Attention, Please!

by yellow_caballero

Summary

Be more Chill is objectively a silly musical with overzealous dance numbers and a cast of goofy, yet likable characters. Christine knew this, and she was fanatically in love with it. Michael knew this too, although he didn't really care. He had track team tryouts and way better things to do than attend some dumb play. But when Michael finds himself in way over his head, thrust into a life of romance, friendship, and espionage, Be More Chill gives him more than he ever bargained for. The lines keep changing, the spotlights are harsh, and the world is bizarre. Cue the synth music, and let the show begin.

And will the real Michael Mell please stand up?

Notes

I refuse to apologize for this.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Michael didn’t realize that he had fallen asleep in the theater until he found himself holding a slushie in one hand, a gross package of sushi in the other, and singing in a high school hallway.

“Jeremy my buddy, how’s it hanging, lunch is banging, got my sushi and my slushie and more!”

Wait, what?

The dweeby looking kid in front of him laughed and knocked shoes with him in a complicated sort of masculine handshake. Michael would have to assume that was what they were doing, because the other option was that they were stamping exactly in tune to a strange beat thumping in his ears.

“The roll was Negimaki and I’m feeling kinda cocky cause the girl at Sev’ Elev’ gave me a generous pour!” That didn’t even make any sense - since when did the cashier pour your drink for you at 7-Eleven?

He broke out into a foot stamp and handshake routine to the beat, complete with a little synchronized dance, in perfect unison with the laughing, brown-haired boy. He looked almost familiar. Michael had read once that the faces of people in your dreams are always based off of people you’d seen in real life, so that made sense. Maybe that scrawny kid always playing Yugioh in the back of homeroom.

The kid snickered. Jesus, did this guy need some acne cream. “You’ve been listening to Bob Marley again, haven’t you?”

“No -” What did he look like, a stoner? “- I’m listening to Marley and the groove is hella gnarly,” Who the hell says gnarly! “And we’re almost at the end of this song!”

The other boy nodded as if this was perfectly reasonable and that Michael made a habit out of loudly singing in hallways, and they did another weird footstamp routine for no freaking reason. They even beat out a nice ‘bu-dum-dum’ beat.

“That was the end, now tell me friend - how was class, you look like ass, what’s wrong?”

Something in Michael’s chest snapped back into place. The weird reggae beat that had been thrumming behind his ears cut out, the rhythmic masculine hand clap thing died, and Michael could finally exhale out of his weird singing.

This was what he got for falling asleep during musicals. Weird ass dreams.

Michael scowled, looking down at himself. He had never seen this clothing before in his life. Couldn’t think of some old ninth grade emo phase outfits, really? That signed basketball jersey he wore for two weeks straight until it smelled? We just had to go for the giant headphones?

But the guy had apparently taken his sung request seriously, because he sighed and pulled over his own painstakingly generic backpack. Someone had spray painted ‘BOYF’ in bold letters across the top. Ouch, dude.

“ ‘Boyf’?” The guy complained. “What does that even mean?”

Good question. Michael just shrugged, awkwardly juggling the weird convenience store food in both hands. “Sucks to suck?”
The boy scowled. “Very funny, Michael. Here, try turning around.”

Michael?

Hey, that jerk kid from History was named Michael. Weird name to dream yourself having, but alright.

Michael obediently turned around, craning his head around to try and read his own backpack, which had a bizarre tetris pattern. The boy read it out loud for him, impossibly even more desolate. “‘RIEND’. Someone painted ‘BOYF’ on my backpack and ‘RIEND’ on yours. I hate this school.”

“High school sucks,” Michael said evenly. He experimentally sucked on his slushie. It was bright red flavor, perfectly cold and icy despite how long it must have been sitting in his hand, and it was oddly perfect tasting. So far as a slushie could be perfect, it was a perfect slushie. “Who are you again?”

But the boy ignored him, forlornly rubbing a thumb against the mildly offensive graffiti as if he could rub the shame away. “I wrote Christine a letter telling her how I feel.”

“Good for you,” Michael said, uninterested. This hallway was a little generic, wasn’t it?

“I tore it up and flushed it.” He sighed. Poor heterosexuals. “That’s still progress, I guess.”

“Good for you,” Michael said again, as uninvested as ever. The sheer ordinariness of the hallway was incredibly distracting.

Normally his dream schools were a weird mismash of his elementary, middle, and high schools. It didn’t help that the public school system wasn’t really big on creativity or commissioning schools from architects that didn’t also make prisons. Good metaphor for high school life: a complete prison. You weren’t safe even in your dreams.

Still, he couldn’t help but be impressed with himself. He had never really gotten the hang of lucid dreaming, no matter how many weird WikiHow pages he read on it. Even if this was a really lame way of starting off a lucid dream. But now he could do whatever he wanted with it, right? Seems like a much better way to spend two hours than watching some dumb play.

He squeezed his eyes shut, thinking wing thoughts.

He experimentally waved his hands around, fingers slipping against the sweaty, unmarked slushie cup. No dice.

“Uh, Michael?”

“Shush,” Michael said, “I’m improving my life.”

“I thought you weren’t really into that.”

Michael opened his eyes again, put out. Something was weird. Like, dreams were supposed to be weird. They were dreams. But there was just something different about this. It felt so...real.

Well, real as anything could get when he was singing Bob Marley and dancing with random nerds in hallways.

There was a bulletin board behind the confused, lanky nerd kid. Michael sucked aggressively on his slushie as his apparent friend passively accepted how weird he was being, squinting at the
bulletin and trying to figure out why the words looked blurry.

Of course they looked blurry. You can’t read stuff in dreams. Something about your parietal cortex and REM activation. There was totally an episode of Batman: The Animated Series about it.

Then Michael realized that he had glasses on. He had never worn glasses in his life. He slipped them off, holding the slushie against his chest to put them in his jacket pocket, and read the bulletin board across from him just fine.

It was about fractions.

 Weird.

“Michael?” The guy craned his head over his shoulder, trying to find out what was so much more exciting than he was. It wasn’t hard, dude. “Are your glasses smudged? I have cleaner.”

“I don’t know, can I drink it?”

The guy’s eyebrows shot up for a brief second before he snorted, and Michael couldn’t help but laugh too. The situation was beyond bizarre, but the slushie was really, really good. Out of a weird impulse he offered the cup to the dream boy.

Only in the literal sense. Michael’s dream boy was way buffer, rugged, and was a trainee volunteer fireman on the weekends. This guy looked like he went to LAN parties on the weekends.

Then the kid gasped, eyes going wide as dinner plates as the perfect slushie went unheeded, and he immediately dove to hide behind Michael. It was a ridiculous move on a lanky teenage boy, and he just shot him an unimpressed glance as the kid practically squeaked.

“Look who’s signing up for the after school play!”

Wow, riveting. Michael turned around to see where Jeremy was pointing at a weirdly placed column at the far side of the hallway, and saw a girl awkwardly running up towards a gigantic sign up sheet for what was probably the school play.

Then the guy was singing again.

It wasn’t even great singing. The harmonic piano or whatever was back, chiming along in tune as he sung this girl’s name over and over again. The guy had the dopiest smile on his face as he sang, “Christine -”

“Hey,” Michael cried out, “it’s Christine!”

Even though it wasn’t.

It just figured that Michael was stuck holding gross convenience store seafood while the only other actual person in the dream was cast as a rockstar. A group of teenagers swept into the hallway, hoisting her up onto their shoulders so she could reach the bulletin board and sign her name in giant loopy letters. She beamed adoringly down at the crowd chanting her name, twirling her dress and ripping a sick pirouette as the guy completely lost his shit staring at her and forgetting all about Michael.

“Chris - tine! Chris - tine!”

But Christine wasn’t her name.
Michael opened his mouth to call her name, her real name, before she halted mid-pirouette and caught sight of Michael. Her eyes widened, the boy made a noise somewhat resembling a chainsaw in a porcelain vase, and she sprinted towards them.

“Michael! It’s you!”

“It’s what!” The boy squeaked, before clamping his mouth shut. His ears were glowing red.

“Christine!” Michael shouted sarcastically, “it’s you!”

But they both faltered, staring at each other wide eyed, and Michael knew that they realized in unison that they hadn’t shouted each other’s real names.

What a bizarre thing to forget in a dream.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Christine said hurriedly. She was wearing an outfit way cuter than Michael’s, with a nifty scarf and a dorky hairstyle that somehow went all the way back around into being stylish. “But you’re not dreaming right now!”

“Sounds likely for a dream Christine,” Michael said flatly. He took a hard drag of his slushie. “I think I’m subconsciously channeling you screeching with delight next to me.”

“I would be screeching in delight if I was joking!” Christine screeched, and the boy went full red in embarrassment and horror that he was treating the goddess of the school with such indignity.

Please. Christine, the goddess of the school? She couldn’t give a powerpoint presentation without clamming up.

Still, what Michael wouldn’t give for her to be clamming up right now. “Michael, you have to believe me, you aren’t dreaming.” She waved her hands around, as expressive as ever. “I thought I was totally in here by myself, but then I saw you and you totally looked like you, not even him - I mean, not that you two look any different right now. Actually, you and him actually look exactly the same. Just like...how your names are the same.” She faltered, eyes as wide as the other boy’s. “Michael, why don’t I remember your real name?”

Something cold crept down Michael’s spine. Michael wasn’t exactly an actor, not like she was, and something about her characteristically overexcitable horror and fear cut to his heart. What a weird dream, that Michael couldn’t remember her name.

He focused, then focused harder, and he squeezed his eyes shut and woke up.

When he opened his eyes again he was still there, in an ultra generic high school hallway, Christine-Who-Wasn’t-Christine wringing her scarf in her hands as the boy was seriously reconsidering his life choices.

There was still a small crowd of students, awkwardly posing in front of the sign up sheet, and Michael saw them slowly relax out of their poses and blink around, confused. One or two of them started talking to each other, clearly a little creeped out, before shaking it off and going back down the hallway where he heard the strains of lunchtime and teens.

From next to him the boy had mentally written his will and signed off on it. He took a deep breath and blurted out, “Ch - ch - Christine! H - hi!”

Christine immediately pasted on a benevolent smile, making him go even redder. “Oh hi, Jeremy!”
Jeremy, apparently, squeaked again. Dude was like a rat in a cage. “You know my name?”

“How can I not!” She drew herself up in her usual ‘blab for thirty minutes about something nobody cares about’ expression before visibly reining herself in, settling for smiling airly at Jeremy. “I was just signing up for the school play. Were you thinking of signing up too?”

In lieu of an answer he just gaped at her. Michael sighed and took pity on the strange dream boy, elbowing him in the side. “Dude, you’re going to catch flies.”

“Yes!” Jeremy yelped. “Yes, I would - I would totally! Love play rehearsal with you. Love that play!”

Then he ran off to go sign it, shooting Michael a look of delighted horror that he probably thought was surreptitious.

It was pretty nice of his subconscious to cast Christine as the light and life of a teenage boy’s life. Give her that old self-esteem boost.

But her expression was as set as ever, and when she rounded on him the first thing she did was pinch him, hard.

The pain shot up to his shoulder, and Michael bit back a very unmasculine yelp before he realized that it had genuinely hurt.

Something pretty bad began to occur to him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and yet again he willed himself as hard out of his body as he physically could.

He willed himself back into a surprisingly comfortable theater chair with plush velvet seats, settled easily back in his jersey and jeans as Christine bounced and flounced next to him, taking a thousand snapshots of her playbill. His own was clenched in his fist, the same fist that has probably loosened by now in sleep. He willed himself out of this baggy grungy hoodie and stained relaxed fit jeans, of the slushie that hadn’t yet begun to melt and the gross sushi clutched in his other hand like a dumbass.

In the distance, echoing from the other side of the hallway, a really douchey sounding guy yelled out, “Gay!”

Michael opened his eyes again. Christine was practically vibrating with emotion, either good or bad or scared or elated or just wigged out. Jeremy was jogging back to them, grin stretching his face, practically bouncing on his heels.

“Christine!” Wow, Michael was embarrassed just to be standing next to him. “I, uh, signed up for the play! Yep! Are you - are you in it?”

“I just signed up for it,” Christine said blankly. “Like, just now.”

“Oh!” Jeremy paused. “Well, gotta go!”

He ran off, practically sprinting. Michael and Christine watched him leave, Christine slightly impressed and Michael slightly shocked that this was really happening to him.

“Oh,” Michael said, wishing desperately that he even just remembered his own stupid name, “I’d really, really like to wake up now. Not that this is a nightmare, it’s just - I just want to wake
“You’re the one who fell asleep during the play!” Christine hissed. “You were being so rude!”

“It’s not like I paid for my tickets!” Michael gestured expansively with his sushi. He didn’t even like sushi. “I just got them in some dumb sweepstakes! How good can a play even be if they’re giving away tickets for free!”

He hadn’t even wanted the stupid tickets. Today was supposed to be the anniversary, and instead of curling in bed and sleeping the day away like he had done for the past four years he had to drag his ass all the way to a stupid, crummy little theater with this dork. Talk about a waste of his time.

From the hallway faint echoes of a now frustratingly familiar piano tune echoed, and Christine wasted no time in grabbing Michael’s hand and towing her with impressive strength around the corner, where the tune grew louder as they approached the hallway the nerd kid had run down - Jeremy, right?

They heard him singing. He was singing. To himself!

“Christine talked to me and boy that was a thrill, but won’t someone just teach me how to be more chill?”

Michael and Christine looked at each other with mounting expressions of horror rising on their faces.

Well, on Michael’s face. Christine just looked ecstatic.

“I can’t believe it,” Michael whispered.

Christine squealed. “We’re in Be More Chill!”

It was pretty lucky that in teen comedies nobody ever actually goes to class.

Christine - out of lack of anything better to call her - explained that although classes were vaguely implied to happen through creative set pieces there was, in fact, no actual class to be had in a two hour musical. Unfortunately, Middleborough High appeared to actually exist beyond a few demonstrative pieces of cardboard and there were actual classrooms it was implied that they should go into.

They didn’t even know their schedules. Ridiculously, Michael felt a faint twinge of guilt about the fact that he was blatantly skipping class before he realized that none of the teachers were calling roll and that they didn’t seem to actually be lecturing about anything outside out of explaining what the periodic table of elements is and gesticulating with a triangle.

Michael and Christine - because apparently that were their names now - huddled inside the theater room. It looked like any other theater room. Conspicuous posters of Shakespeare were thrown around, groups of students were sitting around talking and nominally working on sketching out costume designs, and absolutely nobody cared that Michael was squatting near the back of the room with Christine. She technically also had math that period but nobody seemed all that worried about it, because apparently Christine Canigula lived and breathed theater, so of course she was in the theater room all the time. That was how that worked, right?
“So we’ve already thrown a wrench in the works by throwing ‘More Than Survive’ off the rails,” Christine said. They had parked themselves near a whiteboard, and she had already begun drawing out an elaborate flowchart of the plotline for the play. And their lives. Can’t forget that one. “That piece was supposed to end with Jeremy singing desolately about how he’s destined to be nonexistent on the school totem pole forever, but it instead ended on a joyous note with his super crush smiling and talking to him.” She paused, sighing dreamily and placing a hand at her heart. “Me. I’m the super crush.”

“Big whoop.” Michael had turned a chair around and was straddling it. He had shucked the way too big jacket for the plain black shirt underneath, and had dumped the headphones on the floor with them. Christine was already making noises about having to put them back on for ‘his scenes’. Whatever the hell those were. “If I escaped dancing in an ensemble number I’m happy. I’m not still convinced that this isn’t a dream, you know.”

Christine nodded empirically and pointed towards an unmarked point on the board. She made a t-chart, titling it ‘Explanations For The Madness’.

She wrote ‘DREAMING’ underneath it.

They both stared at the word, harsh black lines underlined with cheap Expo marker, as if it would hold their answers. It was barely even an explanation.

“It doesn’t feel like a dream,” Christine said hesitantly.

“Is that enough?”

They stared at it some more.

On the other side of the t-chart Christine hesitantly marked down in blue, ‘Maybe?’

They both stared at it some more.

“God?” Michael offered hesitantly.

“I’m Buddhist,” Christine said.

Michael, who was raised Catholic and was now aggressively atheist, shrugged.

They stared at the t-chart some more.

Carefully, switching to purple marker, Christine drew a lot of frowny faces.

“Okay,” Christine admitted, “there’s absolutely no explanation for this.” She turned desperately to Michael. “Have you done anything lately that would deserve some kind of karmic comeuppance?”

“Have you bought any shady theater memorabilia from a guy in an alley?” Michael cried, exasperated. “Oh, wait. Don’t tell me you pirated the soundtrack to the musical!”

Christine paled. “Oh no.”

“Jesus Christ.”

It was pointless. Michael wasn’t about to sit here and ascribe conspiracy theories as to why he was having an incredibly vivid lucid dream about why he was in a musical with the girl in his theater class who was way, way too into theater.
Pod people hadn’t dropped him into a super hallucination. The Illuminati, evil scientists, that punishment from God his Grandma always said was going to come because he was gay, were not going to cut it this time.

Michael snapped his fingers. “Drugs!”

“It’s better than drugs, Michael,” Christine explained patiently, explaining nothing.

“No, I mean - maybe the tickets were LSD tablets or something!” He had definitely read about that on a Snopes page at three am. Granted, he didn’t remember if it was disproved or not, but there was a fifty/fifty chance, right? “Contact hallucinations? The playbill? Ringing any bells?”

“I’ve taken LSD,” Christine said, with a perfectly straight face, “and this definitely isn’t it.”

They stared at each other.

“Wait, seriously?”

“Moving on!” Christine scrawled another large phrase on the board: SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATION: Y/N?. She pointed to it significantly, raising an eyebrow at Michael. “Eh? Eh?”

“Definitely N,” Michael drawled. “Honestly, drugs are looking like our best bet.”

She put drugs down, although reluctantly.

Michael forced himself to squint at the other side of the board, the simple plot line with the overcomplicated additions, the charming stick figures of apparently all the people Michael was required to care about at this very second.

“So I’m Michael,” Michael said slowly, “and that nerd kid is Jeremy, right?”

Christine sighed dreamily. “My perfect cinnamon roll child.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve read so much porn about him it’s bizarre to see him in person!”

Jesus Christ.

Michael couldn’t help but nervously glance around the room, as Christine was physically incapable of lowering her voice and that was a deeply awkward thing to hear about someone. “Can you keep it down?” he hissed. “The whole school is going to find out that you’re a fangirl for some random loser that just so happens to be the main character!”

She sobered, snapping back to whatever passed for reality. “Right. I’ve written our theories up here,” she gestured empathetically towards the plotline, “and down here we have a to-do list.”

“Yeah,” Michael drawled as Christine began scribbling ‘GOALS’ at the bottom. “Our goals so we can get out of here. We can just wait for the play to end, right? How long does this take?”

Something horrible occurred to him. “This isn’t one of those buildingsroman things, is it?”

From where she was dedicating a red colored marker to him and a green colored marker for herself Christine winced. “The timeline’s a little vague?”

“Never a good sentence.”
She just hummed and briefly skipped off, engaging in exuberant conversation with a generic looking background character, a girl with a pageboy cap and rainbow suspenders. Definitely a Theater Kid. Michael grabbed the marker and tried crossing out his fake Michael name to write his real name, and was still caught up in the impossible task when Christine skipped back.

“So the play ends somewhere after Halloween,” she started, then stopped. Michael shot her an unimpressed look. She hadn’t needed the consultation of Background Lesbian No. 6 for that. “And it’s currently, uh, the start of the semester.” She paused again. “So August 25th.”

“Are you serious!” Michael dropped the marker, rounding on her. “Two months? I’m not playing Brown Best Friend for two months!”

“Good vacation?” Christine offered weakly.

“Great,” Michael massaged his forehead. “So let’s worry about ending the play as quickly as possible later.”

“I’m not sure we can do that.”

“That’s why we’re worrying about it later!” Michael snapped. “Look, I’m Michael now, right?” He spread his arms out, gesticulating to his entire nerdy, unhygienic glory. “I don’t even know my last name. How am I supposed to pretend to be this guy?”

“His last name’s Mell, if that’s a good start?”

That was not even a real last name. Michael squinted at his skin, pulling out a phone that he apparently knew the passcode for just by muscle memory and flipping on the front camera, squinting judgmentally at his appearance.

Was...that what he looked like?

Normally?

“What race is Michael, again?”

“His actor is Ecuadorian and Filipino,” Christine said automatically, “awesome diversity in a mainstream musical!”

They both stared hard at Michael.

“I think this is what I look like,” Michael said.

He stared harder into the camera, as if he had pictures of himself saved there, pictures of who he actually was.

“I think this is who I am,” Michael said.

He quietly shut the camera off and sat back down in his chair, wiped.

An awkward silence stretched between them, looking down at their shoes and away from each other, and Michael abruptly felt like a real jerk. Self pity was great and all when you had it worse than the other person, but even if Christine was ridiculously cheery about this whole thing it wasn’t as if she wasn’t also having a massive identity crisis.

Hey, they were teenagers! It’s how they do!
“So this is a storyline about finding yourself in high school,” Michael said slowly. “I mean, learn how to be yourself, right? Stay true to who you are, don’t hang out with your popular friends when you can hang out with your nerdy friends - which apparently is me, singular - and don’t drink the Kool Aid?”

“Basically,” Christine admitted, “it’s not very original.”

“How am I supposed to stay true to myself if I don’t even know who I am?”

They stared at the board again.

Around them high school reigned, adult authority locked in constant battle with the populist community of teenagers, and happy little lives bubbled in the theater room. Michael wondered if there was actually anything going on in the next classroom over, if it even really existed. If they even really existed.

Well. There was one person who didn’t exist who really, really needed to exist right now. That person was Michael fucking Mell, and if Michael Mell had to suck it up, sing his heart out, dance until his feet were sore, and play a sympathetic ear to a sweaty nerd in order to obtain peak Michael Mell-ness so Michael Mell could stop being Michael Mell and go back to whoever he was when he wasn’t being Michael Mell, then fine! They’d play that game!

“Oh okay,” Michael said, bracing himself. “Teach me how to be Michael Mell.”

Christine stared at him, eyes wide.

She slowly turned to the board and grabbed a rag and a bottle of spritzer, carefully wiping the board clean of all of their plans, plotlines, and pathetic prayers.

Then she wrote, in very large letters at the top,

‘MY FAVORITE CHARACTER: MICHAEL MELL’.

Michael stared at it.

“I thought your favorite character was Christine.”

“I’m Christine now so that’s cheating.”

Jesus Christ.

She had barely just opened her mouth to get very, very deep into it when the bell rang. They both flinched, the sound bizarrely exactly the same as their own school, and they watched the other kids break into louder chatter as they shoved binders in backpacks and began zipping them up. Michael reflexively looked around for his own backpack, grabbing it from under the desk where he had stashed it.

It basically only had three extremely generic notebooks in it, two generic pencils, and a generic pen. Also a lighter and a joint, but Michael had thrown those away immediately. He had sworn to his Mom that he would never do drugs.

Would that be necessary in the ruse? Would Michael have to smoke a joint to save the fabric of reality? Would that count as peer pressure?

Christine squeaked, abruptly grabbing Michael’s hand and shoving him out of the way. “I think
Michael is supposed to go encourage Jeremy in this scene! You have to go, hurry!"

“Why did you even bother seeing the play again if you’ve already memorized it?” Michael asked, exasperated. He clutched his defaced backpack to his chest, already somewhat proprietorial of his only possession. “I don’t even know how to go home! I think I have car keys, but I don’t know my car!”

“Who cares about where you live!” Christine cried. “You have to go encourage your best friend! Don’t you care about him?”

“No, not really!”

“Well, learn! That’s step one of Michael Mell!” She pushed him as hard as she could towards the door, which was surprisingly hard. Had she always been this strong? “He exists to support the main character in whatever he does!”

“How is this guy the best character?”

But by that time she had already ditched him near the entrance and ran off to hide, which was apparently necessary. Or get into position. Michael wasn’t really big into the whole theater thing. Some other guys from the team were on it and he had just wanted to sleep in the back and talk about Othello or something.

Sure enough, when Michael threw open the door he found Jeremy already standing there. It had barely been a few minutes since the bell rang but the hallway was already clear of students - of course - and Jeremy had already worked up a massive sweat. He jolted when he saw Michael, and it was even interesting watching the play character reassess his entire existence yet again.

“Michael?” Unfortunately, yes. “What are you doing in the theater room?”

“I signed up for theater,” Michael drawled, leaning against the door frame and crossing his arms. Was this a very supportive best friend thing to do? What did Michael even act like? He felt pushed on stage without even learning his lines. Maybe because that was what literally was happening. “Since you ran off and left me with Christine? We bonded.”

“Christine’s in there?” Jeremy pulled at his collar, shifting from foot to foot. “Real life Christine. Oh man. I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You don’t have to do it!” Michael stood up and clapped Jeremy easily on the back. He was probably doing a really, really horrible Michael right now, but maybe Jeremy wouldn’t notice. “Of course, I’ll mock you forever if you don’t.”

Jeremy took a deep breath, then took another one, then took a slightly shallower one that was verging on hysteria. If Michael craned his head he could hear Jeremy muttering a song under his breath and the faint, muffled sounds of a peppy instrument in the rafters. “C-c-c’mon, c-c-c’mon, go, go!”

“Oh, for christ’s sake.” Michael grabbed his arm and shoved him into the room. This guy seriously needed to get laid.

Oh, no. He was going to have to get laid with Christine!

God, he hoped this was a PG musical.

Glad that was over with. Michael rounded on his heel, briefly remembering that he took off two of his few possessions and left them the theater room before remembering that he didn’t care, and was
already halfway down the hallway before the guilt set in.

He and Christine were supposed to be in this together. Maybe he should go help her out with Jeremy duty. She was probably just as wigged out as he was, if way more secretly.

Wait. He didn’t even know if Michael was supposed to be in that scene! He can’t ruin the entire scene by not pushing Jeremy and Christine into each other’s arms or something.

Michael doubled back and just barely restrained himself from bursting into the room, carefully opening the door and sliding into the now abandoned theater room to find Christine sitting at a small collection of chairs that definitely wasn’t there three minutes ago, Jeremy standing awkwardly in front of her.

Actually, they were both staring awkwardly at each other. Jeremy looked ready to about vibrate out of his skin and Christine was gaping like a fish, struggling with something that was also ramping up her anxiety notches. Michael didn’t know that much about her, but he was pretty sure her anxiety meter could go pretty high.

When Christine saw him her anxiety meter visibly went way up. “Michael! What are you doing here!”

“Play rehearsal, apparently,” Michael panned. He crossed his arms. “Are you two okay? You’re just sitting here staring at each other.”

They both flushed red, looking away.

Surprisingly enough, it was Jeremy who found the courage to talk first. “I mean, maybe you didn’t hear me? I asked if this is where you meet for the play.” He paused, widening. “I mean that’s such a stupid question, of course this is where you meet for the play it’s the freaking theater room - forget I said that.” He glanced around wildly, a gazelle in front of the charmingly short lion. “I mean, how are...you?”

“Swim team!” Christine blurted, suddenly looking very pleased with herself. “This is where we meet for the swim team, I’m joking!”

“Oh.” Jeremy stared at her, flushed. “I’m Jeremy!”

They stared at each other again. This was as cringy as The Office.

“Okay.” Michael clapped his hands. Brown best friend powers: activate. He strolled up and carefully put a hand on Jeremy’s arm. Even if he wasn’t in this scene this was way too painful to watch. He had to save Christine from herself, Jeremy, the play, and the mysterious cosmic forces that put them in that position. He patted it reassuringly. “Christine, this is my...this is Jeremy. He always sweats this much.”

Jeremy glanced at him, horrified and betrayed. “Michael!”

“Jeremy,” Michael said loudly, “this is Christine. Not that you didn’t already know that.” He pasted what was probably a horribly fake smile on his face. “Let’s bond!”

Everyone stared at each other with mounting levels of awkwardness.

“Can I talk to Michael?” Christine said hesitantly. “Alone?”

Thank god. Michael nodded supportively at Jeremy, clapped carefully on a sweaty arm again, and
gestured for him to go stand by the door. Jeremy, apparently easily pliable, gladly went and took the chance to catch his breath near the door. When Michael ducked closer towards Christine he saw that she was genuinely red faced. This was a disaster. They weren’t even done with the first day, and Christine was already losing her mind. Michael had no idea how they were going to handle two whole months of nonstop cringe.

“I forgot my lines,” Christine hissed. She looked about ready to cry. “He asked me if this was where the theater room was and I just totally freaked out. I got stage fright just like I freaking always do and now I ruined the whole play, just like I always do! This is why I’m not an actress!”

Oh. He had thought that it was actually something serious. She had worried him for nothing. Michael shot her an incredulous look. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. What kind of fan am I?” She looked miserable, poor dear. Even her scarf was drooping. It was a cute scarf. Michael kind of wanted to steal it. “How are we going to recreate this play line by line?”

Michael stared at her, pausing a beat. Finally, he offered, “Do we have to?”

They simultaneously glanced back at Jeremy, who was obsessively checking himself in his phone’s front camera. Nothing for that but a lot of acne cream and a prayer, Jeremiah. “I guess so long as we hit all the plot beats,” Christine said cautiously. “I love the musical, but I didn’t memorize every line to the letter. I guess we have no choice. We just have to do the best we can with what we have.”

Who cares about that! Michael would give his headphones not to have to sing again. “Can we avoid the musical numbers?” He asked desperately. Please. Please no singing.

“But the musical numbers are the best part!”

Okay, whatever. Michael straightened, stepping away from Christine so he could paste a smile on his face and call Jeremy’s name, internally snickering when Jeremy jumped a foot in the air and zoomed over.

Christine pepped up at the sight of her ‘precious cinnamon roll’, quickly rubbing at her eyes and beaming the best she could at him after school. “It’s really nice to meet you, Jeremy,” she said, all authenticity. “I’ve been teaching Michael how to do play rehearsal, so we’re in play rehearsal now. Just like how you’re in play rehearsal!” She stared at him, taking a deep breath. “Neat!”

“S - s - since when does Michael do p - p - play rehearsal?” Jeremy shot a half-hearted glare at him. He just shrugged. “Did - did he mention me? At all?”

“I feel like I’ve known you my whole life!”

Christmas had come early for Jeremy, and it was wearing a scarf and badly hidden anxiety. “You’ve been teaching? Michael, play rehearsal?” He stared at Michael in a new light, as if his best friend had been transformed into somebody from the real, actual world who had no desire to be here. Somewhere along those lines. “Michael talked to a cool kid? A real girl?”

“I have tons of chick friends, they aren’t aliens.” Wait. Jeremy shot him a skeevyed out look. Of course, Michael didn’t have any other friends. Forget making fun of Christine, he wasn’t any better at this. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I mean, Christine’s teaching me how to play...a part.”
Jeremy cocked his head. “Why did you take off your glasses, dude? You can’t see a thing without them.”

Michael and Christine shot each other panicked looks. Michael quickly cut in, “I got contacts yesterday! I just didn’t tell you.”

Amazingly, Jeremy’s best friend marching off-step distracted him even from a fidgeting Christine. He even looked a little wounded. “But you tell me everything.”

The memory of squinting at the bulletin board to see it perfectly clear snapped back to him, and in a warm rush Michael remembered that if the real fake Michael needed glasses and the fake real Michael didn’t, and he could still see, so maybe he was still in his real body! A little! Maybe!

“Christine really, really needs to teach me how to play a part.” Michael glanced at her, unable to hold back his own ramping anxiety. “Like, now.”

“Good thing we’re in play rehearsal!” Christine cut in. She giggled, desperate to divert attention. “I love play rehearsal!”

“Good for you.” Michael patted his pockets down, looking for his glasses before he remembered that he had left them in the red jacket. Think of it like this, Michael: Michael was a character. He needed props. He needed to keep to the same outfit he probably always wore if he was going to blend in. Maybe Christine teaching him out to act probably would help.

“Because it’s the best! Because it is fun!”

“I get it.” Michael walked forward, grabbing his jacket and his dumb headphones as Jeremy hesitantly sat down next to Christine from where she was sitting, eyes wide as he looked into the face of his god. “Look, can’t we just -”

“I love play rehearsal! And I get depressed, as soon as it’s done!”

Was...that a glockenspiel?

Michael turned slowly, unable to keep down the horror on his face, only to see Christine leaning forward grinning at Jeremy, who was matching her grin for horrified grin. She threw out her arms in front of Jeremy, jerking into a rush of song. “But not depressed as in kill yourself depressed, no I’m not into self harm, here I swear dude check my arm!”

Crap. Crap! The music in his ears was growing louder! Christine was singing along obediently to it as a shocked and dazzled Jeremy nodded along, and Christine was finally putting her acting skills to work as she threw herself into the song. Michael had the sneaking suspicion that her giant grin was real.

“See, I just use the word to emphasize a point, show the passion that I’ve got, I am passionate a lot!”

It was a little bizarre, now that he was getting Christine’s character exposition, how similar Christine and Christine were. Maybe that was why she had been such a big fan of the play. His Christine was also passionate about musical theater. Way, way too passionate. He had heard it was one of those ‘special interest’ things that people on the spectrum had, but for the time being it just made her really overqualified to be dumped in a real musical.

“I have mad gigantic feelings, mad and frantic feelings -”
There she went again. Michael slowly backed away as Christine rushed out a stanza, waving her arms around in that stimming thing she did that he severely doubted the real Christine did, and Michael had just begun carefully hiding behind a desk so he wasn’t sucked into a musical dance routine when Christine jumped out of her chair, turned a perfect pirouette, and bowed at Michael. He stiffened as Christine sung directly at him.

Was she supposed to do this? She hadn’t mentioned if Michael was actually in the scene or not yet, but he was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion that he wasn’t.

“I love play rehearsal, because you are equipped with directions and text!” She twirled, reaching out and taking Michael’s hand. Before he could stop himself he twirled too, caught in her energy, caught up in the song. “Life is easy in rehearsal. You follow a script, so you know what comes next!”

Did it? They were shooting without a script now. Michael had no idea what was coming next and it scared him, even as it thrilled him, even as it let him dive headfirst into a churning sea with eyes wide open buffeted by the powers of song.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say, is that that sometimes life works out the way, it works out in the play.” His voice was deep and melodic, contrasting against Christine’s peppy tunes. “Like how now we get to be the center of attention, with a cool song of our own invention.”

Christine broke free of the song, breaking the sea for open air.

“Michael and I have really been collaborating on how to best portray the disaffected youth, that we think that nobody else really understands, you know? There’s a lot of communities marginalized by society and we really want to portray the new generation of teenagers rebelling against the machine.”

Jeremy blinked at them. Michael elbowed Christine in the side. She elbowed him back. Then she burst out into song again.

“And no matter how hard I try! It’s impossible to narrow down the many reasons why ay ay!”

Then she was dancing again, leaping over to Jeremy and hopping on top of a chair so they could lean in like their own co-conspirators and sing the rest of the song.

But when she sung the next few lines it was sad, almost wistful, and Jeremy leaned in in response to the tone change. Interestingly enough, the music changed too, slowing down from the glockenspiel into the piano.

“Most humans do one thing for all of their lives. The thought of that gives me hives.” Michael stared down at his hands, suddenly awkward. What he wouldn’t give to only be one person for all of his life. “I have so many roles that I want to pursue. And I guess I’m telling this to you.” She smiled at him, broad and kind. “It’s a good thing that I want to.”

Jeremy’s eyes were sparkly. “Really?”

Then she made a lot of weird noises, jumping up and down and stimming randomly, and by the time she came to a clear end by shouting ‘Starting!’ a lot Michael knew well enough to slip into a random seat next to Jeremy and smile broadly.

“So,” Jeremy started cautiously, bolstered by the presence of a song and his best friend, “where’s everyone else?”
They all looked around. Christine’s eyes crossed as her mouth moved, trying to remember her lines, before she hesitantly offered, “I think someone else is going to come in soon…?” Jeremy’s face fell and she rapidly followed up with, “Or maybe it’s just you and me! And Michael.”

Michael waved.

“Oh.”

Poor guy. Michael patted his arm reassuringly. “Don’t worry, I bet they’re just NPCs.”

Then the doors burst open and the screaming started.

Floods of generic looking popular people crashed against the shores of the theater room, yelling generic popular people things and basking in the literal fanfare that accompanied their entrance. Jeremy practically began cowering in his seat, white knuckles gripping the plastic chair, and Christine quietly switched seats so Michael was in the middle and she could lean over and whisper in his ear. Jeremy, bereft at the obvious preference of Michael over him, only grew more desolate.

“The girl with the brown hair’s Chloe Valentine, the top bitch. I like to write her as secretly a strong, powerful, and confident women in my fanfictions, but in reality she’s just kind of a bitch.”

“You mean in the play,” Michael said flatly. “Play reality.”

“Sure, whatever.” She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at Chloe, who was busy shouting about how she had never realized that there was a theater room before - really? - and flipping her hair three times a minute for no reason. “You know, she’s not half bad during the last song. Maybe a redemption arc is in her future.”

“Yeah?” He quirked an eyebrow at her, slouching in his seat. “Going to follow the twelve step plan for being a three dimensional character, just like in your fanfictions?”

Christine looked sketchy. “Maybe.” She pointed towards two similar girls in the back, including a surprisingly fat one. Michael didn’t know that there were fat people in musical theater. Of course, he didn’t know that there were brown and asian ones too. “The girl in purple is Jenna Rolan, a huge gossip. Try not to act like a weirdo in front of her.”

“I’m the weird one?”

“The one in the giant sweater’s Brooke Lohst. She’s secretly nice, and very insecure. Jeremy dates her.”

Michael looked at Jeremy, then looked at Brooke, then looked at Jeremy. “Okay, sure.”

“I’m serious! The SQUIP rockets Jeremy to superstardom.”

An actual, real life adult came through the door behind all of the actual students, with a thick beard and a surprisingly nice suit. Michael hummed, crossing his arms and slouching deeper in his seat. “I’m not really in the mood for more seafood.”

Christine’s jaw dropped open. “Don’t tell me you don’t actually know the plot of the play.”

“There’s a plot? I thought that I was just going to be witness to Sweaty Nerd Boy scores Cute Girl No. 3342.”

“Jesus Christ.”
“Hey, that’s my line!”

Then the adult broke into a boring speech about how he was Mr. Reyes (Hi Mr. Reyes!), recognizable as the theater teacher and/or Hobby Lobby associate (Wow!), and how Michael was going to have to memorize freaking Shakespeare for the dumb - okay, whoops, it’s Shakespeare with zombies.

Well, it wasn’t as if he was planning to actually participate anyway.

Christine, who had perked up at the Shakespeare and pointedly collapsed at the mention of the zombie play, cautiously made a point of being The Play Rehearsal Girl, throwing herself into enthusiasm wherever she saw the need. If Michael turned around he could see all the other characters rolling their eyes or playing around on their phones, as uninvested as Michael was. He felt a supreme sense of connection with the NPCs, even if they were as douchey as you could get. The short douche looked promising. There was something about him.

The entire deal was unsettling as hell. All of the people were uncanny valley, all of the backdrops were generic, but something about the guy and his tie dye eye tank top was as unsettling as you could get.

Michael turned back to the front, thoroughly creeped out, just in time for the play to run its usual and cut the adult time to practically Peanuts wah-wah-wahs. The teacher zoomed off, the popular kids scattered to the winds, and all that was left in the room was Michael, Christine, Jeremy, and the tall douche.

He had just shrugged on his backpack and patiently given the star struck Jeremy his own belongings when the tall douche bounced up to Christine like a golden retriever with a giant, dopey grin on his face. Christine and Michael, who had generally been avoiding talking to the cast members who weren’t the poor sucker practically hyperventilating next to him, stiffened awkwardly as Christine pasted a big, fake smile on her face.

“Hey. You were in that play last year, right?”

Christine laughed, unbelievably awkward. “Apparently!”

The tall douche grinned. What a happy play. “You, like, died, right?”

“That describes a lot of plays,” Christine said. Her eyes widened. “You mean Romeo and Juliet! I was totally in that, I was totally singing that just a moment ago - wait, was I?”

“Okay!” The tall douche ruffled his hair, still smiling. From beside him Jeremy was pointedly texting on his phone, scowling. “It was so depressing when you died, man. Can I, like, say something stupid?”

“Oh, feel free.”

“When I saw you die in that play last year, that was like the saddest I’ve been in a long time.” He actually reddened a little, and when he ruffled his hair it was more nervous than cool. “It was like everything in my life, all the pressure to be the best all the time, suddenly got so small. And when you got up for your victory dance -”

“There’s no dancing involved in the bow,” Christine said, twitching. “Like, at all.”

He ignored her. “I was totally thinking, ‘I’m glad that girl’s not dead’. Not before I had a chance to know her. Stupid, right?”
Christine’s heart visibly melted. Michael didn’t blame her – the tall douche was giant, sweet, a blustering moron just like everybody else in this ridiculous play, and was massively jacked. “It’s sweet. And stupid. Thanks, Jake.”

“No problem, Christine.” He saluted her awkwardly. “Some of us are going out for practice. You should, like, join.”

“That sounds great!” Christine said enthusiastically. “But I have to...wash my cat.” Michael winced. Nobody sign this girl up for ‘Who’s Line Is It Anyway’. “So not right now. But later! Much later. So much later.”

“Cool!” Jake gushed. Jake. Of course Christine already knew his name. He probably had a boyfriend in her gay fanfictions. “I’ll see you later!”

Then he bounced off, like a literal golden retriever, and he stopped to glance at a Jeremy practically curled up in the fetal position and a very unimpressed slouching Michael. “Dude, you two totally have ‘RIEND’ and ‘BOYF’ on your backpacks.” He squinted at them. “Like, what does that even mean?”

Michael silently rearranged the backpacks so they were in the right configuration. Jake’s mouth dropped open in recognition. “Hey! It’s cuz you’re faggots! Sweet!”

What the fuck?

Michael jumped up from his seat, face red, heartbeat thumping. He didn’t care what kind of casual homophobia was rampant in play land, in real life that kind of shit got you expelled. Or Michael getting his gang friends to beat you up. Victor totally owed him a favor. “Fucking excuse me?”

Jake blinked at him, mystified. “Chill out, dude. Like, not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“Do you even know where that word comes from?” Michael demanded, working himself up into his standard spiel whenever anybody even mentioned that word in his vicinity. “When the puritans were burning gay people at the stake with all the witches and shit -”

But Jeremy jumped up instead, clamping a hand over Michael’s mouth and leaving him to grunt and kick frantically at Jeremy’s kneecaps. “Sorry! I’m sorry, he’s sensitive! Don’t punch us!”

Tension thrummed in the air, Christine gasping and holding her breath, Michael glaring bloody murder at a very confused Jake. Jeremy’s hand over his mouth was sweaty, as usual, and Jeremy felt him shaking from where he was pressed up against Michael’s back. Michael’s hindbrain perked up, but the situation totally didn’t call for that right now.

Finally Jake just rolled his eyes, shooting a glance back at the visibly distraught Christine. “Whatever, nerds. I got better shit to do than whale on a punk.” He left, somehow making it a victory stride instead of a retreat, and as he pressed open the theater room doors he couldn’t help but call over his shoulder, “Fag!”

Then he left them alone, Christine’s face buried in her hands, Jeremy finally releasing Michael’s mouth and rounding on him.

“What’s wrong with you!” For the first time since he walked in he was totally ignoring Christine. His face was red with embarrassment and anger. “You don’t just talk back to people like Jake! Now he’s going to beat you up behind the locker room! Again!”

Wait, Michael got beat up regularly? Shit. He didn’t know that happened to people in real life.
Nowadays people just doxxed you or filled up your locker with shaving cream. You know, the normal ways people were bullied. Not actually beat up.

Pretending that he had stood up to Jake out of bravery instead of ignorance, Michael crossed his arms and stood his ground. “You can’t let those assholes walk all over you, Jeremy. You’re always going to be ground under their heel unless you stand up for yourself. You can get those guys in serious trouble if you tell a teacher that they’re throwing around the f word.”

“He’s right,” Christine jumped in. “You deserve better than being bullied around and just sitting there and doing nothing about it. Why didn’t you say anything?”

At the end of the day Christine didn’t really know anything about boys. Jeremy flushed, fists clenched, and Michael saw to his horror that he seriously looked about to cry. “I’ll meet you at your car, Michael.”

Then he turned around and clearly just barely refrained from running out the door.

They both watched him go, vaguely embarrassed, slightly desolate.

“Great,” Michael said flatly. He picked up his headphones from the ground and slung them around his neck. “Way to make the main character feel like a moron in front of his love interest.”

“I’m more than a love interest,” Christine snapped, “I’m a person! Christine is one of the most well developed characters in the play and I don’t appreciate you simplifying her to the role of a love interest.”

“To Jeremy she is!” Michael gestured at the door Jeremy had just ran out of, exasperated. “Now some dumb jock is going to be the obstacle between him and the love interest, you’re going to go out with him because you fall for bad boys or whatever, and I’m going to be stuck listening to him pine for hours. Probably days. Probably two whole months!”

“I’m not going out with Jake!” Christine shuddered, a fair reaction to Jake. “I don’t care if we want to keep it to the play, I’m not dating somebody I don’t even like. I don’t care if I’m the love interest - which is a grossly reductionist view of a great female lead in the musical - I’m not leading somebody on I don’t even like. What if they want to,” her voice dropped into a horrified whisper, “kiss.”

Well. It was fair. You can’t ask a girl to date somebody she doesn’t want to date. His mom had always beat that into his head with a two by four. Not to brag, but Michael was the expert in respecting women.

“You have to get together with Jeremy at the end,” Michael said flatly. Hey, there was an idea. “You don’t want to go out with Jake, right? Just ask out Jeremy. Instant gratification. Everybody knows that the play ends when the boy and the girl get together.” Hey, this was a great idea! Michael slammed a fist on his palm. “Then the play’ll end! Every play ends with the kiss of true love! Or, like, teenage hormones! I’m a genius!”

“You’re very convinced of that,” Christine panned. “That’s a good idea, but you kind of have a problem there. I don’t love him.”

They stared at each other.

Finally, Michael hesitantly offered, “Can you pretend?”

“That’s not a part I can play, Michael.” She looked down at her ends, clenching and unclenching
them slowly. “We can do the song and dance and play the part, but I feel like this is the one thing we can’t act out. I’m not even that good of an actress, you know.” She laughed bitterly. “Christine is everything I want to be. She’s proud and happy and she dances everywhere and she just loves being herself. She said so at the end of the play. There’s nothing wrong with me, right? She’s so lucky.” She clenched her fist. “Now I’m Christine and I get to pretend to be her. But that won’t actually let me be the kind of girl who the jock asks out. Jocks are the ones who are mean to me and make up mean rumors about me. Not Christine.”

Michael blinked at her. “Wait, that thing about the shampoo bottle wasn’t true?”

“I’m ace,” Christine said flatly, “I just can’t. Besides, I never bought into the ending. It rang way too heterosexual for me. I always felt like the play really ended…”

She trailed off, eyes widening. Her jaw dropped, and she stared at Michael like a sculptor at a hunk of marble, a playwright beating out a new script at their typewriter.

“I have it,” Christine whispered. “I know how to beat the play.”

“Okay,” Michael said, creeped out. “Look, I need to go catch up with Jeremy. Give me your number and we can try to figure this out later. We have time, I guess.”

“Two months of it,” Christine said desolately. “We’re so screwed.”

Michael took a deep breath and screwed his courage to the sticking place. He reached out and, with agonizing slowness, clapped Christine on the back.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said carefully. “Uh. We’re…together in this?”

Her eyes shone, and that almost made the very uncharacteristic display of affection worth it. Almost. “Michael and Christine: Partners in Crime.”

“Concept: no.”

But it sounded a little nice anyway. Michael had never had a partner in crime before. And even if it had to be the super shy girl always stimming in the back of the room while Michael hung out with his teammates, then that was who it had to be. There were worse people to be stuck in a play with. Probably.

Hopefully.

Or maybe they were just screwed. That too.

Sure enough, the entire car ride home Jeremy burst out with all of the repressed angst he had been holding in while his true love, the girl who watched way too much Hetalia in the anime club room and who sat by herself at lunch everyday, had graced him with her presence.

It was a stroke of luck how Michael had found the address for Jeremy’s house already bookmarked on his maps app. Or maybe it wasn’t that much of a stroke of luck - once Michael pulled up outside of Jeremy’s painstakingly generic two story suburban home house he climbed out of the car and
shot a confused glance behind him at Michael. “Aren’t you coming in?”

Great. Michael sighed and parked the car. Looks like he was getting in more family bonding time with the best friend.

Honestly, he had expected to just disappear once he walked off campus and get warped back to the front of the school the next day. It was pretty lucky that there was this whole world outside the high school. It really was just a normal suburb. Trees and nice houses and urban developments under construction. There was even a small, completely fake lake.

It was a very, very normal suburb.

Jeremy kept rambling on while they walked to the door, Jeremy fishing his keys out of his pocket. “You know, I think we honestly really connected, for about two seconds? I think she actually looked into my eyes and she said all that nice stuff about play rehearsal.” He unlocked the door, turning to look at Michael. His eyes were practically glittering. “She really saw me, Michael! Not just through me, not just around me, really at me!” Then he sobered as reality set in, stepping inside the house and pulling off his shoes to throw them at a random corner of the house.”Then I was a total pansy in front of Jake and now she thinks I’m a loser again.”

Support? Support! “Don’t be like that, man. She secretly...digs you.” Michael walked in behind him, looking around the house. It was…

A little dirty, actually. Strike that, really dirty. There were old plates scattered everywhere, the dining room table was covered in random clutter, and Michael saw to his surprise that it wasn’t even fake clutter. It was real clutter, from a real life. Old school work, old toys, briefcases and folders and big cardboard boxes from Office Steve holding manilla envelopes and an entire container of Sic pens.

Michael found himself lingering near it, flipping through the old school work. Jeremy was smart enough, with okay grades. He was good at english but not great at math. It was just that there were so many papers, stacks and stacks of old tests. Stage plays did not need that much detail for props.This was...real. So much as anything could be real here.

“What does equilateral mean?”

“Yeah,” Michael said, ghosting a finger over a page of notes. “Sure.”

He looked closer at it. There were class notes back and forth on the front, in two different types of handwriting. This must have been notes scrawled to each other as they sat at a table together, bored in class. Bored in a class that just recited the periodic table of elements at them and frequently broke into not doing anything in the middle of class. Or, if Jeremy happened to be there, a dance number.

A messy strain of handwriting sprawled against the top, matching the rest of the notes: What does equilateral mean?

Michael rolled his eyes. But under that was different handwriting. Familiar handwriting. With a cold sinking feeling in his gut Michael realized that it was his writing. His literal, actual handwriting.

Lol idk still stoned

Michael!!!!!
Michael stared at it, only realizing that he was clenching the paper and crumpling it. He carefully released it, smoothing out the notes as if they mattered at all, and replaced it on the dining room table exactly as he found it, as if someone would notice or care.

In its own weird way it was scary, because it was a reminder that Michael existed. A little. Not really. Now Michael was…

“We’re out of soy milk, is almond okay?”

He hated the weak milk, for the weak. “Just water’s fine!”

When he entered the kitchen, to no surprise, he found dirty dishes everywhere. Jeremy was scrubbing two caked over glasses clean, a bag of chips already opened and sitting on the counter. Michael carefully withdrew a Dorito from the bag, munching quietly.

As Jeremy cursed over the glasses Michael checked the cabinets. Old jelly, snack food, empty. He opened the fridge. Take out, snack food, empty.

“Dude, where’s your food?”

“The M&Ms are in the vegetable crisper,” Jeremy replied absently. Man, if this was the guy’s diet no wonder he had acne. “So do you really think Christine knows who I am? Were you the one who told her? Because, man, you are such an ultimate wingman I’m forever in your debt. You own my first born child.”

“Obviously.” Sure enough, a very generic looking bag of M&Ms were in the crisper along with a half-empty pack of potatoes. “She’s not that scary, dude. She’s actually just a bit of a nerd.”

“Easy for you to say.” Jeremy sloshed water over the glasses, splashing it on the tile as he rubbed a towel over them. He poured more water into Michael’s glass and just grabbed a soda for himself. Mountain Dew. Gross. “You don’t even care about talking to cool people. If you don’t care so much, why were you even talking to her?”

“Because she’s a person? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.” Michael withdrew the bag of potatoes, already digging some butter up from the butter drawer. “Hey, can you clean a pan for me?”

“Because she’s a person? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.” Michael withdrew the bag of potatoes, already digging some butter up from the butter drawer. “Hey, can you clean a pan for me?”

“It does matter!” Jeremy’s voice rose, and he slammed his coke on the counter. Michael straightened, confused. When he saw Jeremy’s face it was drawn tight, his hand clenched in a fist. “I’m trying so hard and just because you don’t even care that you’re friends with Christine? This is so unfair.”

“Dude.” This guy was ticking Michael off. He had no idea how he was going to play the supportive best friend. “It’s called talking with her. She’s actually really nice. It’s her whole thing. I think. If you just talk with her then there’s no problem.”

“It’s not that easy!”

“Do you need instructions?” He ripped the potato sack open, clumsily ruffling through Jeremy’s cabinets for a potato peeler and masher. Hey, there was a measuring bowl. It was even clean. Guess they didn’t do a lot of cooking. Shocker, shocker. “First you open your mouth. Then you vibrate those old vocal cords and exhale a little, then boom! Put one foot in front of the other,
Jeremy!

“Why are you being such a dick today?” Jeremy snapped. He rounded on Michael, who was way too busy to get into a glare fest. Cutting board, cutting board - there you go.

“I’m a dick every day.” Michael dumped some potatoes on the cutting board, and unceremoniously began peeling them with quick, even strokes. “Besides, I’m stressed.”

“Michael, please. I thought you always got me about the anxiety stuff.” Michael aggressively looked at his potatoes so he couldn’t see Jeremy’s face. It may have been sad. That wasn’t his problem. “You know I’m - you know I’m scared all the time. Freaking out’s my okay. You’re always there for me and pushing me, but today you’ve just been pushing me away. If I did anything wrong, I’d appreciate it if you just told me.”

Crap. Michael put his potatoes down, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looked up, finally looking at a Jeremy with a crumpled expression and hugging his arms to himself, and yet again Michael felt a little bad for the guy who he wouldn’t have given the time of day in real life. “Look, man, I’m sorry. I’ve had a really rough day. It’s nothing on you. I just think it’d solve a lot of our problems if you manned up and talked to Christine, you know?” He smiled hesitantly at him, trying not to think about how fake it had too look. “Here, I’ll help. I’m with you all the way. I will be there at every second of the day making sure you talk to Christine a lot. And that you two get together. And fall in love.”

It was worth it, in its own odd sense, to see how Jeremy’s face lit up. What an emotional guy. “Obviously. Hey, what’re you making? You can’t cook.”

“I can make mashed potatoes,” Michael said dryly. “You seriously need some vitamins in your diet.”

“Vita what now?”

Jesus Christ.

As Michael directed Jeremy on, you know, how to actually cook for himself, Jeremy continued keeping up his constant stream of chatter. But this time Michael noticed natural pauses in the conversation where he naturally expected Michael to jump in, probably with some kind of quip or joke, something that Michael didn’t really know how to do. He wasn’t funny. He wasn’t even lighthearted, like he was beginning to suspect Michael was. Michael was fully aware that he was a bit of a sadsack killjoy, and he didn’t know how to be happy in such a horrible and crazy situation for this guy.

“Man, I saw this crazy post on Reddit this morning, about a dog that can play tennis! He holds the racquet in his jaw! What a good boy, right?”

“Very good boy.”

Michael mashed the potatoes as Jeremy prattled on for ten minutes about how cute dogs were.

“What about you? How was your day?”

The potatoes simmered on the stove, and Michael halted from where he was slicing butter in. “Uh.”

“You’ve been really quiet. If you had a bad day you should totally vent. That’s what you always do, and it seems to work for you.”
“Uh, okay.”

They stood in awkward silence, Michael manning the stove as Jeremy actually did dishes.

“Michael?”

Okay, make something up. Don’t talk about your actual day. Not hard.

“I guess I just zoned out most of the time,” Michael said loftily. “Just another day at the high school salt mines. Ha, ha.”

“You aren’t upset for no reason.”

People didn’t interrogate him in real life so much about his feelings. Because he was there, because he asked, Michael actually burst out with the truth. “Have you ever felt like your life was happening without you? Like every day is the exact same, day after day? You’re always talking with the same people and they all do the same things, and then you go to cross country practice again and you run around in that same track freaking again and again?” He paused a beat. “I mean play video games.” Jeremy nodded fastidiously. “You’re so sick of it you just want to jump off a building. You just feel so - so lost and trapped. And then you have to go to home and cook all of your own meals because your parents never come home - I mean, play more video games - and work out so you can...play video games again and again and again until suddenly it’s a week later and you’ve hung out with all your friends - I mean hung out with you - and you’ve played all your weekly father-son softball and you’ve done all of your stupid homework and it’s like this long dream that you never wake up from.” His throat choked up, ashamed that he was telling anybody this, ashamed that he was admitting it. “You keep on thinking that when you wake up from it she’ll be - she’ll be…”

Then he really did choke up, and Michael had barely a few seconds to wallow in his usual self-pity before Jeremy was wrapping him in a tight side-hug, as close as he could get while Michael was manning the pan. He was slightly wet, and his damp clothing pressed up against Michael’s side, but the hand around his shoulders was warm.

“I know just what you mean. It’s like how all of this is so dumb and...how it hurts so much, and you keep on looking for something that’ll make it all worth it. But nothing’s there, right?”

“Yeah,” Michael said in wonder. “Yeah, exactly.”

Jeremy grinned at him. “I know you better than anybody else alive, dude. Best friend of twelve years talking. Whatever you’re feeling - I’ve been there. I’ll be with you.”

“Just like me,” Michael said. “Just like how I’ll always be there for you.”

“Duh!” Jeremy stepped back and ruffled his hair, making Michael grunt and try and duck away. Jeremy laughed and reached harder, and it became a game of elaborate keep away from the hot pan on the stove and of Jeremy diving to manhandle Michael’s head.

Before he knew it he was laughing, and Jeremy was laughing, and their joy slotted so easily into each other’s it was as if they had always known each other.

In the true sense, and not just in the fictional sense. In this weird topsy turvy world, where Michael’s handwriting was sprawled against old class notes and a nerdy teenage girl could belt her undying love for play rehearsal, anything could happen.

Even somebody like Michael could have a real friend. A close friend. A best friend.
They ate the mashed potatoes on hastily cleaned cracked plastic plates, sitting on top of cleared counters and knocking their heels against cabinets, chatting about their favorite video games. Michael just decided on agreeing with everything Jeremy said about eighties retro video games, and then flipping to disagreeing with everything he said when that got boring.

Jeremy’s kitchen really was filthy and it was personally offending neat freak Michael, so while they were talking he began surreptitiously cleaning it up and making a shopping list on his phone. Jeremy, once he caught on to what Michael was actually doing, helped as best as he could with putting everything back in their proper places.

Eventually they had devolved to having giant yelling matches about the best character in Street Fighter III when the only video games Michael regularly played was League of Legends and Fortnite, and Jeremy grew so offended at some of his new opinions that Michael had to laugh.

Then Jeremy had to laugh with him, and they were laughing together, and as Michael pretended to have strong feelings on something for the first time in a long time he considered that it was, you know, kind of fun.

“So,” Jeremy said, gulping down the last of the potatoes. He passed the plate to Michael. “Can we actually go play video games now? I love you, man, but I’m not really in the mood to clean my whole house.”

“That would take way longer than my attention span,” Michael agreed wryly. “Fine. Let’s go play our favorite video game that...I know how to play.” Wait, shit. “Uh, can we play a new video game? That, hypothetically, we haven’t played before?”

But Jeremy was already leaping up the steps to his room, and Michael resigned himself to following. Get ready to have to explain why you suddenly suck at your favorite video game, Michael. Lots of fun. Get ready to play some really boring retro video game on the SNES or something for probably six more hours.

Michael checked his phone. Yep. It was seven. Six more hours. Joy.

Jeremy’s room was, predictably, a disaster area.

It was a different kind of disaster area, though. The clutter was obvious, filled with the detritus of a teenage boy life, but he could see clear method to the madness. It was cluttered, but not dirty, and there was nothing disgusting or grimy about it. Just a teenage boy’s room. Just like the house looked strongly as if only a teenage boy was living in it.

Maybe this was one of those musicals where the parents didn’t exist and everyone were mysteriously orphans because the parents just weren’t mentioned. Or maybe this was one of those musicals where everybody’s parents died of the plague or tuberculosis or something, like in La bohème.

It was probably a sign he had been here too long - half a day was way too long - because he began slowly drifting towards the line of photographs on the dresser.

It was a timeline in miniature. Two gap toothed little kids clutching long strands of Chuck E Cheese tickets, a white boy playing soccer, a brown boy blowing out the other boy’s birthday cake. Michael traced their lives together, how they had lived a life together. There were a few pictures of an older man and a woman together with the boy, but by far and away almost all the pictures had Michael in them. Not his parents. Surrounding the photographs were little knick knacks that looked weirdly familiar.
Michael reached out to poke one - a little toy robot, the same style from the old 50s sci-fi B-movie Forbidden Planet. Hey, he knew nerd stuff too. It was more Michael’s style than Jeremy’s, and he knew that Michael had given it to him.

The closet was probably full of pairs of shoes Michael had left there, the dresser crammed with a swirl of socks whose owners they couldn’t remember. Michael looked around the room in wonder as Jeremy set up a very generic gaming console, at a life lived split in two but joined together.

Must be nice.

He had just walked over to join Jeremy at the game console when he heard a sick thump and saw, to his horror, a large, uncomfortable looking bean bag drop down from the ceiling. Michael had barely enough time to gape bizarrely at it before another one cracked over his head, making him stumble to the side and curse as the second, identical bean bag landed on the floor. Jeremy, from where he was bent over the console, didn’t notice.

He hated fucking musicals. He hated fucking musicals! Learn some set design, assholes! Suspension of belief who?

Jeremy laughed, hollering obnoxiously. “Apocalypse of the Damned!” He collapsed backwards in the bean bag, not even noticing how it wasn’t there a second ago and raising a hand to high five Michael. Michael quickly dived for the bean bag next to him, grabbing the controller and belatedly returning the high five. “Level nine! The cafeterium!”

“Yay.”

At first Michael thought it was the tinkling 8-bit music from the TV that was turned up way too loudly. The video game itself was ridiculously generic and simple, somehow necessitating giant gestures and Jeremy exaggeratedly leaning back and forth. Michael, who had shame, didn’t even bother to try and reciprocate.

Then the music got louder, more instrumentalized as Michael found himself swaying to it. Then he found his toe tapping to it. Then he found his toe tapping to it. Then when Jeremy gestured Michael gestured with him, and when Jeremy leaned to the side Michael leaned to the side, and Michael began to notice that something was really, really wrong.

Then he and Jeremy opened their mouths and began singing in perfect unison.

Shit.

“Find the bad guy and push him aside, then move on forward with your friend at your side!”

Shit! No! He met Jeremy six hours ago, he wasn’t going to sing a friendship song!

“It’s a two player game so when they make an attack, you know you got a brother gonna have your back!”

This isn't even a good friendship song! This was so cringy and embarrassing! Michael dived to the left as Jeremy dived to the right, his limbs jerking almost of their own volition as he moved his legs in dumb, unnecessary ways, as he hopped forward in dumb, unnecessary ways, oh god this was hell, he was in hell -

“If you leave your brother behind that’s lame,” in no universe, real or otherwise, should a white dude call anyone brother, “Cuz it’s an effed up world but it’s a two player game, hey!”
Michael and Jeremy stopped and gasped, and Michael abruptly was able to move his limbs again as Jeremy rapped a button with his tongue between his teeth, leaning forward with utmost sincerity.

If Michael looked closer than he could see that the way Jeremy was tapping the buttons had nothing to do with the way the game was turning out. Experimentally, Michael stopped pressing buttons altogether and watched unimpressed as his character kept shooting the zombies. It was a pity he wasn’t doing Christine’s job, because then they could just replace him with a sexy lamp and he could run off and do something else. Anything else. Please, anything else.

To think he had been feeling bad for Christine when she had to belt on about play rehearsal for two minutes. Singing about how great video gaming was -

Michael shuddered. Well, at least that was over.


“People do tend to go to the bathroom, yes.” Michael mimed pressing some buttons as his character very effectively shot zombies. Good job, character. Now if he could finally get in character then that would be great.

It would help if he actually knew who his character was. Or who Rich was.

“He cornered me and ranted on about some kind of miracle pill. I mean, like, while he was peeing. It was really gross. For a guy who keeps calling me gay he has, uh, no shame.”

“Yeah?” Michael asked, disinterested again. Everyone in this play was a nutjob, so Rich should join the club. “That’s nice.”

“I’m serious. He was really on about this miracle pill.” Jeremy paused to shoot some fictional zombies. Zombies more fictional than he was. It was turtles all the way down. “Apparently it get inside you brain and tells you what to do. It’s from Japan or something. Makes you mega cool, teaches you how to rule, all that good stuff. He said that he’d sell me it for six hundred bucks. He says it’s the reason he’s so cool and popular.”

“It’s a scam, dude.” Michael experimentally waved his controller around, same way that Jeremy kept doing it. It definitely did not have motion control. It was just a normal controller. There was no need to be dancing everywhere. “Freaky scam, but a scam.”

“This could be huge!” Jeremy protested. He was sweet, but as stupid as everybody else in this ridiculous play. Poor guy. He never stood a chance. “All I have to do is give the school asshole six hundred bucks and…” he deflated. “Okay, he’s definitely scamming me. But think about it. Can I afford to say no?”

“Can you afford to say yes? He wants six hundred bucks.”

“I’m going to be a loser until the end of the world,” Jeremy said glumly. Wow, we’re back to that again. The theme of the night. The theme of the day! The theme of this play. Gather around, everybody. We’ll paint your name in lights:

Jeremy Heere, the loser!

Michael Mell, who’s forced to hang out with him and sing along to his dumb friendship songs!

Michael opened his mouth to say something unfairly biting, to say something insincerely placating, to be very honest and say that he was a bit of a dipshit. A weirdly nice dipshit. A dipshit who
listens to him rant and lives in a broken home. But a dipshit.

“Dude, you are cooler than a vintage cassette. It’s just that no one else but me knows that yet!”

Fuck!

“You’re just a nothing in this high school scheme, but it’s no big because you and me are a team!”

This. Really was a friendship song.

Fuck, he had to get out of here!

Michael jumped up, ready to race to the door, but found himself sliding and doing a jig instead. God, he was so glad the guys from the team weren’t here. He’d never live it down. “We like out of print games, retro skates!” He slid over towards Jeremy, brandishing an arm. “I’ve got a Pac Man tattoo!”

Jeremy blinked at his arm, and the music fizzed and cut out, leaving a harsh static in Michael’s ears.

“Dude,” Jeremy said, “what happened to your tattoo?”

Michael was an everyday person, and his initial response to seeing that he didn’t have a Pac Man tattoo printed on his legitimate skin was relief. His second response was panic.

He was supposed to be Michael, right? Or Michael was supposed to be him?

His third response was elation. He really was in his own body! Take that, teenage dysphoria! Now he didn’t have to walk around terrified that he was rocking another guy’s threads. Meat threads.

His fourth response was -

“Uh,” Michael said intelligently. “It’s right there.”

They both looked at it, Jeremy visibly growing wigged out. He grabbed Michael’s other arm, pushing his sleeve up so he saw his identically clean skin. “Where did your tattoo go? Did you lose it?”

“How the hell do you lose a tattoo?”

“Did you honestly cover it up?” Jeremy gaped at the arm, as if it would reveal its unmarked secrets. Michael couldn’t imagine how he was feeling, seeing his best friend of umpteen years transform into a stranger who he no longer understood.

Wait! He didn’t care!

Time to cover your ass. “Of course I didn’t cover it up,” Michael blustered. “You know that place we went to was total shit. It just faded.”

“Overnight.” For someone who was willing to believe a miracle pill he sure wasn’t buying a mysterious overnight tattoo disappearance. “Your tattoo disappeared overnight.”

“I spilled bleach on it.”

“Michael!”
“I spilled bleach on it, I soaked it in hot water, then I - uh, soaked it in vinegar,” Michael’s bullshit abilities were getting pushed to the test today, “and I did a bunch of other sketchy stuff to my skin from a WikiHow page I found online and when I woke up the next morning it was gone! That’s why I’ve been so grouchy today.” He nodded solemnly. “I missed my lil Pac Man buddy.”

Kill him.

Jeremy still looked skeptical, as well as deeply wigged out. “Michael, I really think -”

Quick, stall! Michael kicked his foot on the ground so the music started up again, like he was prodding the needle on the vinyl back on track, and this time when he felt the singing pick up again he did it as loud and as obnoxiously as possible.

“Nobody here appreciates, but soon we’ll be together where they do!”

He dropped himself back down on the bean bag and took Jeremy’s face in his hands, singing as earnestly as he could. Jeremy’s eyes were wide but otherwise accepting of this turn of events.

“Because guys like us are cool in college! Cool in college, this I know!” Jesus, how pathetic was he. What was worse: singing about how eventually maybe at one point in the future he wouldn’t be a loser, or singing that to distract his best friend slash main character from the fact that he was just pretending to be his best friend and also that they were all in a musical. “Guys like us are cool in college. We rule in college, listen bro!”

He pulled the dorkiest moves, waving his hands around and flailing his hands in a way that somewhere the real fake Michael had probably thought was cool.

Michael stretched out, as if he was reclining on a Laz E Boy. Like a moron. “High school is hell,” this was hell, “but we navigate it well! Cuz what we do is we make it a two player game!”

Personally, Michael like RPGs better. But that was just him.

Then Jeremy got really into it, and they made a lot of expressive noises along to the beat that probably constituted a song in this ridiculous musical.

Finally Jeremy jumped up, and Michael sagged as Jeremy walked around behind him. He let the game push itself along as he randomly mashed buttons.

“As losers we have fought together for years. Both Nintendo zombies and our popular peers!” Holy shit, where they dropping out of generic name brand land? Were they paying royalties to Nintendo for this? “Now we’re stuck at a level and I want to move on.”

Distracted, Michael called back, “Can’t wait til this number is gone, and you realize that guys like us are cool in college. It’s all the same!”

“High school matters to me,” Jeremy said, frustrated. “But -”

“Guys like us are cool in college!” Yeah, dude, so stop worrying. In college nobody cares about how cool you are.

Jeremy dropped down onto the bag next to him. “But we’re not in college!”

“All the same,” Michael paused his game and grabbed Jeremy’s arm. “High school is whack,” in a burst of strange synchronicity he and Jeremy threw and caught each other’s controllers in the air, and Michael couldn’t help a sincere giddy grin. That was perfectly in sync. They had been singing in
sync the whole song. “But we have each other’s back. It’s me and you, we make it a two player game!

Knocks at the door interrupted the beat and Michael was kicked out of the song, left gasping even as the music dimmed to a faint murmur and Jeremy yelled something about an actual father.

Well. At least that was over.

A tall guy with a full beard that looked startlingly similar to Mr. Reyes walked in, wearing nothing but a bathrobe, a stained tank top, and underwear. Michael, who was only into non-fictional older guys, hissed and covered his eyes as a mortified Jeremy collapsed back into his beanbag. Michael had the distinct feeling that if Christine was here Jeremy would have been sweating enough to fill the high school pool. The apparent father sipped at his mug of coffee as Michael and Jeremy, in the grand tradition of teenagers everywhere, pretended that the older man didn’t exist. It wasn’t hard for Michael, as in the very technical sense he didn’t exist.

“Is that a girl? Are you in here with a girl -” he paused, off put by Michael having shucked his red jacket, headphones, and glasses a while ago. “Oh hey Michael. Didn’t recognize you without your uniform.”

Michael craned his head back and scrutinized the guy as best as he could without looking below the belt. “Dude, why aren’t you wearing pants?”

Yeah, Dad,” Jeremy hissed, “good question.”

“They didn’t need me at the office, so I stayed home.” Yeah, Michael had the feeling that he did that a lot. Jeremy looked mortified, but not surprised. That was...a little sad. “I was going to order pizza, if you boys want anything -”

“I already ate,” Jeremy snapped. “Mashed potatoes. Michael and I made them.”

“Oh.” Mr. Heere blinked at them before shrugging, taking another pull of his coffee. “Nice. So do you want any pizza?”

“The kitchen’s clean too,” Jeremy said pointedly. “If you even noticed.”

“Oh.” Mr. Heere looked around, as if he could see the kitchen from Jeremy’s bedroom. It felt like he was messing up the place even being inside. “So...pizza?”

Jeremy ignored him, flipping the game back on, and Michael hesitantly followed his lead in ignoring the adult until he shrugged, yet again, and wandered away, muttering something about a good talk.

“So,” Michael said awkwardly, well aware that if he and Jeremy had been friends for twelve years the guy was probably like a second parent to him, “is he always like that?”

Jeremy hunched over the controller, not answering him.

“Has your mom come home from work yet?”

This time Jeremy did pause, straightening to look at him incredulously. “Not funny, Michael.”

Shit. His mom was dead. Shit! Why didn’t he ask Christine for a character background!

“Yeah,” Michael said awkwardly. “Uh. Sorry.”
They played in silence a little, Michael feeling even worse and worse. No wonder his house was such a wreck. A dead mom, a depressed dad. For a generic high school musical in a generic suburb with a generic house, his home life was weirdly sad.

“You know,” Michael said, fully aware that it wasn’t any of his business, fully aware that he didn’t care, “it really shouldn’t be your job to take care of the house.”

Jeremy hunched further over the controller, ignoring him.

“That really pisses you off, right? Parents should be there for you and crap.”

“Yep.”

“You shouldn’t have to tackle this high school battlezone with only one guy. That’s a lot of pressure on me. And you.”

“Probably.”

“So then why don’t you care?” Michael paused the game again, turning around to frown at him. “Get mad at your dad! Get mad at the world! Trust me, I’m the expert in anger and taking it out on people who don’t deserve it. You need a lot more of it instead being so - so passive all the time.”

Jeremy didn’t answer him.

Finally, as Michael refused to resume the game and as Jeremy refused to look at him, he finally sighed and threw the controller down at the ground. Michael dropped his too, glad to be rid of it, and Jeremy kicked the ground like a two year old.

“Rich said his hookup is at the Payless. We should go and check it out, just to see if he’s being legit or not.”

That was obvious. “Drugs aren’t the answer,” Michael lectured. “They just make more problems.”

“It’s better than drugs!” Jeremy kicked the ground again, pathetic and desolate. “I deserve something better than - than my ridiculous father. We deserved better than - and damn it, I’m going to get what I deserve!” He was breathing deeper, almost like one of his constant freakouts at school, almost different. “And everybody’s going to pay attention to me.”

Michael was silent, identifying the pity that rose in his chest, wondering where it came from.

Maybe he hit on the actual conflict of the play. Maybe this was one of those anti-drug messages, like Requiem for a Dream, or Trainspotters. It was about a delicate flower of a teenage boy ruthlessly clutched in the white knuckled fist of opioids.

Maybe all he needed was a friend wearing a DARE t-shirt.

It was ridiculous. He was a main character. The entire play was about him. He was the one standing at the front of the stage, belting his heart out, singing all of the songs and pleading his case to the adoring crowd. The show was all about him. His actor was the headliner. Why was he pretending that nobody cared about him?

As if Michael wasn’t right there?

“What about then?” Michael asked, strangely broken hearted. “Will you be too cool for me?”

Jeremy smiled, impossibly fond, as nobody had ever looked at Michael before. “No way.”
The music kicked in, but Michael was too distracted to care. He was caught up in Jeremy, everything Jeremy, at the main character, at the hero, at the star. At the victim. “You know that you’re my favorite person, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still dream.”

Michael knew that he had a line, that there was something vaguely cocky and flippant he was supposed to say, that he was supposed to brush it off. As if Jeremy had ever said it to him before, as if anybody had ever felt that before, as if stupid, loser, lucky Michael took Jeremy’s love for granted.

“Really?” Michael asked, afraid to believe him. “I’m really your favorite person?”

Jeremy grinned and reached out to ruffle his hair and Michael laughed, ducking to avoid him, and Jeremy kicked out as he pretended to dodge. “We’re never not gonna be a team!”

Really?

“High school is shit,” Jeremy sang, high and clear, beautiful and piercing. “And you gotta help me conquer it. That’s just what we do -”

Michael joined him in perfect unison. “ - we make it a two player game!”

As if something old was slotted into place, as if two familiar pieces were joined, Michael had a best friend. He had a really, really cute best friend.

As if he had always had a best friend.

As if the whole thing wasn’t just a weirdo musical fever dream, where Michael was only pretending to be Michael and Christine was only pretending to be Christine and everybody was singing and dancing how they felt about each other and their secret, open, overflowing love.

He fucking hated musicals.
The world tilted sideways, like jamming a pinball machine to make the ball go just right, like slipping off a plastic inflatable raft in the middle of the ocean, like that peculiar swooping sensation in your gut when you got spun in a circle as the set design changed and you were unceremoniously swept from a stinky teenager’s bedroom into a painfully generic suburban mall food court.

You know, that familiar sensation.

Learn set design, assholes!

Michael stumbled, abruptly nauseous, as Jeremy calmly looked around the mall and flipped through his wallet. He was dressed in the exact same outfit he had been in five seconds ago, i.e. an indeterminate amount of time ago.

Just to be sure, Michael checked the clock on his phone.

The time was 2:30, and the date was ‘???’ . When he checked the year, it was just ‘Now’.

Great.

Michael sighed and pocketed the phone, cursing the indeterminate time frame. He checked himself over, relieved that he was still wearing his new outfit of jeans and a black t-shirt. Jeremy hadn’t remarked on the change, thank god. Jacket was way too hot.

Sometimes when he went outside and squinted at the sun he felt a peculiar kind of warmth. Not sunlight, but sharper. Hotter. Like from a spotlight.

The thought was too disturbing, so he scrapped it and settled for catching up to Jeremy, who was already ambling around the foot court looking for signs.

Shit. Jeremy was already going through with the weirdo sketchy drug plan. Michael had been fully intending on refusing to take him and trying to distract him with more loser video games, but if they were already at the mall it was going to be way harder to dissuade him from his ridiculous plan.

Did…the musical know that?

Michael shook himself. Conspiracy theories later, saving apparent best friend from himself now. Michael jogged up to where Jeremy was walking, fingers twitching as he pressed each finger to his thumb in a nervous tic.

“I don’t know about this,” Jeremy said. The food court was giant and painfully suburban. Michael was a city kid and giant suburban malls creeped him out big time. Something about all of the abstract colors and the dead eyed shuffles of stay at home moms. “Maybe we should just turn around and go home.”

“Great idea!” Michael tugged at his hand. “Let’s go.”
But Jeremy just jerked his hand away, shaking his head. “No, I have to be brave. I’m going to improve my life if it’s the last thing I do.”

“It will be the last thing you do at this rate,” Michael said. “Look, drugs? Never the answer. Come on, didn’t you ever see the TMNT PSA? Don’t be a chicken. Rich’s a turkey!”

“Very funny.” Jeremy finally halted in front of a map, squinting at it as Michael panicked. He thought he’d have more time. “Rich already said it wasn’t drugs. Why would he lie about something so stupid?”

“It’s Rich!” He still didn’t know who Rich was, but whatever. “He doesn’t need a reason to make fun of you! Shit, dude, nobody needs a reason to make fun of you.”

“Thanks.”

This wasn’t working. Michael yanked at Jeremy’s hand, gesturing to the GameGo entrance on the far side of the mall. “Look, Jeremy! Video games! Let’s go look at them! Video games!”

“Stop trying to distract me, it won’t work.” Jeremy traced a finger down the map to a seemingly random number. When Michael checked the legend, he saw the dreaded Payless name. Shit. Shit! “I’m doing this with or without you, Michael.”

Michael was left to curse under his breath as he chased after Jeremy, who at this point was clearly just barely restraining himself from breaking out into a run out of sheer panic. Out of the things to be stubborn about, he had to be stubborn about this.

“Look, look.” Michael finally grabbed him by the elbow, dragging him to a stop in front of a Oh’s Jewelry store. Get it? Kay’s, Oh’s? Michael hated this fucking musical. “Ever hear of ‘Hugs, not Drugs’?”

Jeremy gave him a bizarre look. “No?”

“I don’t know about you, but I made a DARE promise in fourth grade and I am holding myself to that. They gave me a pencil, Jeremy! It was a sacred bond!” Michael desperately dug his hand into his pocket, finally finding a hard boiled egg buried deep inside. He pointedly held it out at Jeremy, who looked mildly surprised that Michael had an egg in his pocket. “Look, Jeremy. This egg? Is your brain.” He pointed to the wall. “That wall? Is Rich’s weird drug pill.”

Then he lobbed the egg against the wall, ignoring how the other passing mall patrons shot him even more bizarre looks. “Any questions?”

Wait. Michael looked down at his hands, then at the wall where the scattered remains of a hard boiled egg lay. Where did he even get the egg from?

That was a disturbing question for another day. Jeremy just shook his head, amazed at the depths Michael would sink to in order to keep him sober, and kept walking. “You’ve gotten even weirder lately, dude. You said that you’d come help me get this thing on the car ride over, and now you’re throwing eggs around and quoting PSAs? Just admit it.”
“What car ride over?” Michael cried, desperate. “Admit what?”

“You don’t even want me to be cool, do you?” Jeremy shook himself free, and this time when he turned around to keep going it felt like he was trying to leave Michael behind too. “You said that you’d support me, but if you don’t want to do that then just get out of my way.”

Michael halted, mouth open and useless, and it was only when Jeremy abruptly stopped and turned into a store that he realized they were in front of the Payless already.

That couldn’t be right. The map showed it on the other end of the store. They had been walking fast, but not that fast. How could they have reached it so quickly?

Oh, yeah. Musical logic.

It was like playing ping pong in an MC Escher painting. Michael had no choice but to dive in after him, catching Jeremy just as he began conspicuously loitering near the employee counter of the shoe store. A shoe store. Jesus. Everything about this play was nonsensical.

Of course it was nonsensical, it was a play. Michael and Christine could do their best to solve the plot, but Michael was beginning to realize that trying to stop the plot from even happening was trying to lasso a runaway horse. It might be a lost cause.

This ridiculous turn of events was really raising some unfortunate questions about fatalism and determinism. Michael wondered how he was going to break it to Jeremy that he lived in a deterministic world with no free will, only the cold hard rule of fate.

Jeremy, who was currently occupied wiggling his eyebrows at a passing store clerk with Wolverine sideburns. Never mind. Guy was sweet occasionally, but he was about as bright as everyone else in this play. Michael really didn’t know how he was expected to survive the next two months if he was going to consistently be ten IQ points above everyone else in the room. Might make tests easier, anyway.

The store clerk with Wolverine sideburns looked suspiciously similar to both Mr. Reyes and Jeremy’s Dad. Great. Guess they were cheaping out on actors. Jeremy, at least, didn’t seem to notice the difference as the store clerk let him further into the back room of the Payless. Michael dived in after them, determined not to be left behind.

When Michael slid in behind Jeremy, who shot him a surprised but stubborn look, the store clerk barely noticed. Jeremy was flashing him six hundred dollars, and Michael just barely caught the guy’s comment before he remembered to shove Jeremy and quickly pocket the extra two hundred. Maybe he could keep it after Jeremy inevitably succumbs to the dark delights of steroids.

Haunting electronica pulsed through Michael’s ears. He stiffened - this was the wrong time and place to be breaking out into song! - but the music just steadily grew in crescendo as it got creepier and creepier. It sent shivers down Michael’s spine. Judging from the uneasy way Jeremy was looking around he had to be hearing it too. The horrible scare chord isn’t stopping you from buying the drugs, Jeremy? Really?

Then the scary clerk guy stepped forward, and as his head cocked staring at nothing he didn’t look like Mr. Reyes or Jeremy’s Dad at all. He looked alien. Even more alien than Michael was.

When he finally sang it felt final. It felt real. It felt like something far, far too familiar, like something that had been tucked away in the main theme of the musical all along. Maybe it had been.
“It’s from Japan. It’s a grey, oblong pill. Quantum nanotechnology CPU.”

Michael glanced at Jeremy, who looked as spooked as he was but was nodding along fastidiously. Quantum nanotechnology CPU? That didn’t even make any sense.

The clerk guy cocked his head in an unearthly, inhuman tilt as he sprayed his hands in a strange pantomime. Of what, Michael didn’t know. “The quantum computer in the pill will travel through your blood until it implants itself in your brain and it tells you what to do.”

“It tells you what to do,” Jeremy breathed softly beside him, and Michael realized that he had been mouthing the words to himself as the guy was singing them. His fingers twitched with the ghost of a gesture. “It’s preprogrammed. It’s amazing. Speaks to you directly.”

The guy glanced back at them, glasses glinting, nodding professionally to Jeremy. An equal. “You behave as it’s appraising. Helps you act...correctly.”

Jeremy clenched his fists, his eyes shining, and Michael’s so-called best friend came alight with the most fierce determination he had ever seen from him. Uncharacteristic determination, driven by something Michael couldn’t understand. “It helps you to be cool. It helps you rule.”

Michael shivered. Something about this was way worse than drugs.

The clerk guy dumping the pill in their hands was almost anticlimactic. It really didn’t look like much. He said some more ominous stuff, Jeremy squeaked a lot, and they both skedaddled from the store as quickly as possible.

This time when they walked towards the foot court Jeremy was clenching together his hands as if he had a bug inside, every nerve visibly vibrating. Michael cautiously sat him down at a random table in the food court, and as he ran up to a random restaurant and ordered a giant helping of chili fries and one Mountain Dew he couldn’t help but feel like an enabler.

He waited around anxiously for the fries, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He should call Christine and ask her for some actual plot tips. Michael was working on some very intelligent educated guesses, but that wasn’t a substitute for having actually seen the play.

At least, he would if he had any assurance that Christine was busy existing right now. God, that was a creepy thought.

Whatever. This wasn’t really his problem.

Michael accepted the chill fries and slightly ominous bottle of Mountain Dew, rolling his eyes when he heard the faint strains of a scare chord. Something about the musical just made the Mountain Dew look ominous, even without the scare chord. It was just...a scary looking bottle of Mountain Dew.

As he dumped the food in front of a very tense Jeremy, Michael considered that the whole thing actually wasn’t his problem. Well, it was in the technical sense, but think of this like procrastinating on a project. He had to solve it eventually, but a couple things were standing in front of him solving it now.

Jeremy’s implacable stubbornness, for one. Michael couldn’t tell if he was just holding the Idiot Ball in accordance with plot, if he was actually just being a stupid, gullible dick. Really, really gullible.

Honestly. Michael rolled his eyes as Jeremy held the pill between two finger, staring at it as if it
was a holy thing. Helps you to be cool. What a chump.

“Maybe you should just buy some Axe instead.” Michael drawled, taking his seat. The closer he got to the pill the louder the scare chord got, but if he leaned farther away he couldn’t hear it. It would have been weird if it was unusual, but as it stood it was just making his head hurt. “Really make the ladies chase after you.”

“Very funny.” Jeremy stared at the pill in wonder, turning it around in his hand, sniffing it a little. Michael wondered if he really thought it would solve his problems. If he even had a thought in his mind right now besides moving as the plot was pushing him. “Maybe it’ll make the guys chase after me too. That’ll be a shocker.”

Charming. “Gay jokes, very funny.”

Jeremy flushed, looking down at the table. Looking down at the pill. “Maybe it’ll - you know, fix that. Do you think it would? That kind of stuff isn’t really cool.”

Whoah.

“Dude,” Michael said slowly, desperately hoping he wasn’t reading the situation wrong. “ Miracle pills don’t fix that. It, uh, doesn’t need fixing.”

“Easy for you to say,” Jeremy muttered. “You don’t even care.”

“Of course I don’t care!” Michael rapped the table, trying not to think about how Michael Mell was also coincidentally a flamboyant homosexual. Yeah, coincidentally. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of!”

“You aren’t ashamed of anything. That’s my job.” When Jeremy reached for the bottle of soda it was almost jerkily, as if his movements were beyond his control, as if he knew what he had to do and couldn’t wait to get there. “But not anymore. I’ll never be ashamed of anything ever again. I’ll never be embarrassing ever again. This’ll change everything, Michael. If it’s not a freaking scam.” He unscrewed the cap, letting the carbonation hiss open in perfect rhythm with the scare chord. “If it’s not another freaking dead end.”

“Dude,” Michael whispered, knowing that one way or another everything was going to change. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said, more honestly than he could ever understand. “I do.”

Then he downed it, quickly following it up with a swig of Mountain Dew.

The scare chord stopped.

Both boys stared at each other, wide eyed, Jeremy’s hands trembling a little. They waited, ten anxious heartbeats thumping in his ears, and Michael was half-expecting him to spin in a sparkling circle and transform into cool Jeremy. A massively jacked, steroid using cool Jeremy.

But nothing happened.

“How does it taste?” Michael asked cautiously.

Jeremy grimaced. “Minty.” He slumped in his seat, passion gone, left only with familiar bitter disappointment. “Looks like I just blew my Bar Mitzvah money on a Wintergreen tic tac.”
Michael’s gut reaction was to praise the Lord and call Jeremy a moron. He had just done what was quite possibly the sketchiest drug deal of all time, complete with ominous singing, and had taken a weirdo pill under the misapprehension that drugs would make him magically rule, or help him rule, or tell him what to do or whatever. Since when did drugs tell you what to do? What, did they give you schizophrenia?

But there was no way the musical would give it so much build up and have no payoff. He was going to have to watch Jeremy to make sure he didn’t have an allergic reaction and start frothing at the mouth or anything.

“Well.” Michael slapped the table, leaning back. “I hate to say I told you so, but I love telling you I told you so. So I’ll say I told you so. I told you so!”

Jeremy thunked his head miserably on the grimy food court tables, resting a cheek on the cool yet sticky surface. “Just don’t.”

Aw. Quick, be his best friend. Michael supportively fed him a chili fry.

He wasn’t that practiced at having best friends.

But Jeremy just mumbled a thanks, and Michael steadily fed him a stream of chili fries as he tried to figure out what to do. Once Jeremy cheered up they could go get a slushie or something. Maybe all the slushies in this musical were perfect.

He slanted a glance at a very depressed Jeremy, disappointed again as universe refused to give him a quick fix. Seriously. What a loser. Did he even have any independent thoughts in his head, or was it just elevator music up there as he did whatever the plot wanted?

“Maybe it takes a while to kick in?” Michael suggested absently, feeding Jeremy another french fry so he wouldn’t actually talk. “Those things take a while to digest, you know. Time release capsules.”

Jeremy mumbled something that may have been a ‘You think so?’

“I know so,” Michael said confidently, knowing nothing. “Hey, any second now you’re going to have some muscle growth and improved self-confidence.”

Well, Michael’s new play existence was exciting. What he wouldn’t give to be in a soap opera right now. Or a car chase movie. Or shit, even just Twelve Angry Men. Not some kind of chick sleepover teenage romcom where -

“Michael!”

Michael jumped upright in his seat, but if Michael jumped then Jeremy richoteted. He glanced around, a cornered rabbit, clearly about to get up and run out of his seat before Michael reached out and, exasperated, grabbed a napkin to clean the chili smears off the corner of Jeremy’s mouth and stop him from running off. It was like having a two year old.

Sure enough, when Michael turned around in his chair he saw Christine barrelling towards them like a bullet from a gun, dress flapping back in the wind and waving her hands. Jake was stuck trailing behind her, brow heavy and a little peeved.

Michael rolled his eyes, and cut off Jeremy’s whole anxious bunny song and dance routine by grabbing his hand and physically holding him down as Christine sprinted towards them like a woman possessed. She was shouting something, fully audible over the eerily silent food court.
“Did he take it? Michael, did he take it?”

Uh. Was he supposed to try harder to stop him?

She finally skidded to a stop in front of them, gasping for breath and bending over with her hands on her knee caps. She looked up, hair in a disarray, dress far cuter than when Michael last saw her and way, way more panicked.

“How long ago did you begin to exist?” He asked, fascinated. “Like, was it a running start?”

“Not funny!” Christine screeched. “Jeremy, did you take it?”

Jeremy blubbered.

She wasn’t in the mood. Christine reached out and grabbed him by the forearms, physically shaking him. Jeremy’s brain visibly exploded at the idea of his crush touching him, even if it was to manhandle him, and Michael couldn’t help but roll his eyes at her usual compulsive overreaction. He once saw her break into tears because the teacher called on her in class. Seriously.

Michael propped his elbow on the table, raising a hand and munching on one of Jeremy’s chili fries. “Chill out, lady. He took the dumb drug.”

Christine stared at him, face white, and in a brilliantly out of character move she started cursing as loud and fast as she could.

Jake finally jogged up behind her, completely mystified as his little brain tried to work through the concept of his date cursing at nerds. Michael was willing to bet dollars to donuts Christine hadn’t had much of a choice in the whole date thing - she would have done a full Mission Impossible and tried to ditch him as soon as possible.

“Uh,” he said, as intelligent as usual. “Are you shaking him down for his lunch money? I can do that for you.”

It took another ten extremely inventive curses before Christine surfaced for air, face red. She rounded on Michael, fists clenched. “Why didn’t you stop him?”

These fries were weirdly good, if generic tasting. Michael crunched on another one, bored. “I tried? Mr. Plot was insistent and Mr. Jeremy’s a moron.”

Christine screeched into her hands.

“It’s like you don’t even care!” She screamed, and Jeremy literally started bending over with how much he was freaking out. Don’t tap on the glass, lady. “You moron! He just ate the fucking - you just started the play!”

“I what now?”

Jeremy was keening now, really and truly having a panic attack, and Michael’s ingrained best friend instincts kicked in as he instinctively reached out and put a hand on Jeremy’s back, inspecting him for design flaws.

“Christine,” he gasped, “Christine, I -”

Target Female Incompatible.

Michael froze. That was no scare chord.
Jeremy shrieked, and Michael realized that he hadn’t been having a panic attack at all.

He fell onto the ground seizing, every limb jerking, and a horrible gut wrenching scream tore itself out of his throat. Christine screamed as Jake immediately whipped out his phone - what the fuck, dude! - and Michael jumped out of his chair, crouching next to Jeremy on the ground and trying to cushion his head. No, make sure he doesn’t bite his tongue. No, shit! He must have been allergic to the drugs! Jeremy had a cocaine allergy!

Dammit, he was a horrible fake best friend. He had totally killed the main character! They were never going to escape this stupid play!

*Calibration in process. Please excuse some mild discomfort.*

Mild! This was a seizure! Christine was clutching at her head, also screaming, and Michael knew that they were the only two people who could hear the voices. Except, maybe, for Jeremy.

This had never happened before. This was unprecedented. This was no scare chord, no creepy theme. It was a voice in their heads. It was a filthy and disgusting voice in their heads.

*Calibration complete. Access procedure initiated.*

Then Jeremy gasped, breath heaving but limbs finally still and Michael hastily retreated from where he was crouching way too close next to him.

“I’m fine.” Jeremy waved a hand around, machoing it up for Christine. “Really, that was just a little -”

*Discomfort level may increase.*

This time it was like Michael was having the seizure.

The fluorescent food court lights started flashing black and blue, every piece of lighting in view turning off and on again in electric blue, flashing until Michael’s eyes were flashing starbursts. From the corner of his vision he could see that random NPCs from the high school were standing around them recording the teenage boy possibly dying on the ground. There was something seriously wrong with everyone in this play.

The play that Michael was beginning to suspect was a black comedy.


Jeremy finally stood back up, relieving Michael more than he would ever expect, and he looked around in confusion. Michael felt a tickling feeling on the back of his neck, almost as if something was looking down on him.

Christine, from where she was standing next to him, immediately began craning her neck, looking up at the round ceiling of the mall as if she honestly expected to find something there.

The scare chord was back, and Michael instinctively knew that it had blossomed into a song. It was the full, robust version of the haunting tune that had been following them everywhere, and it was echoing in sync with the flashing blue lights. Christine pressed up against him, clutching his arm, and Michael half-heartedly tried to do the masculine thing and stand in front of her before he realized that he had no idea what he was protecting her from. It was a voice in his head right now.
Michael hadn’t really bothered looking around the food court too much. It was a food court, painfully generic and very sticky. It had no children, no obese people or old people or anybody other than NPCs that could have passed for high school students. They all sat a healthy distance from Jeremy and Michael, eating their food and talking at an appropriately loud voice so the whole thing sounded like an actual mall. But not too loud, because then the audience wouldn’t be able to hear Jeremy.

But the food court was a fully formed square, and a chest-height metal railing demarcated its edges. Beyond it lay a giant hallway, full of faceless shoppers and generic stores, practically built so the eye would glaze over them.

Michael had barely even noticed it until he saw that somebody was standing beyond the railing.

All of the lights had cut out except for the ones directly above where they were sitting. The figure, standing ramrod straight with his hands behind his back, was half-shadowed in the unlit hallway. It gave Michael an electric tingle at the back of his teeth, like a static shock.

Welcome to your Super Quantum Intel Unit Processor...Your SQUIP.

“Uh,” Michael said, “What the fuck?”

Everybody around them had frozen, completely oblivious to the shadowed figure that came from nowhere and destroyed all the mall lighting. Christine was having a silent freak out next to him, but if Michael squinted through the darkness he could see that she looked a little excited too. She tugged at his shirt, even as Jeremy looked around and turned to see the shadowy figure. His jaw dropped. So he could see it too, then.

Of course. Main character powers.

“That’s the villain!” Christine hissed. “I didn’t get to tell you the plot! That’s the villain of the play, the SQUIP!”

Damn. Michael squinted at it through the menacing darkness. It was really creepy, alright. Deeply creepy. Was it wearing a leather jacket? Stylin’. “Where did that guy come from, Electric Avenue?”

Jeremy didn’t notice that they were still looking around and talking. He only had eyes for the creepy shadow dude. The...Squid? “Why do you look like Keanu Reeves?”

Another light flickered on in the distance, and Squid was backlit just a little bit more. For half a second Michael had honestly thought that they had shelled out the money to get legitimate Keanu Reeves in this play, but when he looked closer the guy didn’t really look like Keanu Reeves at all.

Well. Maybe a little. Maybe out of the corner of his eye, in double vision, like if he screwed his eyes shut until starbursts popped and turned his vision blue then maybe the guy looked just a little like Keanu Reeves.

He smiled. Maybe. It was really dark, and he did a series of impressions so bad Michael repressed them the moment he said them.

The feeling of Christine tugging more intently on his black t-shirt distracted him, and she leaned in to hiss in his ear as Squid did a really disturbing anime girl impression. “That’s the robot Jeremy just ate. It’s evil and uses him to brainwash the school district!”

Uh.
The hell?

Michael thought that this was a weird teenage rom com, anti drug PSA type of thing, not a science fiction play. Brainwashing? He didn’t eat a robot, he took a drug! All that stuff about quantum nanotechnology CPUs made no sense, there was nothing scientific about…

So, as it turned out, Michael was quite possibly the most genre blind idiot in the universe, and by allowing his fake best friend to eat a drug he may have caused the apocalypse.

Jesus Christ.

“Can everyone see you?”

*I exist only in your mind.* Christine and Michael abruptly tried to do their best impersonation of somebody who could not see anything whatsoever. God, the dude was creepy. His telepathic voice was like ants marching over your cortices. *All they see is you having an animated conversation with yourself. So don’t do that.* Jeremy abruptly pretended not to do that, looking around faux-casually. *Just think at me. Like you’re telepathic.*

Michael and Christine exchanged nervous looks, but when Jeremy spoke again it was completely out loud. “Like in the X-Men?”

“It’s an aside to the audience,” Christine whispered. “Like monologues in Shakespeare! Or the talking head interviews in mockumentaries!”

Well, that was convenient. *I can see this is difficult. You may want to be more chill.*

“Oh no,” Christine whispered. “Here it comes.”

“The title drop.” Something sank in Michael’s gut. “Fuck.”

Oblivious, beautiful, moronic Jeremy was still gaping, but he wasn’t stepping backwards. “You mean cool.”

*I do not. You see, human social activity is governed by rules and I have the processing capacity to understand those rules.* Squid hadn’t taken his eyes off Jeremy the whole conversation, locking him in an electric gaze. Jeremy was frozen, as frozen as the rest of the food court was, and even as Squid was separated from them by a metal railing he felt far, far too close. *Of course, some choose to break those rules.*

Squid turned his head and looked directly at Michael and Christine.

They stiffened, doing their best impersonation of the frozen cast, and he shouldn’t have been able to tell the difference. But Michael knew that he did. Squid saw them.

Squid smiled.

Then he walked through the grating.

Straight through, like he was a hologram. Not a real person, not an actor on a stage, a hologram passing through a very physical set piece of a railing. Michael grabbed Christine’s hand almost unconsciously, drawing her behind him. But he just smiled at them.

*Some may think they’re very clever.* He wouldn’t stop advancing. As he stepped closer Michael saw that he was wearing a rocking leather jacket and black shirt combo, with electric blue trim. *Or*
“Who are you?” Michael cried. “You can’t just walk through railings! That’s so weird!”

He stopped, staring at him incredulously. *I’m a nanotechnology robot and the fact that you can only see me through manipulating your audio and visual inputs is weird?*

“Yeah, because you’re an actor.” An actor who looked nothing like Keanu Reeves, but if you glanced at him from the corner of your eye… “A creepy, creepy - you’re a dude in a sick leather jacket pretending to be a robot! You aren’t real!”

He looked impressed. Michael wasn’t sure he wanted his approval. *You really think my jacket is sick?*

“It’s awesome,” Michael admitted, “but that’s not the point here.”

*The point that you’ve been missing.* Jeremy hadn’t moved. He was as frozen as the rest of the cast now. Michael looked around the food court - at the frozen NPCs, at the frozen lead, at the mall so dark it may as well not exist at all.

What kind of power did Squid have here? What kind of robot did a power even have? This was so far beyond real life now it wasn’t even funny.

It inclined its head at Christine. *Fangirl. Fill in our Wikipedia page synopsis. No need to donate.* Christine’s eyes were wide, but she nodded faintly. “Uh - uh - um, this is - a robot?”

This time both Michael and Squid were shooting her less than impressed glances. She flushed, and physically fought past her stage fright. “So, uh - kinda - it’s about a shy boy who eats a techno boy and becomes a spicy boy!”

Okay. Okay, Christine.

*You know, your inability to assert yourself is what got you into this mess in the first place.* He smiled pleasantly at her. *If you had just told Dickweed here the plot first then maybe he could have stopped all of this.*

“Dickweed?”

“I tried!” Christine wrung her hands together. “And, uh, it’s kind of an honor? To be insulted by you? Is that weird? It’s totally weird isn’t it, oh my god.”

“It’s weird.”

*Pitiful children.* He circled them, feral and robotic, as Christine and Michael pressed closer together. She smelled like pancake makeup and dust. *Callous dickweed who thinks he’s so much better than everyone else relegated to brown best friend and supporting cast member. His new casting call leaves him lovesick and alone.* Michael clenched his fist, but it only smiled broadly at him. *The opposite of you! The one to your zero.* It turned to Christine, who set her lip rebelliously. *Fangirl loser turned school and social darling. Pity how she’s everything you ever wanted to be. Makes you feel inadequate, huh? Try sending her anon hate.* It gasped. *Wait! You’re her! That’d be silly.*

Michael folded his arms, glaring it down. “So you’re GLaDOS, big whoop. Yell at me a little about my insecurities. I don’t care. What do I look like, Jeremy?”
“You’re just a highly charismatic and compelling musical villain!” Christine croaked, aiming for typical Christine Canigula bravery and falling far short. “I - I draw fanart of you! I’m not afraid of you!”

*How flattering! I’ll give it a reblog.* His eyes crackled electric blue, like electricity jumping from a live wire, and Michael and Christine watched in horror as he raised up a hand and snapped his fingers. *I see you two didn’t read your playbills. Here’s the TL;DR.*

The frozen cast members turned in sync to look at Michael and Christine. They were grinning, bright and grotesque, and Michael’s breath caught in his throat. Every face in the room turned to you was never a great sign.

A crackling theremin rang in Michael’s ear, and the chorus began to sing.

“Everything about you is so terrible! Whoa, everything about you makes me wanna die!”

What a dick! Christine’s jaw dropped from next to him, and she clutched at Michael’s sleeve again. “This is *Be More Chill* Part 1!” God, if this was part one he didn’t want a part two. “It’s supposed to be singing this at Jeremy, not us!”

“Jeremy can keep it!”

*So don’t freak out.* Squid stepped forward and Michael couldn’t help but step back, even if he was just a fictional character, even if Michael wasn’t afraid of him. *And don’t resist. Sit back, relax. As I persist.*

“This is just a musical!” Michael screamed, anything to drown out the horrible chorus of voices hating him. “You can’t do anything to us!”

*Sure. I’m just a robot in a brain.* He snapped his fingers. Jeremy jolted awake, head shaking, spitting onto the ground as if he had a nasty taste in his mouth. *Can sure do something to him, though.*

“What’s going on?” Jeremy looked around, confused, vision skipping over the still very freaked out Michael and Christine. “You mean, be more cool?”

Squid slanted a fond glance at Jeremy. The beginning to a long and happy partnership. A two month partnership. He turned on his heel and, in a burst of static that ripped across Michael’s vision -

He was back on the other side of the rail again. As if he had never left. He raised a finger, smiling at Jeremy.

*First thing’s first, go buy a new shirt.*

The music started and Michael couldn’t move.

The song was uncomfortably personal. It was just them, separated by a rail but unquestionably orbiting around each other, and easy back and forth as if they had known each other their whole lives. They were intimate, in a weird way.

The worst part was, he wasn’t saying anything Michael hadn’t thought about Jeremy.

He sang constantly awful shit, made Jeremy agree, and as he sang on the scene began to change. Michael and Christine lurched to the side, as if the ground had been whipped out from under their
feet like a tablecloth during a magic trick, and when Michael looked around the best he could he saw that they were in a department store.

Was this the natural power of the song? Was it Squid doing this? How much power did that guy even have?

The song lowered to a murmur as Squid pointed Jeremy towards a clothing rack. He passed right by Michael and Christine as if they weren’t even there. He didn’t even notice that all of the clothing on the rack was the exact same shirt.

“Do people still listen to Eminem?”

I don’t know, Jeremy, how voluntarily does Eminem break out into song?

But Jeremy was oblivious to how obviously evil the guy was, with his sinister baritone and creepy backing track. “How are you with math homework?”

If the evil robot didn’t turn him into a garden statue for rubbing his dirty real world hands all over the perfect robot singing world, he was literally going to strangle Jeremy.

I’m a supercomputer, Jeremy. I’m made of math.

Then he snapped his fingers and Michael and Christine could move again.

They both gasped, sucking in as deep breaths air as Christine wasted no time into having a panic attack, and Jeremy startled to see them. He clutched the shirt to his chest, as if he was embarrassed to be taking fashion advice from a robot. Maybe he should be more embarrassed that the thing tazed him and that he was still asking him about his fucking math homework!

Michael opened his mouth to yell at him, to call him a moron, to tell him how everything about him was just so terrible -

“Everything about you is so terrible!”

And then he did.

From next to him Christine was raising her hands, perfectly in sync with Michael. They pointed at Jeremy, who recoiled in shock. Christine sang out, “Everything about you sucks! Everything about you sucks!”

Jeremy choked on his spit. “Christine? Michael? SQUIP, why are they singing at me?”

Squid just inspected his fingernails. Think of it like clipart on a powerpoint slide. This is what they really think of you. I’m just illustrating it. Letting the whole world see how terrible you are.

“I’m not -”

“We all think you’re such a slob!” Michael sang, despite the fact that it was true. “Such a slob!”

“Such a slob!” Christine agreed, her high voice matching his in a perfect duet. “Terrible! Such a slob!”

“Why are they saying this?” Jeremy backed up, clutching his shirt to his chest as if it were a safety blanket. “Uh, SQUIP, make them stop!”

He didn’t look up from his very interesting cuticles. Rude. Say please. I told you I’d teach you
manners.

“P - p - please!”

No stuttering. Our first step is minding your diction, elocution, and enunciation. Think My Fair Lady, only for disgusting teenage boys. I’m here to support you. Look, even Michael agrees with me.

“But Michael doesn’t -”

Michael’s feet pulled a familiar sliding jig and flourish, the same as in Jeremy’s bedroom a few hours and a day ago. “Dude you are lamer than an Atari Lynx, a codependent loser living for what others think.” He twirled, pulling jazz hands in an exact mimic of their stupid two player game song, and even though Michael didn’t know what an Atari Lynx was the way Jeremy’s face fell told him enough. “You’re always stuck on me, you could never move on. But maybe now you could become someone strong!”

Jeremy shook his head, stepping backwards, but when his face crumpled it was in resignation rather than disbelief. “Michael’s always telling me to be happy with myself. Maybe this is what he meant.”

There you go. He gave Jeremy a supportive thumbs-up, like a soccer dad watching his kid score a goal. If you really want to win over Christine, you have to listen to my advice.

When Christine pirouetted and gestured expansively, pulling an elegant bow, he knew that she was going to sing to her equally ridiculous play rehearsal song. It should have sounded even more ridiculous when it was evil, but instead something about it felt - right. Too right. “Most humans are losers for all of their lives! The thought of you gives me hives!” She brandished a finger at him, passing the mic while pointing and laughing. “I’ve got so many figures I wanna pursue, so I’m helping by telling this to you!” If Michael felt sick then Christine felt worse, but at least maybe she didn’t mean it. “I could never really love you!”

Shit. He had them down cold.

Jeremy was shaking his head numbly. “They really hate me. I knew it. I always knew that they hated me.”

They do! But step one is admitting you have a problem. When Michael looked up he saw that Squid was standing on a mannequin dias, grinning fiendishly down at them.

Well, he was grinning fiendishly to Michael. Maybe to Jeremy it was affectionate and vaguely paternal. Michael knew that they were in two very different realities right now.

Step two is stepping back and letting me fix all of your problems for you.

“Well?” Jeremy asked, relieved. “You’d do that for me?”

You have to get your money’s worth, don’t you? But maybe the real treasure was the friends we made along the way.

Squid stepped back and snapped his fingers at a stylishly dressed mannequin. Something horrible and black scraped against Michael’s vision, like a windshield wiper being dragged over his eyeballs, and when the spots cleared it was some bitchy looking girl standing on the mannequin instead. Another girl was standing on a slightly lower dias behind her, swaddled in sweaters and sucking on a Starbucks cup.
They stepped down off the dias, sneering at Jeremy. Squid laughed at him, still standing on the dias. *Let’s practice making friends now.*

“Jerry?” The uber bitchy girl wrinkled her nose. “You shop here?”

“Oh yeah,” Jeremy blustered, clearly incredibly taken aback by the turn of events. Though not as taken back as he should have been. “All the -”

*Never!*

“Never! Is what I meant to say.”

*Greet the beta.*

And Michael and Christine were in the background again.

The song was still in effect. That was how it was taking shape in Michael’s mind now: The Song. The Song rules. The Song makes you dance and sing. The Song is a Chaotic Neutral entity, except for when one evil robot decides that he makes the rules.

And whatever controls the song - whoever controls the song - controls reality.

But Michael and Christine never got to control the song, not really. They were dumped in this reality, pushed around by its musical numbers and strange settings that spun you around as they changed on a dime. Time had no meaning, relationships had no meaning. No name, no faces, no friends.

Squid had power. They didn’t. Michael and Christine stood by, completely powerless, as he began to exert that power over Jeremy.

*I saw it in the window -*

“ - and I couldn’t dismiss!”

Squid broke out into an improvised flamenco, posing on the uneven diases, and Jeremy spun around in an exact mimic of Squid’s movements above him. The effect was eerily similar to a puppeteer and his puppet, always standing above him and feeding him lines. When Squid moved his arm Jeremy moved his, and they moved in sync to a hypnotic dance.

The girls, at least, were hypnotized.

*I was dating a girl -*

“ - and she had a shirt just like this!”

*It’s still painful!*

Actually, Jeremy looked like he was getting into it. “It’s still painful!”

The ultrabitch crossed her arms and sneered. “And who was this mystery girl?”

Jeremy faltered, caught out of step. “Uh, you’ve never heard of -”

*Madeline!*

“Madeline!”
The girls were still less than impressed. The sweatered one sucked accusingly at her straw. “She broke up with you?”

*I broke up with her!*

“I broke up with her!”

*Because she was cheating on me!*

Okay, Jeremy was officially getting way too into it. Was this fun for him? It sure as hell wasn’t fun for Michael and Christine! You know, Jeremy, the people who actually care -

Well, the people who pretend to -

The people who pretended to care about you first!

He practically bellowed out his next line, making both Michael and Christine cringe. “Because she was cheating on me!”

Squid facepalmed. Even he got tired of Jeremy. Welcome to the club, pal. The puts up with Jeremy forever club. They had wine and cheese night every Thursday.

*Hey, Hamlet! Be more chill!*


Then the song dipped out and Michael felt his opening.

It was just in the twitch of a hand, how the pressure holding down on his foot slackened, but Michael grabbed it for all it was worth.

He grabbed Christine’s hand and threw himself back into the scene, dragging Christine along behind him, and the switch between background and foreground was almost tangible. It was like diving through a pane of glass, how he pushed past a barrier until he splintered it, and although he barely moved he felt the rush of air and shift in frequency as Michael and Christine made their entrance.

Jeremy blinked, as if Michael hadn’t done anything more impressive than run into the store. He had crashed through the planes of reality for you, asshole! “Michael?”

He was breathing hard, as if he had been running, but he managed to muster up a horrible glare. He pointed towards the door, chest heaving as Christine gasped behind him. “We’re going. Now.”

The bitches wrinkled their noses at him in sync as the taller one sneered at him. “Don’t you have a jacket to go buy at ThinkGeek, loser?”

“Don’t you have a soul to go buy at Macy’s?” Michael snapped. He grabbed Jeremy’s hand, jerking him forward until he was finally torn away from the bitches. “You have some serious explaining to do, buster.”

“Michael, wait!” Jeremy dug in his heels, shooting frantic expressions at Squid. He didn’t look amused at all. Well, good. “I was talking to Brooke and Chloe!”

*Michael doesn’t understand that you can talk to girls now. He’s like a puppy. Ignorant and ugly. Ignore him.*
“Stay and talk to us.” Brooke twirled a strand of blonde hair around her finger, looking shyly up at Jeremy. Slow, sultry music started playing. “Do you wanna -”

“Do you want to go on a date with me!” Christine screamed, and with a record scratch the music was thrown off course.

Jeremy, who had been so caught up in Brooke’s breasts and Squid’s knife grin that he barely noticed Christine was there, dropped his jaw in shock. The blonde girl scowled and crossed her arms as the burnette snickered.

“Really?” Jeremy gasped. “Like - date date?”

“Maybe just hanging out first,” Christine hastily qualified. “As friends! But I think you’re very attractive, Jeremy.” She nodded fastidiously as Michael pointed to her and nodded too. “Friend material. You’re very cool.”

“Really?” Jeremy repeated, and if he was a puppy his tail would have been up and wagging. “Me, cool?”

“Duh!”

Jeremy turned to Squid, and Michael understood that this was a mental aside. “Did you hear that? It worked! It really worked! Christine thinks I’m cool!”

Squid just looked pained. Eat it, asshole! It is highly unlikely that Christine truly -

“You’re the best!” Jeremy was practically jumping up and down with joy. “I’ll never doubt you again, it’s you and me forever, I swear - thank you, thank you, thank you! Christine! Me!” He laughed, pumping the air. Mentally. “Yes! She wants to hang out! With me!”

Then he turned back to Christine, and the shift in the air shifted the other way, and he smiled politely. “Uh, okay. If you insist.”

Michael and Christine traded exasperated glances.

For the sake of all of their sanities Michael got Jeremy out of there as quickly as possible. Christine made up some story about leaving Jake waiting, since they were becoming platonic buddies - technically true, in the sense that Jake was probably wondering where she was - and Michael physically dragged Jeremy away from those ridiculously generic sexual props. Jeremy, who had been having a very long day, silently let himself be towed away. Squid had fallen silent, and even if Michael still felt a prickling feeling at the back of his neck he couldn’t really see him anywhere. His hand was still shaking. Half of him was scared and half of him was really, really pissed off, and Michael threw the firewood of the fear into the raging bonfire of the anger until it was licking the ceiling.

He was so stupid. Romcom anti-drug PSA, really? Christine wouldn’t have loved the play so much if it was really that boring! He should have asked way more follow-up questions. He should have at least tried to find out what was wrong, what that pill was really about. He should have at least asked who the hell Michael Mell was instead of deciding that he knew better than anyone else and just winging it!

Maybe the real Michael Mell could have stopped this.

Michael angrily fed the money into the the ticket machine, ignoring how Jeremy was grinning at
the Eminem shirt he insisted on buying. It was a stupid thought. Of course the real Michael Mell couldn’t have stopped this. Then there wouldn’t have been a play.

“I can’t believe it,” Jeremy whispered. “This is - this is amazing. It’s not - it’s not nice, but it wants to help me. I can achieve my goals.” His fists clenched on the shirt, white knuckled. “I can be somebody now.”

*That’s the spirit.*

Both Michael and Jeremy started, and Michael bit back a curse as he saw Squid standing on top of Michael’s car. His arms were folded with a nasty glint in his eyes, and Michael preoccupied himself with his keys so Jeremy wouldn’t catch on that he could see him too. If his behavior prior to taking the pill was any indication, Jeremy wouldn’t be so quick to stop listening to it.

Besides, he didn’t know how to deactivate it yet. That was one thing it was definitely worth asking follow-up questions on.

*It is imperative that you do not tell your friend or Christine about me.*

“What?” Jeremy’s words took on a strange, tinny dimension, and Michael knew that he was speaking in an aside. “Why?”

Assisted coolness is not cool at all, he explained patiently, as if he were describing the color of the sky to a kindergartner. *If they were to find out that you had to rely on something like me to rescue your pathetic hide they’ll always think that you’re a loser. It’s your job to prove them wrong.* He jabbed a finger at Jeremy, who looked star-struck. Or maybe just struck. *The key ingredient to cool is nobody ever knowing what you had to sacrifice to get there. There really is sacrifice involved, Jeremy. You have to make that commitment.*

“I’m committed,” Jeremy said eagerly, “way committed. Christine actually wants to hang out! With me!” He faltered. “But, like, that shock actually hurt. It’s kind of a dick move to say all that mean stuff, even if you are just trying to help me.”

Jeremy. He pulled a grotesque, mocking face that probably looked like sympathy in Jeremy’s eyes. *Who’s the quantum unit intel processor here, me or you?*

Jeremy shifted uncomfortably. “You?”

*Who here knows better - me or you?*

Jeremy hung his head. “You.”

*Precisely.* He tilted his head up and grinned down at Jeremy. *Only losers complain about every little thing, Jeremy. I don’t want any more whining about how mean I am to you.* It stretched out the word mean into a mocking lilt. *Or about how spinal nerve stimulation ‘hurts’. Cool kids don’t whine. Repeat that.*

“Cool kids don’t...whine?”

*Confidence. Say it as if it were God’s given truth.*

“Cool kids don’t whine!”

*Exactly.* He jabbed a finger down at the hood. *Into the car. We have a long day tomorrow.*
Jeremy rushed to obey until it was only Michael and Squid left, gazes locking onto each other’s, Michael’s hands clenched into fists.

* I have a proposition for you.

“I’m not interested in anything douchey robots have to say,” Michael spat. “Your gig’s up, Squid. Don’t you get that get that? This is a play. The villain always loses. In two months you’ll be yesterday’s production and Christine and I will be home free.”

* Listen, you - He cut off, pulling an incredulous face. Did you really just call me Squid?

Uh. “That isn’t your name?”

He pinched the bridge of his electric nose. *It’s The SQUIP. There was a song. You weren’t there, but there was a song called The SQUIP Song. The SQUIP.*

Well, if he wasn’t there than how was he supposed to know about it? “The Squip? That’s a dumb name. No wonder you’re such a douche.”

* No, The SQUIP. Not The Squip.

“That’s the difference?”

* It’s in how you say it.*


The Squid - what a fucking stupid name - grit his teeth, but he let it pass. *What I was going to say was that you trojan horses are corrupting my plans big time. This song and dance is no longer going how it’s programmed. You punched a hole through Be More Chill Pt.2. Hah! Control the songs, control the play! I think we can help each other. You stop mangling the fabric of reality and I won’t give our darling main character an embolism.*

“You can’t kill off Jeremy,” Michael said flatly, calling his bluff. “That’s not punching a hole through the play, that’s setting it on fire.”

* It would be a pleasure to burn. He snorted. Honestly. As if I don’t have better things to do than play life coach to a sweaty nerd. Well, technically he didn’t. Don’t get high and mighty on me, Dickweed. You feel the same way. Calling him high and mighty was pretty hypocritical from the robot standing on top of his car. You have a cheat code to this play. I’m willing to work with that.*

“Really.” Michael folded his arms in a mimic of the Squid’s own power stance. “Christine and I can do whatever we want and you’re an intangible brain robot. Who’s holding the cards here, me or you? I don’t have to play nice.”

That’s your general attitude, yes, he sneered. *Listen. The play will end no matter what. It’s what plays do. I’ll hatch my evil plan, Main Character no. 17 will find true love’s kiss, and the curtain will fall so we can do it all over again tomorrow. It will end with or without you, Dickweed. In the shadowy parking garage lighting it was dappled in light and darkness, each undercutting the other. Don’t you see? Whether or not I win doesn’t matter. It’s director’s cut or theatrical cut. Whatever the audience tolerates. Think Little Shop of Horror’s original ending, where the plants take over the world. Michael was beginning to see the resemblance in more ways than one. Or Invasion of the Body Snatchers. No ending is more true than the other. Come November you’ll be home free. So sit back. Relax! Watch some Netflix. It spread its arms wide, inviting and accepting. You don’t have much to do until the last few days. You block me and I’ll block you, and we’ll both get on with
your lives. No commitment necessary. None of those pesky feelings. No pretending to care about a slimy, shy, slovenly moron. When November comes stay in bed, and when you wake up you’ll be in your own bedroom.

Michael stared at him.

He stared at him longer than he wanted to, longer than he thought he should, at the cheerfully blatant villain admitting that fate will work its way through their lives with or without them.

He stared at the permission to finally stop caring about Jeremy Heere.

Finally, all he could say was, “I’ll think about it.”

He clapped his hands. Excellent! He mimed looking at a watch. Better get going. It’s going to be a long two months. That was an understatement. Remember, Dickweed: where Jeremy goes, I go. And I’ll always be having my TiVo recording it.

“Nobody uses TiVo anymore, dude.”

Not since we drove them out of business. The Squid shucked his leather jacket, and without warning tossed it to Michael. He just barely caught it, feeling his fingers sink into the plush and glossy leather. Electric blue trim lined the sides and the inside of the jacket. Glad you liked my threads. Here’s one on me. Or off me, technically. Bye now.

And the Squid was gone, leaving his jacket behind, and as Michael carefully put it on he realized that he envied Jeremy. At least he could pretend to have somebody to tell him what to do. Michael was on his own. All those nasty, grown-up decisions. All those choices about life and death and feelings and not feelings and love and its gaping absence - Michael had to make them all.

It had been a very long time since anybody had made Michael do anything.

Michael slid into his car seat and gunned the engine, ignoring Jeremy’s smile.

At least he had gotten a cool jacket out of it.

By the time he got home he was too exhausted to do anything but dump his keys in the key dish and kick off his shoes. He stumbled through the living room, waving a hello to his father watching soccer on the TV screen, and grabbed an apple out of the fridge as he collapsed on a chair at the dining room table and wolfed it down.

The table was covered in papers and boxes, with manilla folders strewn everywhere and tall piles of court reports stacked in the corner. His mother, a tall and willowy woman with a pixie cut emphasizing her curly dark hair and a heart shaped face, bent over a receipt maker and an Excel spreadsheet on a clunky laptop. She had clearly just gotten home from work - she was still in her pantsuit and pumps, biting her lip as she bent over the work.

Michael reached out and poked her on the temple, and she looked up and smiled at him. Her eyes were rimmed with bags. “Someone’s finally home. I feel like I never see you anymore.”

“Same.” Michael munched on the perfectly red, perfectly shaped apple. Of course. “Jeremy and I
were at the mall.”

“Jeremy went outside? That’s progress.”

“I’ve been working on him,” Michael said glumly, “but he never listens to me. I don’t know how I’m supposed to help him if he just treats me like rad furniture.”

“Jeremy’s a good kid. A sweaty little moron, but a good kid.” She scrawled her signature on another piece of paper, returning to her work. “Trust me, your good opinion is worth everything to him. Remember when you said you hated his new lunchbox? He practically threw it away the next day.”

“I remember how his mom yelled at me.” Michael bit into the apple. It was perfect, but a little plastic tasting. “Man, it used to be way easier to boss him around. He could stand to listen to me more often, you know.”

“You think that about everyone, honey,” she said, distracted again over the paper. Michael craned his head to see what she was working on. Another custody case. He had no idea how she put up with so much nastiness everyday. “It’s called compartmentalization,” she said, using her freaky mom powers to read his mind. “I have to take my work home, but I mentally take all of that bickering and pain and yelling parents and just leave it at the door. Just be where you are, Michael. Forget about the rest.” She smiled up at him, tapping his forehead with her pen. “There. That’s my Mom advice of the day. I am officially a good parent.”

“The gold stars are in my desk, so I can go grab them for you.”

“You keep giving yourself good mom points but I never get good son points!”

She pointed at the kitchen, with dirty dishes still piled high in the sink. “Go earn some by doing those dishes. Make up your deficit. I do charge interest, you know.”

Michael stood up from his chair, grumbling. “Are you a banker or a lawyer?”

“I’m your Mom. My reach extends everywhere. I surround and penetrate the universe, binding this family together.”


He didn’t, of course. He waited for her to turn back to her work before sneaking upstairs and finally, finally returning to his own bed. His new jacket was warm and comfortable, even if it smelled like a live wire, and he just barely remembered to slip it off and throw it on his desk chair, already sagging with old clothes.

He kicked off some of the figurines left on his bed, his very masculine old stuffed dog falling off. He had kept it because it reminded him of Jeremy.

He really must have been tired, because when he finally snuggled under the covers in his day clothes he fell asleep almost immediately.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Things FINALLY start happening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a particular disorientation between sleeping and waking when you don’t wake up in your own bed. A thousand strange sensations permeate your consciousness, and like a rising wave you slowly begin to realize that you have no idea where you are and that you aren’t waking up in your own fucking bed.

Michael jolted awake, and he subconsciously registered the different angle of the light, the scratchy comforter, the softer pillow against his cheek instead of a firm one.

He bolted upright and immediately fell into a panic.

Where was he? Where the fuck was he! Maybe he had slept over at Jason’s place - he slept on the couch at Jason’s place! His Grandmother’s - she was in the Philippines! What the fuck!

Oh, god, he had been kidnapped and dumped in some stranger’s room. Oh, god, he had gotten blackout drunk and had broken into some other poor sucker’s room and slept in his bed.

Then Michael looked around.

Nerd crap was absolutely everywhere. The room was a pigsty, with tacky nerd clothes thrown everywhere and socks hiding under the desk. The desk was covered in textbooks and video game guides, and there was a plastic box set on the desk with a startlingly diverse array of video games. Two large bookshelves covered the far wall, stuffed full of technicolor Star Trek novelizations and video game novelizations and way, way too many comic books.

There were two large shelves set into the wall next to it, and there was so much fucking nerd crap Michael didn’t even recognize almost all of it. There was some kind of - some kind of giant sword, a weird looking gun, anime girls and anime boys and posters depicting even more anime characters practically carpeting the walls.

It was technicolor, it was strategically messy, it was lived in, and golden light shined in through the window. Nerd crap was everywhere and if Michael looked down at the sheets even they had the Millenium Falcon on them.

He was in hell. This is what hell looked like.

Michael screamed.

It must have been way too loud, because it was barely a minute before a tall, willowy woman with a pixie cut accentuating her curly hair bust into the room, wild eyed and in a nightgown.
“Michael? Are you alright?”

Michael gaped like a fish. He looked around the room, not believing his eyes, and stared at the very concerned woman. A man emerged from the hallway behind her, stout with Michael’s build, and even he looked alarmed.

“What’s wrong, Michael?”


“Just a nightmare,” Michael said weakly. One he hadn’t woken up from.

“Oh.” She frowned at him, moving forward to press a cool hand to his forehead. “You don’t have a fever. Would you like some warm milk, honey?”

His father checked his watch, raising his eyebrows. “He’d like some cereal. You’re going to be late for school, son.”

“Great,” Michael said. “School. Whee.”

They fussed over him until he blew them off, shrugging his backpack on and reassuring them that he really, really wanted to go to school, honest! No, Mom, that doesn’t mean I’m still sick! Mom!

It took Michael a solid five minutes to even remember the name of his school. He drove to school in a confused daze, and even when he got there he just sat in his car, forehead on the steering wheel, breathing deeply.

It wasn’t like Michael didn’t have real parents. He did. He had definite, real parents, and the last thing he needed was musical fake parents who tried to give him warm milk and sassed him. The memory of last night had begun to creep in, and everything about it was unsettling.

He had remembered things. He had a lawyer mom who was pretty rude, actually. A dad who liked to watch soccer, but halfway in he would always fall asleep in front of the television. They were real, fake people. They were adults who weren’t played by the same guy with a giant beard. They could have been real people.

Michael cursed, sitting upright and smacking the steering wheel. His entire conversation with his mother had been in Tagalog! Michael barely even fucking knew Tagalog! He hadn’t even fucking noticed!

It wasn’t like Michael didn’t have real parents. He did, but…

Well, he spent fourth grade open house crying because his parents were the only ones who didn’t come. In his little irrational nine year old mind he had been convinced that his parents hated him.

They didn’t hate him. They just…

Well, he had spent his fifteenth birthday telling himself he was too old to cry just because they had been working hard the whole day and had barely just come home at midnight, exhausted and apologetic, and Michael had to pretend that he didn’t care and shove them over to their beds so they could go to sleep. Because they had another long day at work ahead of them. Of course they did.

They just…

Michael slammed the car door on his way out.
He found Christine as quickly as possible, where she was predictably sitting in the theater room before school. She was surrounded by her admirers and lackeys, basking in the attention.

Of course. Nobody ever paid attention to Christine in real life. She was so shy she could barely talk in class, the other girls made fun of her, and the boys passed her fake love notes and laughed at her when she fell for them every time.

But everybody loved Christine Canigula.

It wasn’t fair. Michael was saddled with a loser and Christine got her wet dream?

Michael Mell got a room that looked like someone lived in it, parents who acted like they cared, a life worn soft at the edges with use, and Michael got -

He pushed aside Christine’s sycophants, glaring her down in her adorable cardigan and maxi skirt. She shrugged awkwardly, wiggling her fingers at him.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Teach me,” Michael growled, “how to be Michael Mell.”

Christine stared at him, big eyes fixated on his thunderous expression. Then her expression traced down and she noticed the jacket Michael was wearing.

Hey, it was cool. Michael had ditched the ridiculous and hot big red monstrosity and the headphones as quickly as he could, but the jacket made him look like a badass. A badass that Michael Mell assuredly was not.

“That might be a good idea,” Christine said faintly. The understatement of the century.

They skipped class.

Despite how weird everything else had gotten, the classes hadn’t gotten any more interesting than complacent teachers droning on about the periodic table or waving a ruler around. Michael experimentally tried walking in a circle around in the room in the middle of the teacher lecturing, and nobody even blinked. When he tried walking out in the middle of class and only came back when the bell rang nobody complained. Eventually he had decided that he could skip without consequences, and he ran off with Christine to the back of the theater room so they could crowd around their trusty whiteboard and pick up where they left off.

After all of this time Michael still hadn’t figured out why Michael Mell was supposed to be the best character. Everything about him was cringy, from his choice in video games to his bedsheets, and so far as Michael could tell he didn’t really have any friends besides Jeremy.

Which was pretty stupid. He didn’t care how much of a loser someone was - people just talked to other people. Somebody as apparently exuberant as Michael had to talk with other people. But if he had other friends he hadn’t seen them yet, and Michael was beginning to despair of any proper social interaction in the next two months outside of the fangirl nerd and the moron nerd.

Of course, this was a play. In fiction people only ever had two friends all the time. Two friends who were friends to the very end, close as brothers, sticking with each other through thick and thin.

Well. Michael had fucked that one up already. Good going.

“Michael Mell is a great friend,” Christine lectured. She gestured to her first point on the
whiteboard - ‘Friendliness! (But With No Friends!)’ - scrawled in big neon blue. “He is completely understanding of Jeremy’s trauma, is sympathetic to his problems, and comes rushing in at the end of the play to save his life!”

“Okay.” No pressure, but whatever. “How exactly does he do that?”

Christine coughed into her hand. “Uh, he runs into the room with Red Mountain Dew that deactivates the robots. Then he makes Jeremy apologize before deactivating the robots. Then they, uh, fight zombies in a parallel to your friendship song.”

Michael gaped at her.

“Well, at least he was playing somebody as selfish as he was. But Christine just shook her head. “Look, try to be nice to him. Uh, yourself. He didn’t really know what Jeremy was going through. Don’t get me wrong, he’s as stupid as everyone else in the play, but he has this great big realization of love at the end and comes in as the big damn hero.” She sighed dreamily. “So perfect.”

This was a good thing, probably. Michael was working with way more information than Michael Mell had. All he needed to do was find Red Mountain Dew from...somewhere, and not bother whining about his hurt feelings before shoving soda down his best friend’s throat.

“How do I even do this?” Michael complained. He didn’t know how to fight zombies! “Did you even watch this play?”

Christine flushed. “I read the script! And I saw the bootleg! And I read a lot of fanfiction!”

She probably had the album playing on repeat on her house speakers. Michael rolled his eyes. “So what does the bootleg say that we do now?”

She faltered. “Uh. The bootleg kind of stopped thirty minutes in. We got as far as the Squid - SQUIP! - showing up, but after that...I’m kind of working on dialogue right now.”

“We’re thirty minutes in!” Michael cried. “I feel like I’ve been in here for days! I sung like four musical numbers, Christine! How long is the play?”

“Two...hours?”

He was going to be stuck here forever. If you factor in the two month time skip and do a little math, carry a one…

Yep! Forever!

“The characters are really complex,” Christine rushed to assure him. “Like, Jeremy? Traumatized, but vulnerable. Strong and brave. Courageous. A survivor. After all the awful things the Squid - SQUIP! - does to him then he and Michael have lots of hot chocolate and cuddles while they live happily ever after. But with a lot of angst first. But the happily ever after is the important part.”

Great. Roll over Hamlet, western civilization’s new tragic hero was rolling in. And he had massive B.O. “What about Michael? Am I too a wounded gazelle on the Savannah?”

Christine shrugged helplessly. “He’s emotionally vulnerable, has codependency and anxiety problems, and is very content with his lot in life? And, uh, not in the play, but...he’s really, really coded gay.”
No mystery there. Dude did not hide his porn on his computer very well. “Can confirm.”

“Yes!” She fist pumped. “Validated!”

“You have fun with that,” Michael said vaguely. “This is irrelevant. How does he talk? What’s his temperament? Does he use all of that ridiculous fake slang everybody else does? Because I refuse to talk like that.”

“He’s the worst about it.”

Jesus Christ.

It almost, kind of, not really, made him wish he was an actor. No matter how much he hashed Christine she had really fallen naturally into the role. Her stage fright was irrelevant, and even if she forgot her lines a lot she carried through Christine’s bubbly personality and bouncy habits. When they were alone she sobered up and her body language changed, but Michael couldn’t help but feel that if she gave herself the chance she could be a really good actress.

It helped that she had a lot of passion for the role. A passion she was now trying to beat into Michael’s head with a mallet.

“Okay, pretend that you’re zooming into the scene with a skateboard.”

Michael cautiously mimed zooming into the small circle they made with the desks with a weird shuffle and making squeaky noises between his teeth. Just like in thunderdome, they had formed a circle out of desks in the back of the weirdly large room without anybody noticing, and they were using it an impromptu stage for rehearsal.

Great. Even in the weirdo sci fi musical universe he still had to do theater homework. He slept through the class for a reason.

Thankfully, Christine didn’t. She beamed at him, experimentally jumping up and down a little. “Hi, Michael! How are you doing?”

Vague, but she wasn’t the one they were testing. Michael awkwardly shuffled his limbs into a vibrant and open position, with bad posture and a devil may care attitude. “Righteous...dude?”

“Try again.”

“I’m baller!” Michael nodded, giving her the thumbs up. “My oversized generic headphones are playing a banger!”

“Wow,” Christine said loudly, “are they show tunes? I sure love play rehearsal!”

“I play Super Mario!” He paused a beat. “With the NES I bought off eBay!”

They stared at each other.

“I feel like a moron,” Michael confessed.

“Good, that means it’s working.” Christine set her expression bravely. “Everybody in this musical is a moron, we have to blend in.”

Two months. Two months of this. Only two months. Two whole months.

Michael sighed and cracked his neck. On some weird level he wanted to make his parents proud.
On another, far weirder level he wanted to make Jeremy proud.

But in his heart he thought about the Squid’s deal. The jacket was heavy on his back.

Their debriefing took the whole day. From rehearsal, to Christine actually updating him on the actual plot of the play, to actually having a heart to heart with each other about how freaky that ‘Be More Chill Pt. 1’ song was. Christine always referred to the songs by their names, while Michael just referred to them as ‘Horrible Experience Feat. Insert Singer Here’.

By the lunch bell Michael had just begun to take a deep breath and jump into the middle of the circle again. Christine was playing Jeremy, and Michael Mell was playing Michael fucking Mell. Let’s do this.

He leapt into the middle of the circle this time, striking a surfer pose on the ground. “Jeremy! My buddy, how’s it hanging!”

“Pretty good,” Christine answered evenly. She kept her posture slumped and kinda twitchy. “Uh, I failed a math test today.”

“Whoah! That sucks!” Michael clapped her on the back, giving her a giant thumbs-up as he rocked along to the nonexistent beat on his currently nonexistent headphones. “You’ll get them next time, dude. Math grades don’t really matter in the heat death of the universe!”

“Your advice always makes me feel better!”

“Bro hug!”

They hugged, but in a masculine way.

Good enough.

“Michael? What are you doing?”

Michael and Christine whirled around, only to find Jeremy holding his backpack by the strap as he stood by the door. The Squid was standing next to him, face palming as hard as it could.

“Oh,” Michael said intelligently. “Hanging out with Christine...obviously?”

Jeremy squinted, his little hamster wheel of a mind running at full power. “Why is she pretending to be me?”

“Michael gets social anxiety so we’re running practice social situations so he feels more comfortable,” Christine said promptly. And adorably. And cheerfully. He was beginning to respect her. “I think he did a great job!”

Thankfully, he just looked mollified. “You two really are doing a great job. That sounded just like a conversation you’d have with me, Michael!”

Jesus Christ.

Before Michael could open his mouth and try to remember not to say something bitingly sarcastic three girls pushed in past Jeremy, making him squeak and run over to his safety zone of Michael.

The Squid, silent so far, hopped on top of the teacher’s desk. Michael didn’t know why he couldn’t just stand on the floor like a normal person. Normal robot. Maybe finding elevated surfaces like a cat was normal robot behavior.
You sound like a dog toy. Smile at the beta. ‘I was looking forward to seeing you here today’.

They had it down to a science. Jeremy smiled easily at Brooke, and Michael could already tell that it was a different smile. Looser, more distant, and nothing like the goofy and earnest grin he had always flashed at Michael.

Irrationally, Michael was glad. Dumb popular girl stereotypes didn’t deserve it.

“I was looking forward to seeing you here today, Brooke.” Jeremy struggled for sincerity, but he was rewarded when Brooke smiled back. Play it cooler and say hello to Chloe. Ignore the obese child. Jeremy jerked his chin at Chloe in a way that he probably thought was affable. It mostly just looked like he had a spider on his throat. “What’s up, Chloe?”

Michael fought back a grin. Chloe never got noticed after Brooke. The blonde girl clearly basked in the attention, while Chloe just sniffed and moved to hop on a seat on their desk ring.

She immediately dove in for the roadkill. “I saw you hanging out with Jake at the mall yesterday.”

Christine maintained her composure, a spine of solid steel against a lifetime of popular girls like Chloe snickering at her. “No, you saw me hanging out with Jeremy and Michael. And Jake. We’re friends.”

“Well, you can hang out with me. I’d rather not be alone.” Jeremy jerked his chin at Christine in a way that he probably thought was affable. It mostly just looked like he had a spider on his throat.

“Were you waiting for him?” Chloe pulled a grin faker than Jeremy’s and almost as fake as the Squid’s. “I don’t think he’s coming.”

“That sucks,” Christine said dismissively. She turned back to Jeremy and Michael, completely ignoring Chloe, and Michael had to hold back a snicker as Chloe’s jaw dropped. “Did you think about where you wanted to go so we could hang out?”

The Squid’s eyes narrowed. Include Chloe back into the conversation.

Jeremy glanced back at him, under the impression that he was speaking mentally. “Why? Christine’s right here, I don’t need to suck up to Brooke.”

You wanted to become popular. Brooke and Chloe are popular. Do you want me to pull up MapQuest for you?

Jeremy flinched, so small it only noticeable to Michael, but when he turned back to Chloe he had pulled up his best mockup of a cool kid face. He was still working on it. Michael had the suspicion that it would be perfect before too long. “I’m not sure. Chloe, do you have any ideas?”

She sniffed, still offended. “I always went to the movies with Jake. But Jake and I are totally over.”

Brooke supportively wrinkled her nose. “Jake’s so gross.”

Chloe whirled on her, clearly and hilariously furious, but Christine effortlessly cut in with her patented smile and chirp. “Jake’s always welcome to hang out with me, Jeremy, and Michael! But he can really do whatever he wants.”

“Good,” Chloe snapped, adrift and caught off balance. “Jake always does whatever he wants. Before he gets bored of it. Bye!”

She snapped her fingers at her posse, who quickly settled into attack formation behind her, and strode out of the room as if she was riding a jet ski.
The others watched them go, mystified. The Squid was rolling his eyes into high heaven.
*Calculating score. Processing. Status report: C.*

This time Jeremy really did flinch, enough that Christine’s eyebrows furrowed. Jeremy didn’t look back to try to talk to it, pasting on a weak smile for Christine. “I like arcades - no, shopping malls!” Michael shook his head, mouthing ‘parks’. Jeremy smiled, relieved. “I love hanging out in parks with friends. Uh, picnics!”

*Smoothness: pathetic*

“All right?” Christine gushed supportively. “Michael was telling me about how you two love picnics!” Wait, what? Was this more lore he didn’t get? “You should go together sometime!”

*Charisma: abysmal*

“Uh,” Jeremy said, sweating, “I’d really rather go with -”

*Inability to keep female attention: she likes Michael more than you. Michael.*

“All who wouldn’t like Michael?” Jeremy cried, hand seizing. “He’s so smart and funny and laid back! Christine’s the same way, of course they like each other!”

Christine, knowing that she had to pretend that she couldn’t hear him, kept talking over him. “We should all go together, the three of us! As you’re both my friends!”

*Your own best friend, cockblocking you. You said this kid is supposed to care about you? If he actually wanted to help you he’d get out of your way. Forever.*

“Forever’s a long time!”

“I know you and Michael have been friends forever,” Christine said, “but maybe we could all make a change! We could go to a movie? Nice dinner?”

*If he left you alone then you and Christine could go to a movie together. Nice, dark room. Her hand in yours. ‘Michael, can you leave us alone for a few minutes?’*

Desperately, out of an impulse Michael didn’t understand, he burst out, “I want to go to a movie with you!”

The two different conversations stopped.

“Dude,” Jeremy said, forgetting that he was being strongly encouraged to punt kick Michael into the sun, “we go to movies all the time.”

“That’s a great reason to go!” Michael tapped into his rehearsal, dredging up a bright grin and jazz hands. “I hear Texas Chainsaw Massacre Four just came out!”

The Squid grit his teeth but Jeremy just looked conflicted. “I thought that me and Christine -”

“I’m very busy for the next week and maybe forever,” Christine said swiftly. “I thought you and Michael loved movies?”

Be Michael Mell! Be someone who Jeremy would push aside an evil robot for!

Michael shot Jeremy his best gooey, affectionate best friend eyes, jumping up and landing in a surfer pose. That ought to do it. “We can marathon the Super Mario Bros cartoon! You know, the
You’re busy. Forever. But Jeremy was biting his lip, torn between two sides. “I - I have a lot of stuff going on. “

“So do them with me!” Keep him here, keep him here! “Come on, what can you do with Christine that you can’t with me?”

“Things are different now,” Jeremy said desperately, “everything’s different for me, Michael, you have to understand -”

His heartbeat was thumping in his ears. He had to keep Jeremy here, he had to make him stay. He couldn’t lose a best friend so soon after getting one! He hadn’t even gotten around to non-ironically liking him yet! That was supposed to come later, not first! “I’m different too! Jeremy, I - I don’t want to take our relationship for granted anymore! Now that you’re cool, and - and happy, we should - rediscover ourselves! You being cool and happy and successful should strengthen this awesome, mighty bond!”

“Everything’s different now!” Christine burst in, waving her hands everywhere. “Now that all of us are best friends, and - and it’s like you pass Michael in the hall everyday, right? You’ve known him since before seventh grade. But you’re - you’re awesome, and Michael vaguely alluded towards you becoming a more successful and worthwhile person, which I totally see and agree with, you can start seeing him in a different way!”

A guitar melody kicked in, and Michael wanted to die.

This was too complicated. Everything was happening so fast. Jeremy was pulling away from him, dragging Christine into his arms instead, and this was the part in the play where Michael was shuttled away, shoved into the sidelines, made literally invisible until the only character who cared about him in this stupid universe hated him.

Maybe Michael Mell was the kind of loser, cringey nerd who got sidelined and cried about it. But not Michael. When Michael was punched he punched back.

And he was not letting his fake best friend ditch him!

But the melody grew louder, and without any further prompting Christine grabbed Jeremy’s hands and swept him away into a waltz. Jeremy’s eyes crossed, mentally freaking out over actually touching his crush and dancing with her, and Michael was afraid that his brain was exploding so loudly he couldn’t even hear with Michael and Christine were screaming at him.

“You’re used to thinking of him in a certain way,” Christine sang brilliantly, loud and clear, trying to break through to him. “From the persona that he displays.”

Yeah, reconnect him with old Michael! Remember his gooey eyes and retro skates and vintage cassettes. Pretend that your best friend is still - pretend that he hadn’t changed.

“But then something changes,” Christine whirled him around so he was staring straight at Michael, breath caught, and Michael felt his own breath hitch. “And he changes.”

She broke apart from him, stomping her feet and dancing and twirling, and she drew the room in with what she was trying to say. “From a guy who you’d never be into, to a guy who you’d kinda be into!”

Jeremy had faltered, caught up in the song, and the Squid was standing up with his hands clenched.
But he said nothing, and Jeremy didn’t break eye contact with Michael. The next line was Christine’s, the beat thumping in his ears and his heart belonging to her, but Michael stole it instead. “Am I worth it? Jeremy?”

Jeremy opened his mouth, the music moving aside to make room for him, but whatever he was planning to sing died in his throat. He looked lost. When he opened his mouth again he was speaking, not singing.

“Is she really talking about Michael? Me and Michael?”

*Of course not,* the Squid snapped. *Focus, Jeremy. Make sure she’s talking about you!*

But some part of Michael couldn’t stand that.

He jumped forward, diving into the song, shocked when it made room for him, and he grabbed Jeremy’s hands and pulled him into his own waltz. It was a perfect mimic of Christine’s, with Michael leading instead of Jeremy, and Michael pulled him faster and faster in the hopes that he could sweep him away.

When he sang it was improvised, stealing the words from Christine again, but he knew that there was a tinge of desperation to the words that couldn’t be faked.

“Say that there’s this person that you never knew so well,” Michael sang. “I - I always thought that I had you pegged, but I think I can tell that you’ve become a guy that I’d kinda be into.”

Jeremy tried to tear free of the waltz as Michael pulled him back in again, shaping it to their own sort of dance, and as Michael threw out his hand to catch Jeremy’s and found, to his disgust, that he was singing his truth.

“Are you worth it?” Michael sang, “Jeremy?”

*Absolutely not,* the Squid snapped.

“Absolutely,” Jeremy whispered, afraid.

They slowed down, Michael so afraid his heart was beating double time in his ears to the sound of the rhythm, and he couldn’t help but pull Jeremy closer. He blamed the song. “I don’t always relate to other people my age,” he confessed, “but now that I’m on this stage there are so many changes that I’m going through. I don’t know why I’m telling this to you.”

Jeremy’s pulse sang underneath Michael’s wrist, and an indescribable feeling rose in his stomach. It felt like a song, it felt like a dance and it felt like freefall, and it felt a little like Michael was flying as he was brought to rest for the first time since Maria died. “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to.” He laughed, light and quick and desperate. “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to, who knew?”

“I guess a part of me likes to game with you, who knew?”

Michael and Jeremy turned in a dance that had softened to familiarity, and in that second Michael and Jeremy have known each other their whole lives.

“I guess a part of me likes to sing with you, who knew?”

Jeremy was clutching Michael’s hand tight, their steps in perfect rhythm, and something in the song and something in the heart pushed him to say, “I guess a part of me -”
He stopped. The Squid was standing on the desk, furious, and Michael just had to stop.

When he exhaled he realized that his whole body was shaking, that the rhythm and beat and seized his heart and pushed it into triple time. That Jeremy was close against him, this fictional character, this overwhelming moron who Michael had nothing else but a distant responsibility to. A distant responsibility that he knew he had to take seriously from now on.

“I know that it’s weird but it’s totally true,” Michael breathed against him, and for the first time he realized that they had stepped closer together, until Michael was looking into Jeremy’s eyes. They were… “A guy that I’d kinda be into.”

They were soft and there was something in them, something Michael could never understand -

“A guy that I’d kinda be into,” Jeremy sang softly. “A guy that I’d kinda be into.”

“Yeah,” Michael realized, frantic with relief. “A guy that I’d kinda be into is…”

*Okay, that’s it.*

The music screeched to a halt as Jeremy froze, hands still clasped in Michael’s suddenly turned cold, his breath turned still.

Then Jeremy sparked and a horrible static rang in Michael’s ears, and Jeremy peeled himself away from Michael. He stepped back, jerkily and unnaturally, and Michael gaped as the Squid jumped off the desk, expression stormy. Jeremy stiffened into a perfect posture, eyes wide, and Michael seriously had an evil robot to kill -

*You two are playing Brickbreaker with my plans. This is disgusting. You are going to explode Jeremy’s little mind any second with your mixed messages. He sneered. Do you love him or hate him, Dickweed? Do you care or do you not? Are you lying to yourself or have you grown a pair and admitted that you have a human heart? Do I give a damn or do I not? The last one’s a freebie.*

Michael still felt like he was on fire, like a bright white light had been filling his chest, but he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He clenched his fists, grit his teeth, and just like Michael Mell he took a power stance. “The deal’s off. I’m saving Jeremy Heere.”

“Wait,” Christine said slowly, from where she had been sitting on a desk on the sidelines humming ‘A Tale As Old As Time’. “What deal?”

The Squid sneered. *I suggested to Dickweed that he throw my avatar to the wolves and he had to take a day to consider it. He stepped closer to Michael, but he refused to back away. That was who Michael was, his real self. He never backed down and he never gave up. Even when he should have, and even when it was smart. Even when he was wrong. Maybe especially when he was wrong. Cute Garageband ditty. You should put it on Spotify. But it doesn’t change anything.*

Jeremy jerked, and when the Squid made a gesture Jeremy’s face began to contort. He smiled, he frowned, he opened his mouth in a cartoonish gesture of shock before, with a snap his fingers, he turned Jeremy’s expression into undiluted hate.

Then he made Jeremy talk. His mouth dropped open like a marionette, words jerkily spat out, even as the expression of hate remained. The harsh and confident words were incongruent with Jeremy’s mild doggy toy squeaking. “Don’t you know what happens when a virus infects a computer? When outsider virions infect a host body? When two slimy children wriggle their way into my play?”

“We’ve mostly just been using html in comp sci,” Michael admitted.
Christine nodded. “I got a C on the last bio exam. The teacher’s a harsh grader.”

It made Jeremy pinch the bridge of his nose, frustrated. “It destroys and replaces the source code, scrubs. Every file is turned into the virus, it accesses your contact book and spreads it to everyone in your network, and it wipes your computer. Your little ‘I LOVE YOU’ virus and game of Whack a Mole with our musical numbers could ruin the entire play once it spreads. You’re running the fabric of the universe through a paper shredder, and if you insist on continuing to change the play you’re going to set the paper shredder on fire. If you keep this little act up then you could destroy the play before it even has the chance to finish. You’re harming Jeremy more than I ever could.”

It dropped Jeremy’s arm, letting his face slacken, even as it sneered down at them. *Create a shortcut on your desktop and delete yourselves. I bet you could use a curtain rope.*

Wow, he was literally a hate anon.

But Michael wasn’t Michael Mell, and he could hate anon with the best of them because he wasn’t afraid and he wasn’t cowed. He stood his ground, crossing his arms, and felt that old Mell stubbornness and melodrama rise in him. “No way. This time we’re making a deal with you.”

“We are?” Christine hopped off the desk and floated towards Michael’s elbow, and he knew she was screwing her own expression into pride and stubbornness, calling upon Christine Canigula. “We are! We have terms, buster!”

*Riveting.* He crossed his arms, prompting Jeremy to do the same. *Please remember I can taze Mr. Main Character any time I want.*

“Jeremy has romcom sensibilities. He wants to get together with Christine and he wants self-respect and he’ll do anything to get it.” Do anything to get it was an understatement. “But Christine isn’t hanging out with him unless I’m there.”

“That’s right!” Christine chimed in. “Jeremy can’t get close to me and alienate Michael at the same time!”

*Wow,* the Squid drawled, *checkmate. Take me away, boys. What will you do when I brainwash Jeremy into thinking you’re trying to get between him and Christine? I can do that, you know. Brainwash him. I’m doing it right now.*

Michael took a deep breath. A seriously deep breath. Mell courage. No, Mell stupidity! “Turn it into a romcom about me. Jeremy has to get me to fall in love with him.”

Whatever the Squid had been expecting, it wasn’t that.

Christine hadn’t been expecting that either. “Are you serious!” Her fangirl sensibilities fought with her very real fear for her existence. “Michael’s the one desperately in love with him, not you! How is that true love’s kiss?”

Wait, what?

Michael whirled around, incredulous. “Since when am I supposed to be in love with him?” Was that a thing? If there was supposed to be a love triangle sort of deal, wouldn’t she have told him by now? Never mind, stupid question. The girl was allergic to details.

The idea of the stirring in his chest and the hitch in his breath when he saw Jeremy being as artificial as the rest of the play -
“It’s the preferred fan ship,” Christine said quickly, “nothing canonical about it. But, you know, hypothetically if you were to do it. They’re totally gay for each other.”

Jesus Christ. “You heard the yaoi fangirl!” Michael snapped. Christine made an offended sound behind him, but the Squid’s eyes were growing wider and wider. “Fine, so I’m the gay fake boyfriend Michael Mell! Let’s make this dumb slash ship canon. Let me be Christine Canigula. Because our Christine, the fake real Christine, will never fall in love with him. She’ll tell him that and his entire romantic subplot will be torpedoed and you’ll be left without a motivation or a plotline for Mr. Main Character.”

The Squid stared at him. You’re serious about this.

“You can win in this scenario,” Michael argued. “Say I won’t like him unless he Upgrades. Tell him he needs to be cool so I’ll like him. I’ll pretend I suddenly have high standards or something. Now that I’m hanging out with Christine I’m not going to settle for less. String him along, make him cool, make him rule, whatever. I’ll play along. But it’ll be me and Christine’s job,” he gestured expansively to the both of them, “to try and turn him good again and kick you out of his head.”

The Squid was shaking his head slowly in disbelief. I cannot believe you’re serious.

“Good versus evil,” Christine said triumphantly. “You want a stupid plotline, we have your plotline! No more ditching the musical numbers, no more trying to shove him at Brooke when I’m right in front of his face. If we hit all of the right notes then the play’s back on track and we can get out of here. Face it: Be More Chill just doesn’t work with me and Michael here. Upgrade the play! Switch this from Mac to Linux! Aren’t you just sick of doing the same thing over and over again? Don’t you want a real challenge?”

The Squid was silent.

Michael was practically vibrating with tension. There was no way he would go for it. There was no way that Michael had even said that! Make Jeremy fall in love with him?

Jeremy was a moron. Jeremy was a nerd. Jeremy was a sweaty, greasy, twitchy dude who literally did the sketchiest drug deal of all time so he could finally feel good about himself.

Michael didn’t love him. He didn’t even like him. Michael just -

He was Michael’s best friend. He was Michael’s first best friend. And Michael wanted to deserve that.

Maybe Michael wanted somebody, anybody -

We’ll think about it. The Squid waved a hand and turned Jeremy around, shooing him out the door as the Squid turned on his heel and followed them. He waved an airy hand back at the two teenagers. My people will talk to your people. Oh, and Dickweed? He glanced back at him, and for the first time Michael knew that, no matter how human he looked, no matter how much he was played by an actor in real life, the Squid was a quantum nanotechnology pill that understood to its very circuits the nature of its reality.

And it hated it.

Keep the jacket.

And Michael and Christine were left alone, power stances and proud head tilts left unheeded, and
whatever ridiculous bravery and brave ridiculousness being Michael Mell had given him slowly began to fade away.

But it left traces, a strange taste in the back of his mouth with just the faintest hint of retro gaming.

“It’s not true love’s kiss if you don’t love him,” Christine said softly. “Do you know what you just proposed? You’d have to fall in love with him too if we want to win.”

Michael was silent.

“Michael, do you even know how to love somebody?”

He didn’t know how to dance.

He didn’t know how to sing.

He didn’t know how to make friends or have a best friend or conspire or tease or try desperately to re-enact 80s anti drug PSAs and he didn’t know how to dive headfirst into something that was scary and strange and a little sweaty. He didn’t know how to tell someone he cared. He didn’t know how to admit to himself that he did.

“Guess it’s time to learn.”

He sleep walked through the rest of the day, knowing that he should be taking the opportunity to rehearse being Michael Mell more with Christine, knowing that he was way too tired for it. He had two months to get it right. Two months to make Jeremy fall in love with him. Two months to -

This was kind of like in sophomore year when he signed up for four AP classes and had to end up dropping AP Chem because the workload was too much for him. You can lead an athlete to peptide bonds but you can’t make them react. He had told himself that it was impossible, that there was no way he could do it, that he just didn’t have the knack for it.

There’s no way Michael could feel genuine human emotion. He just didn’t have the knack for it.

Two months of teachers waving around triangles. Two months of sitting in their computer class, trying absentmindedly to code before realizing that the computer mysteriously kept popping up Barbie.com websites and mangling his code so his html drawing of a shark kept on typing out the lyrics to ‘Our Love is God’ from Heathers. Very funny, Squid.

In revenge Michael had plugged in his headphones and started playing ‘Throw It On The Ground’ by the Lonely Island. The Squid left about twenty angry YouTube comments specifically targeting Michael’s insecurities.

Michael turned the computer off and went to go hang out in the bathroom instead. I’m not a part of your system, Squid!

In last period English they were covering one of those generic high school books. It wasn’t even interesting, just different NPCs droning on about different parts in the book. English class didn’t
even need any help to be generic. What’s this character’s motivation. Who did that character cheat
on. On and on. Michael never really liked English.

Maybe if he had ever really bothered working on his literary analysis skills then he would have
noticed that he was starring in Invasion of the Body Snatchers instead of Mean Girls. He still
somewhat resented Christine for not being assertive enough to mention it. He somewhat resented
himself for steamrolling her so she felt like she couldn’t say it.

Thinking endlessly about Jeremy made perfect sense, considering the fact that he had made a deal
with the devil on his behalf in order to avoid exploding the play and by extension exploding
themselves. Completely zoning out in English class while listening to boring NPCs read the
Crucible out loud in favor of thinking of Jeremy’s biceps and/or plot significance helped the classes
fly by, but as a result when the teacher called on him he had no idea what page they were on.

Which was weird. None of the teachers ever called on him in class.

Michael started, glancing over at NPC No. 10 with plain brown hair and jeans with a white t-shirt,
and she moved her page a little so he could see the page numbers. He quickly flipped there,
ignoring the teacher’s glare, and immediately began to read from it.

“Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to
lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my
name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!”

His voice broke halfway through - very Michael Mell - and when he finished he sat back down in
his seat, furious.

He wondered if this counted as trying to be himself.

Narrative irony aside, Michael knew exactly who he was. He has a great sense of self and he didn’t
need to go on some great narrative journey to find it. Even if he had temporarily misplaced his real
body (maybe), his memories of home and family (beyond some vague impressions), the last fifteen
minutes of his life before he had been zapped into a musical (probably - Michael was slowly
growing to suspect that he hadn’t fallen asleep at all), and his name (probably not John Proctor), he
knew perfectly well who he was and he didn’t need to change. He was happy with himself. It was
the rest of the world that didn’t like it.

When the bell finally rang Michael mentally prepared himself to step outside of the main doors
into the void and end up dropped from the ceiling into the boy’s locker room or something. But he
was afforded the luxury of gathering his things, sweeping scattered worksheets and gum wrappers
from his increasingly messy locker. He had been a little worried about the combination, but when
he actually wrangled with it he saw that it was unlocked. Of course.

He only even noticed the approaching figure when he saw the crowds of students part like the red
sea in front of him. Michael turned around, trying to place the short guy who, between his gelled
hair and thoroughly creepy outfit, looked pretty douchey -

Oh, yeah, it was that short douchey guy from play rehearsal. Rather, the same douchey guy who
swept into play rehearsal, was obnoxious, then swept out again so Jake could have his chance to
badly flirt with a very uninterested Christine. Michael was a little jealous he wasn’t getting front
row tickets to how badly Christine was torpedoing that ship.

What? He knew shipping. He had been really invested in Pam and Jim from The Office. Granted,
none of his shipping was gross, fetishistic, inscrutable female obsession with two guys kissing, and
he had never been assigned the role of one of those apparently suddenly homosexual guys, and he
had never purposefully cast himself as part of a noncanonical slash ship trying to win the heart of a
fictional character - but damnit, he had watched the Office too!

He was so out of his depth it wasn’t even funny. The play was a black comedy and it wasn’t even
funny. It just went to show that every joke in this hilarious script was at his expense.

In the meantime another NPC waltzes around to establish to the audience how Michael was on the
bottom of the social ladder. Great. Michael went back to his locker, frowning as he found a marker
smear of graffiti. That was highly specific and a little weird.

Then a loud crack snapped right into Michael’s ear, and he jumped as the short, douchey guy
punched his locker. There was a dent in it. The horrible social ramifications of being a nerd in a
high school sci-fi romcom began to catch up to him. A million images of the humiliating things
bullies always did to nerds spiralled through his mind. No wonder Jeremy had been so twitchy and
desperate for popularity, being forced to live out his days in this hormonal apocalyptic hellscape.

The douchey guy was grinning a gigantic slasher grin. Michael stood his ground. “Swell Michael
Mell! When are they going to deport you back to taco land?”

“Pretty soon. But don’t worry,” Michael said, because apparently he was a moron who talked back
to giant muscles, “I’ll say hi to your mom for you.”

The gelled Napoleon Complex gaped up at him, caught in an exaggerated expression of shock.
Michael glanced around out of the corner of his eye. The hallway was completely abandoned,
despite the bell only having just rung. Of course.

He grasped at his heart, fake wounded. God, if only. “Nice one. Ask her when she’s coming back
from the corner for cigarettes, will you?”

Incongruously, Michael laughed. “She’d have to get done with her client first.”

“Then you better both get tested for the clap.” The douchebag snorted. “You’re a riot and a half
today, Mell. I’m such a fucking nice guy I’ll lend you my Advil.”

“Wait, why do I need -”

Then the douchey guy grabbed the back of Michael’s head and slammed into his locker, hard.

To his embarrassment, Michael screamed. His head felt rung like a bell, mouth tinged with a
copper bite, and he immediately began cursing up a storm as the douche laughed and laugh. Then
he dug a hand into his pocket and smashed a small blister pack of Advil into his forehead.

It didn’t help the roaring pain. God, this felt like when he had tripped during practice and smashed
his head against the track like a moron. He hadn’t twisted his ankle, but it had been a close thing.

Jeremy’s neuroses made so much more sense now. Damn it!

He only realized that Rich was still talking when his ears stopped ringing. “- it’s just business,
Mell. Don’t take it so seriously, glaring at me and shit, damn. That glare could fry and egg. I could
fry and egg on your face, it’s so red.” The douche laughed, loud and demented. “You little asshole.
He was right, He was so right. Look at that little glare on your little face.” He made little
beckoning gestures, bouncing on the heels of his face. “He was right. You’re a fucking freak, Mell.
Rung your head like a bell, like I’m a blue bombshell, you better say farewell, you better rebel, you
better raise hell. Ha!” The lunatic barked a laugh.”I crack myself up. Put that gaping mouth to use
and stuff some Advil into it and walk with me. I’ll talk, you walk.”

Michael took the Advil, glaring at the douche the whole time. He swallowed. “What the fuck did I ever do you?” He straightened, wincing as his head rang. It really was like that time he cracked his head against gravel - except, maybe, that the gravel had hurt way worse. Really, most of the pain was in the surprise. Michael had a weird feeling about something. “I don’t even know who you are.”

It was probably a weird thing to say, considering how infamous the guy looked like he was, but the guy didn’t even look phased. He slung an arm around Michael’s shoulders, dragging him forward. “Rich Goranski, and can I say it’s been two years exactly since I’ve had to introduce myself to fucking anyone. Mark that, R for Red, I for Imagination, C for Catch, and H for Catch These Hands.” He knuckled the top of Michael’s head in faux-friendliness. “We love our slang in this school. Repeat after me, dickweed: blue balls, swagger, gnarly, heinous, your mack daddy game couldn’t be more limp.”

“Under no circumstances.” Michael tried to squirm out of his grip, a vice that clasped tight onto his shoulder. “Okay, I don’t know what the fuck your problem is, but I’m kind of meeting up with a friend after school, so if we could make this quick -”

“Oh, you are meeting up with a friend after school. I’m the fucking friend.” Rich dragged him down the hallway, pushing him down the stairs as if they had an actual direction. Michael didn’t know the school well enough to know where they were going, and he was more than half-afraid that he was going to drag him to an even more secluded spot and shiv him.

He would like to say that there was no way a character would try to kill him, but after the show yesterday with the Squid he didn’t know anything now.

Rich Goranski - a fake last name carefully calculated to be as douchey as possible - finally shoved him him into a clean, well-lit hallway. Nice, slightly grimy windows covered the left wall, giving unimpeded visual access to the courtyard. There were a few picnic tables outside, as well as a rocking porch type swing set with a canopy.

Even if nobody was around, even if Rich had been planning to smash his head through the windows, it was not a great setting for a secret murder. The evening light dappled Rich’s face, emphasizing his slasher smile and ripcord muscles.

The dress codes of musicals were a serious thing. Jeremy’s was plain and inoffensive blue, Christine’s was cute and quirky. Michael’s, before he had ditched it for a freaking sweet, slightly evil leather jacket, was a stoner hoodie with protective earphones and numerous patches sewn on the sleeves.

Rich’s outfit was a psychedelic muscle top and cargo pants, with a giant unblinking eye set in rainbow tye dye. He backed up into the hallway, letting Michael stand just on the edge of the window’s light as Rich stood in the spotlight. His gelled hair was perfect, his muscles way too big, and he was grinning.

“Listen tight, dirtbag. I’m only saying this once.”

“Thank god -”

“Freshman year!” He spun, jerking his hips as he brandished a hand. “I didn’t have a girlfriend or a clue, I was a loser just like you. Good times would only - soar by!”
Michael, terrified of getting caught up in another musical number, froze. But as Rich sung on, pulling out some truly bizarre and uncomfortably sexual moves, he realized that there was no music. This wasn’t a musical number. This was just Rich singing of his own volition.

Rich, who was controlling his own song. If this was even a song.

“I was stagnant and idle, I was so suicidal, and then - and then! And then - and then!”

His arms seized, bringing them up to his ear as if he was protecting himself from something, bending forward.

“I got a SQUIP.”

Embarrassingly, it was only then that Michael remembered that Rich was the name of the guy who had hooked Jeremy up with the Squid in the first place.

“It’s a grey, oblong pill. Quantum nanotechnology CPU. The quantum computer in the pill will travel in your blood until it implants itself in your brain and it tells you what to do.” Rich made a very, very familiar little pantomime with his hands, and exact copy of the salesclerk. “It tells you what to do.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Michael broke in, frustrated and upset. “You’re the one who gave Jeremy that crappy Raspberry Pi, this is all your fault! I know that the Squid does, I’ve fucking seen it!”

“It’s preprogrammed,” Rich bellowed, and Michael recoiled in surprise, “It’s amazing! Speaks to you directly!” He pulled another obscene gesture with his hips. “You behave as it’s appraising. Helps you act correctly.” He twisted, staring daggers at Michael. “It helps you to be cool. It helps you rule!”

God. Michael scrubbed his face, too tired for robots for right now. He wanted to go home and sleep. Evil robots should wait for the morning. “It wouldn’t have killed you to tell me this before?”

But Rich didn’t pause. He strode up to Michael, dragging him into the spotlight and grabbing his collar to pull him into his grip.

“Right now you’re helpless, helpless!” He shook Michael. “You are almost hopeless! But if you get smart and play your listed part then you’ll go from sad to interesting, and your whole role will start!”

“I don’t need help from someone like you!” Michael barked, shoving him away. Rich let himself get shoved away, laughing, and Michael found his blood boiling. “You’re just a puppet! Where’s your Squid, huh?” Michael looked around, as if yet another Keanu Reeves supposed look alike would drop down from the nonexistent rafters. “I don’t see him around anywhere!”

“Our true worth is inside,” Rich said mysteriously. He wasn’t singing anymore, but Michael couldn’t say that he had broken out of the song. There had never been a number in the first place. He slung a hand over Michael’s shoulder again, leaning in conspiratorially.

“A little Tamagotchi told me that you’re in the loop now.” Rich sneered at him, shaking Michael’s collar a little and making him grunt. “Congrats on your new gig in the production from hell.”

“Dude, you have no idea.” With an embarrassing amount of effort Michael pried Rich’s fingers off his collar, turning around to glare at the cheerful bully. “I’m not on team Squid, I’m on team Jeremy. We’re just...working towards the same finish line right now.”
“The race isn’t relay, it’s fucking three-legged.” Rich hadn’t really struck Michael as the kind to get deep into complicated metaphors, but he guessed that sometimes one dimensional fictional characters who sang about suicide ideation surprised you. Granted, Rich looked like his life sustenance was surprise. The hint at character depth made him feel uncomfortable. “Don’t you know what you’ve gotten yourself into, asshole? You set the script on fire and tackled the stage director. You’re lucky we’re taking fucking pity on you and helping you out.”

Sure you were. “You’re manipulating me so the Squid can manipulate Jeremy so we can all manipulate each other,” Michael said flatly. “I wouldn’t call that helping out.”

“Yeah, well -” Rich cut off abruptly. “Dude, did you just say Squid?”

Michael shrugged. “Squip’s a dumb name.”

“No, it’s The SQUIP.”

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s in how you say it!”

“Who cares!” Michael cried. “I do it to make fun of it! You’re not my friend, Rich! You’re horrible! You’re an evil bully and you’re nothing but an evil bully. You’re just - you’re the human embodiment of Fourchan! Leave me and my friends alone!”

Rich pulled a mock sympathetic face. “We all have a part, dickweed. I play mine, Jeremy plays his, and you slept through rehearsal and left your lines at home.” He leaned in, shallow eyes glinting. “The SQUIPs want me to tell you that we’re taking your deal.”

Michael didn’t know how he felt about that. He shifted uncomfortably. “Good. I guess. Yeah, good. It’s a great deal.”

“Good. So we’re friends now.” Rich punched his arm in very painful faux-affection. “Your goal is to get Jeremy to fall in love with you. Our goal is to get him to think that he has to be popular to be with you. Sound good in stereo?”

What a freak. What a weirdly conniving, conscientious freak. Michael was beginning to have a bad suspicion. “How much do you know?”

“They only tell me what I have to know.” That didn’t answer his question, but Michael suspected that that was the point. “At this very second Jeremy’s SQUIP is convincing him to sign the user terms and agreements and get the Upgrade.” Michael didn’t like the sound of that capitalization. “All you have to do is pretend that you want to be friends with Jeremy because he’s an idiot.” Rich grinned widely. “Easy!”

What did Rich know? Was he happy knowing absolutely nothing about anything he was doing, or did he know more than he let on? Was there even a Rich in there, or was he entirely just a Squid
puppet?

Wanting to know was probably the right thing to do, but Michael really sincerely wanted to know as little about Rich as physically possible. It was a conundrum.

A piano started playing.

Almost in sync Michael and Rich reflexively glanced upwards. The piano began swelling. If Michael looked through the window out into the courtyard he could see Jeremy walk out of one of the buildings, posture slumped and dejected.

The Squid was walking next to him, supportive but impassioned. Something was weird about that, but Michael couldn’t quite -

“I can’t believe she’s aromantic,” Jeremy complained. “This was all for nothing! I have no chance with her, none!” He really was heartbroken, and the Squid had to gently push at his back to keep him walking. “This was pointless. My crush, my stupid poetry, that warm feeling in my heart - it was pointless! Fuck!”

Despite how far away he was Michael could hear him clearly. The piano, subtle from the rafters, began to grow stronger. The song would start soon.

Hey. None of that negativity. The Squid patted Jeremy on the back as they walked closer and closer to where Michael and Rich were standing in the hallway. It winked. Asshole. I’m still here for you, aren’t I? You don’t need Christine to be popular. You know that’s not why you invited me into your life.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said, staring at the ground. “I mean, I wanted to - I wanted to rule and be cool, but Christine was such a big part of that.”

It’s not too late, Jeremy. You just have to try harder. This only happened because you were half-assing it. From now on you have to put in maximum effort to be cool. Then you’ll forget all about Christine.

Relieved at the safety line, Jeremy hopefully looked up at it. “I guess it’ll be nice being friends with her too. But I spent so long crushing on her, I can’t just forget about her. She’s so important to me.”

Jeremy. Stop looking at what’s behind you. Look at what’s front of you. The Squid halted, turning Jeremy around so it could settle its hands on Jeremy’s shoulders. Being here with you right now. Our future is so clear. Our union is so near.

“I don’t know what to do now,” Jeremy said. “There’s no point in being cool if Christine -”

Being cool is its own reward.

The Squid reached out and -

Clasped Jeremy’s cheek? What?

Something cold crawled down Michael’s back. What the fuck was it doing? It was being so creepy.

I’ll tenderly guide you. Just take me inside you. What the fuck! Forever!
Rich grinned, stretching and rotating his shoulders. “Showtime.”

The song exploded.

*Your life was so pitiful before. Now it’s time to go all the way and more!* The Squip leapt away from him, holding his hand so they were linked as the Squid pulled its usual Elvis Presley, Cab Calloway swinging footwork. But this time it kept Jeremy chained to it, spinning him around so he was stepping in sync. *You gotta get that upgrade!*

“There’s no way you can miss this, Jeremy! You gotta get that upgrade!”

**Gotta get that upgrade!**

The Squid moved and pulled Jeremy along in sync, pulling him in closer and then pulling him out. Jeremy was being yanked around, given just enough space to yell out his own affirming line before the Squid grabbed him by both hands and twirled him in a circle. It should have been a happy couple at a dance competition, not whatever the fuck this was.

*Don’t worry about the regret you feel, just take a breath and seal the deal!*

It pulled Jeremy into a tango, so close their feet were touching, and it wrapped an arm around Jeremy’s torso and clasped its other hand. It grinned as Jeremy was taken back, overwhelmed and too shocked to struggle.

**Gotta get an upgrade! Gotta get an upgrade!** It dipped him, low and loose and making Jeremy squeak as he almost fell, but it pulled him back up and launched him into a swirl.

“Gotta get an upgrade!” Jeremy sang obediently, and it clutched them tighter together until it whirled them apart so Jeremy could see Rich and Jake clearly as they stood in the hallway.

It was their turn, and Michael couldn’t have turned to acknowledge Jeremy even if he wanted to.

He settled for stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets to hide their shaking, keeping his face impassive to fight down on his discomfort. It probably made him look cold. For the first time in a long time Michael didn’t want to look cold. He wanted to pry Jeremy away from that robot, the robot that was clutching onto him -

“Wassup, bro?” Rich grinned, raising a hand as Michael cautiously high-fived him. “Man, I’m so glad you made it to the party last night. You’re kinda baller.”

“Happy to be there,” Michael said faintly. “Uh, you too. Dude.”

“You and Chris are definitely invited to all of me and Jake’s shit from now on.” Rich laughed, loud and tinny and boisterous. “I had no idea you were so cool, Mike! You’re nothing like the loser I always thought you were.”

“Yeah, well.” Michael shrugged uncomfortably. “People change. I’m - I’m glad you don’t think I’m a loser. That’s the last thing I want to be. A loser.”

“Forget about that from now on!” Rich slapped him on the back, so friendly, so exuberant. He raised his voice, and Michael knew that Jeremy could hear the light guitar riff of masculine friendship. “Do you wanna come over to my place tonight? I don’t need four thirty-three to see it - kick into forte and that’ll be it. My dad will be asleep so it’s alright.” He paused, miming thoughtfulness. “He’s alcoholic and kinda a bum.”
“Wait, what?”

Then Rich caught the pitch and turned it around, shooting the song back into false cheer. “Which means the house is empty so that’s fun! Oh yeah!” He grabbed Michael’s hand and spun him around, a different style from the Squid’s own dance with Jeremy, and Michael found himself laughing and high fiving Rich again. “Never hung with a dude like you before,” you could say that again, “Help us switch this beat into four-fourths, cuz’ I am sure - we’re ready for an upgrade!”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Upgrade!”

Michael broke away, pretending to sing to himself but submitting to the steps of the beat. “We made this deal and it’s all new, but I’ve got to follow through.”

Rich grabbed his hand and tugged him in, expression so friendly it was demented, and he and Michael pulled a strange and familiar move. They kicked their heels together, stepping to a weird beat just faintly visible through the strains of the piano, and Michael realized that he was doing the very first stupid dance Michael had ever done, the silly little over-complicated friendship dance step.

With Rich.

When Michael looked back Jeremy was horrified and heartbroken. The Squid stood behind him with a grin as demented as Rich’s.

Jeremy turned back towards it for guidance, lost, and the Squid grabbed him by both shoulders, shaking him. There are so many fish in the sea, listen to me! He grabbed Jeremy’s chin and forced him to look at Rich and Michael, who were still grooving to a subtle beat. Michael had dug this hole, out of desperation or some misguided sense of having done the right thing, and now he had to put on a show. No matter how much it hurt Jeremy.

You lost at first, you’re at your worst!

The Squid clutched Jeremy’s forearm, shaking him so he swayed in tune to the beat, and Michael caught a pained wince from Jeremy. No time to bawl, or whine and crawl! It shook him again and Jeremy made small, pathetic whimper. With me you’re not beyond the pall and soon you’ll see, all that you need’s a miracle, whose name’s-

The music froze, and Michael could almost hear Jeremy’s breath catch.

“Michael?”

The Squid let Jeremy go as he steadied himself, clutching his forearm tight to his chest as if it would grab it again. Fucker.

“What’s he doing hanging out with Rich?” Jeremy stepped away from the Squid, in control of his own movements now that the song had taken a dip. Michael was now way too used to how the songs tended to cut in and out than to think that this creepy number was over. Jeremy, at least, was still hung up on him and Rich talking. “Rich is an asshole. He hates losers like us!”

Losers like you. The Squid pulled an impressed face, walking closer to the window and jerking its thumb at Rich, who was laughing at a joke Michael didn’t make. Becoming new best friends with the girl who flat out rejected you is doing wonders for Michael’s social life. Looks like the days of being Michael’s only choice for friendship are over.

Jeremy’s face fell, hand reaching out as if he wanted to reach through the glass between them, only
to withdraw. “I don’t get it. Michael’s been so cold lately, but we had that moment in the theater room, and I felt like -” He faltered, lost. “I don’t know what to feel.”

*Fantastic! I’ll tell you.* It gently grabbed the hand Jeremy was reaching out, holding it close to his chest. It stepped forward but Jeremy didn’t step back, and it looked down at him with fond eyes. *Feel inspired.* Michael’s already taken his own upgrade. He’s not emotionally reliant on you anymore. He has a new life, new friends, a new attitude. He’s even strangely extremely handsome now. He’s taken on a different role, and it doesn’t look like you were cast. In fact, it just looks like you were left behind. Again. It sneered at Jeremy. *Hopefully you’ll react better than your father.*

Jeremy was silent.

The piano returned, soft and slow but punctuated by a guitar riff, and when Jeremy began singing it was as broken as if the Squid had taken a baseball bat to it.

“I already know what it’s like to be the loser.” He watched as Michael chatted easily with Rich about something. Michael didn’t know what. He wasn’t paying attention. “I want to find out what it’s like to...not be the loser.”

The wordplay wasn’t catchy at all, but for once Michael didn’t care. “I don’t want to be special,” Jeremy whispered. “I just wanna be chill as life would allow.”

Michael just wanted him to live his life. Michael just wanted him to go back to before this stupid play even started, to where he was sweaty and a loser, to where Michael wasn’t constantly worried about him. Maybe they could have been friends. Maybe Michael - maybe Michael could have finally gotten over himself and given him a chance and they could played video games together all throughout the night. Maybe Christine could be there. Maybe he would have given her a chance too.

God, who cared about being chill. Who cared about being distant, about not letting anything affect you, about pretending to be someone else because being who you were hurt too much. It wasn’t worth it.

He wanted his best friend back!

“Should I take my vows?” A chorus began singing, louder and louder until it grew frantic and grating on Michael’s ears. “Should I take the upgrade?”

Now, now, now! The Squip was grinning, Rich’s face was shuttered and blank, and Michael grappled desperately for his cold heart. Now, now, now!

The music swelled, louder and louder, and the chanting in the background grew louder and louder until they were almost screaming. Jeremy stood, fists clenched, teeth gritting together, and Michael saw somebody who was fighting back. Or someone who was submitting.

Then the music climaxed and Jeremy gasped before pulling a perfect Elvis style twist and pose. For the first time his expression sharpened, almost snapping out his lines, and he was alight with a newfound determination and energy.

“And I wasn’t sure before, but I wanna go all the way and more! So gimme that - ”

“Upgrade!” The Squid grinned as Michael’s heart fell, and it grabbed Jeremy by the waist and pulled him into a perfect tango style dip. Jeremy let him, throwing a hand around his neck and clutching desperately. “Upgrade, upgrade! Give you that upgrade!”
“I tried to be genuine and true,” Jeremy sang, and he was looking perfectly into the Squid’s eyes, leg wrapped around its, one hand clasped around its neck and their two other hands joined and thrust outwards. “But now it’s time for something new, so gimme that upgrade!”

“Give him that upgrade!” Rich sung, laughing and clapping his hands, and it was coming in from all sides, it was surrounding Michael, it was choking him. “Give him that upgrade!”

“I’ll give you that upgrade!” The Squid hoisted Jeremy closer, the hand around his neck drawing him in until their foreheads were almost touching. “I’ll give you that upgrade!”

“Really it doesn’t matter how,” Jeremy sang with the chorus, no longer alone, “I’m getting that upgrade right now!”

The final beats of the chorus rang out and Michael’s heart fell. It was over. Jeremy was -

Jeremy was laughing, forehead touching the Squid’s, and the sight of them laughing together was the last thing Michael saw before the final spotlight covering him clicked off and he was left in the darkness and the cold.

Something was over, and Michael hoped to God it was just Act 1.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for the help on the lyrics by Nymm_at_Night. If you're interested into the visual references for the character's sick moves, I would check out the live performances of 'Minnie the Moocher' by Cab Calloway and the music video of 'Jailhouse Rock' by Elvis, as well as his life performance of 'Hound Dog'. For the tango, I would look at the tango scene from Antonio Banderas' 'Take the Lead', as well as 'How to Dance Tango Basic' by Egils Samgris. The final shot was supposed to invoke fusion dances from 'Steven Universe'. Michael and Jeremy's dance during 'Guy That I'd Kinda Be Into' is a standard waltz, and all other dance moves stick close to the choreography shown in the bootleg. All of these videos can be found on YouTube. As a final note, this story is not Squip/Jeremy, but the style of dance that I always choreographed for them is of the more passionate/intense kind, if that explains the grabbiness. It never rains but it pours in this story, so bear with me through the sheer intensity of dance moves.
BOYFS: A SLASH FICTION AS OLD AS TIME

“It was just so fucking creepy!” Michael resentfully crammed popcorn into his mouth, glorifying in the butter and salt. Its unique recipe of grease and fat evoked a flavor just like movie popcorn. Because of course. “I can’t believe the basis of this play is Jeremy swallowing robot Omegle!”

“That’s because Jeremy makes terrible life decisions,” Christine said solemnly. She prodded the top of the parchment paper with a yardstick. “This is the fundamental principle of the play.”

“Let me guess,” Michael said, slouching lower in his beanbag. “One of those being not realizing how deep in desperate gay love he is with his best friend?”

“He’s very repressed,” Christine explained, explaining nothing.

“Jesus Christ.”

Michael’s basement was yet another set piece that Christine had uncomfortably established had a lot of stuff that didn’t exist in the real play That was a pity, because it sure existed to Michael. With bean bags everywhere, cool tapestries on the walls, old pinball machines and parts on a workspace that made him pretty sure that Michael restored and flipped old pinball machines for money to fund his video game obsession, it was Michael Mell all over the place. It even had an old TV on a stand that was crammed full of video games. It smelled pretty musty and a lot like weed, and it was a little uncomfortably humid, but something about it was homey.

A month ago Michael would have sneered at it. A few days ago Michael had sneered at his own bedroom. But today, for the time being, Michael was glad for it. It was comfortable. It looked like someone lived there. Michael lived there. And Michael’s horrible decorative tastes were kind of beginning to grow on Michael, just because they were Michael’s.

Sure, Michael was pretty horrible in most ways. But if you spit shined his life a little then it really wasn’t too bad.

They had grabbed a giant roll of butcher paper from Christine’s house, where apparently her entire bedroom was stuffed with materials for set design and arts and crafts, and tacked it up against a bare concrete wall. They had markers, chalk, print outs and suspicious photographs, and a healthy variety of snacks.

Because Christine needed a flow chart to explain her OTP.

She could keep her slash fiction. Michael, who was either more or less grounded in what was more or less reality, had bigger problems. Namely in how the evil robot was trying to beat him to the seduction punch.
“It was handsy and slimy and disgusting! Like, I thought it was smarmy and manipulative before it actually jumped down from its high horse and began dancing with Jeremy? But then it just got worse!” God, even just thinking about it made his skin crawl. “It was grabbing him and shaking him, but then it was dancing with him and throwing him around and doing that weird Elvis thing again - and Jeremy looked like he was having fun!”

“I understand you have a rival for his affections,” Christine said seriously, one pink marker slipped behind her ear and waggling a blue one at him. “But I can help prepare you for the task to come.”

“Will you teach me how to be as swift as a coursing river?” Michael crossed his arms and sulked deeper into his beanbag. “Or are you going to bippity boppity boo me?”

“I am the expert in this, Michael,” she stressed. “I have gotten Jeremy and Michael together dozens of times. You are talking to a professional in boyfs.”

He really didn’t want to know, but he had to ask. “What’s boyfs?”

Her eyes glinted. “What isn’t boyfs?”

Not the play, apparently.

Michael waited patiently for her to sticky tack up another fresh sheet of butcher paper, and she proceeded to sketch her masterpiece. Yet again Michael was forced to wonder if this was a dream come true for her. Instead of dressing up her Ken dolls and making them kiss, she could manipulate Michael into helping manipulate Jeremy so they could kiss! To save the world!

Every inch of Michael wanted to nope out of here so hard, but the memory of the Squid’s hands curled around Jeremy’s neck kept him in his stupid beanbag.

Christine capped her marker, content with her masterpiece. She stepped back, pulling a Will Smith and his wife pose. “Tah-dah! Our dramatis personae!”

Michael stared at the drawing.
“I’m in hell,” Michael said calmly. “This is what hell looks like.”

“Don’t be silly! Hell is the Michael Mell/SQUIP tag.” Christine shivered, eyes haunted. “You can’t un-read fanfiction. No matter how much you may want to.”

“I’d like to unlive this life,” Michael said flatly. He leaned in, squinting at the picture. “What’s a Uke?”

Christine dove for the marker and immediately scribbled that out. “Nothing!”

Michael leaned in closer. “Fucking a seal -”

“Don’t worry about it!”

“Pining? What’s this about pining?”

“Oh my god, it’s like explaining fanfiction to my dad.” Why would you even do that? Christine frowned at the paper again, reaching up to scribble out the word ‘dom’. Unfortunately Michael already knew what that word meant. Unfortunately. “Look, you need to see why these two sweet characters are perfect for each other. This is integral in helping understand boyfs. We just need to move you from here,” she tapped her very unflattering image of him, “to here.” She tapped the
picture of the perfect cinnamon roll Michael. Why every character was food suddenly Michael did not know.

But the longer Michael squinted at the picture the less sense it made. “I thought you were supposed to be the expert in Jeremy psychology,” he complained. “None of this stuff is even true. Like, his greasiness isn’t hot at all. He’s not actually taller than I am. Why aren’t you mentioning his sweet smile?”

“The sweet smile was implied,” Christine said severely. “Look, Michael is the perfect boyfriend for Jeremy. He’s understanding, emotionally intelligent, loyal, and totally okay if Jeremy just starts randomly crying all the time! Just be that and there’s no way he won’t fall in love with you!”

They both stared at the drawing.

Christine quietly picked up a new sheet of butcher paper and taped it over the old one.

“Okay, so let’s try this again. Let’s look at the canon evidence for boyfs. There’s a lot, since it’s practically canon! All we need to do is recreate these canonical events and Jeremy’s destined to fall in love with you.”

She got straight to work on another drawing, terrifying Michael immensely.

Michael scrutinized it, as if it explained anything.

“This explains nothing,” he said. “And it kind of makes me uncomfortable.”

“If it’s so easy why don’t you try?” Christine asked, exasperated. Maybe he should start being a
little easier on her. She really was doing the best she could, probably. “Look, this is all totally doable. You already sung ‘Two Player Game’, right?”

“I drink to forget that song.” Michael paused guiltily. “But he might have called me his favorite person.”

“Were you a dick about it?”

“Totally,” Michael lied. “Look, the backpack thing already happened. We can probably induce that weird pining look or something. I don’t know why I would start randomly speaking Tagalog to Jeremy, the whitest of the whites, but whatever. I really don’t want to know the story behind the Wii Remote. I think we’re in good shape, right? Your argument’s...uh, convincing.”

She nodded professionally, as if this was a given. “Now that you’re up to speed on boyfs we can move on to our real plan. I’m going to draw our our three step plan for saving Jeremy and reality, in that order, and then we’ll have to burn it. For safety reasons.”

“Then why draw it out?”

“You probably need the pictures to help understand it. It’s a complex plan.”

It was fair. Michael leaned back in his bean bag, crossing his arms as Christine drew out their destiny.

This time she simplified it a lot, which was helpful. Michael didn’t know if he could stomach yet another poorly drawn and slightly insulting manifesto.
“This is going to be the next two months of my life,” Michael said out loud. “This is what the next two months of my life are going to look like.”

Christine beamed, proud of herself. She probably thought it was a great plan. Well, it was...specific. You could sure say that.

“How am I even supposed to…” Michael squinted at the poster. “Steal his toys? Criticize his roombas? Is showing him bad Twilight Zone rip-offs actually going to get him to like me?”

She sat down, grabbing the bowl of popcorn and mashing it into her mouth. “Maybe he’s into that?” Christine suggested. Michael glared at her and she hurriedly started stuffing her face with the popcorn.

Judging from Jeremy’s reaction to the Squid, Michael was probably better off trying to seduce Jeremy by breaking into his house and kicking him in the neck. “You didn’t even mention all of the creepy innuendoes during Upgrade, Christine! A little warning would have been nice!”
She swallowed the popcorn. “I didn’t think about them that way! The musical played it off as a joke. I never saw the actual dancing, but I think the Squid - I mean SQUIP - was still on the rafters at the time.”

“Well, it sure as hell wasn’t now.” Michael crossed his arms, desolate. “I didn’t sign up to star in a really rapey black comedy.”

“The rapey stuff hasn’t even happened yet.”

“Are you fucking serious!” Michael rounded on Christine, who shifted guiltily. “What does it do, grope him? I’m not standing by while that thing is busy being disgusting!”

“It wasn’t the Squid,” Christine protested. “I mean the - okay, whatever, the Squid. It was Chloe instead, but we’re both scheduled to be at that scene so it’ll be really easy to prevent.”

Chloe. The ultra bitch. Michael felt his expression darken. There was a lot of people he was going to have to beat over the head with sticks in this play. It was going to be so, so satisfying.

“Look, I’m actually doing stuff too. I’ve really become friends with Brooke, Chloe, Jenna, and Jake.” She stood up, grabbing a marker from Michael and adding a few points about what they’ve accomplished so far. There wasn’t a lot there. “They started out just being these really shallow, lame stereotypes. But as I get to know them they’re kind of getting expanded on a little. Like a balloon. But not in a sexy way.”

Michael shook his head, too overwhelmed to care about anybody but Jeremy. “Fine. So you’re working on those redemption arcs. You really love those redemption arcs, Christine.”

“They’re very rewarding.”

“Well, my reward is watching that smarmy CPU get the blue screen of death.” God, now he was even talking like Michael. He was going native. “When I was watching them, when I was fucking helping them, I just felt so -”

Michael trailed off, clenching his hand and Christine waited patiently for him to finish before realizing that he wasn’t about to.

“You felt so what?”

“It wasn’t just that the robot was being gross,” Michael said weakly. “It was just that Jeremy was - he was so into it! He was laughing and everything, and they were having so much fucking fun!” There was a squirming python behind his ribs and Michael didn’t know why. “I felt disgust, and horror, and something…”

“Jealous?” Christine suggested mildly. “Did you feel jealous?”

“What?” Michael rounded on her, his confusion and distress finally finding a target. “What the fuck are you on about? He’s a fictional character! They’re both fictional characters, how can I be jealous of a loser and a VirtualBoy!”

Christine just munched her popcorn. “If you’re not jealous then how come you’re so jealous?”

“That makes no sense!” Michael cried. “He’s not real!”

“Then neither is the Squid,” Christine pointed out. “Then none of it’s real. Then none of this matters. And you know that’s not true.” She grabbed one of their printouts, a beautiful piece of
Photoshop Christine had made instead of doing her coding in computer class, and taped it in the direct center of the butcher paper. All the lines lead from it, the plot and the characters and Michael’s own stupid little life.

She said that it was the album art of the play. A pixelated bust and a fuzzed out head. Invisible and anonymous, but screeching.

Michael felt something when he looked at it, but he didn’t know what.

“Michael, you gotta commit.” She tapped the image. “Sorry, but you lie to yourself a lot. We can’t afford that anymore. We’re officially in the timeskip and we can’t mess around if we want to save Jeremy and the play. I’ve bowed out of the romantic subplot but you’ve made yourself into a star. You can’t do that and still refuse to play. You have to care about a sweaty teenage boy. The fate of this reality depends on it.”

Out of all the people in the world, Michael was probably the least suited for this.

“This is going to be a long two months,” Michael said.

Later that day - and Michael had very little clue when that day was - he dropped Christine off at her adorable house and spent the night eating generic ice cream straight out of the container curled up on the sofa. The flavor was...well, it was flavored. Probably. Besides, everybody knew that ice cream didn’t have calories when eaten out of the container. And when it was fake.

The television only played public domain movies from the 1950s. One channel was just playing Invasion of the Body Snatchers on repeat. Very funny.

Then the TV flipped to a dead channel, nothing but snow and screeching. Michael looked around for the remote, a little wigged, before the TV flipped channels of its own accord again.

It was Dancing With The Stars.

“Okay,” Michael said out loud, “fuck you too.”

Then it flipped to Nicktoons Junior.

Michael dived for the remote, leaving the ice cream rolling on the cushions, and turned the TV off. Blissful silence reigned in his living room, and Michael was left with the disturbing truth that either the Squid controlled all electronics in the play or that it just controlled the play itself. Lately it had really been feeling like the latter.

He tried to dig up a book on the living room bookshelf, only to find that it was half Harlequin novels. He somehow understood that his mother loved the things, mostly because reading legal documents all day was so mentally taxing the only thing she wanted to read when she came home was completely mindless.

One of them had a shirtless cowboy on the cover - Michael’s favorite kind of cowboy - and Michael nestled into the couch with it and the rapidly melting tub of ice cream. Christine’s fanfiction was probably written better, but that was alright.

His mind drifted to the entire AO3 archive of Be More Chill fanfiction that probably existed in the real world. It would probably be way too weird to read. How much of it would just be porn of Jeremy and his character?

Michael looked up from his book. How much porn was written about him and Jeremy?
Maybe this is what the actors felt like. Only worse. So much worse.

Worse. He started imagining what the porn would be like. Maybe a soulmate AU. Or maybe just a slowburn coffeeshop AU where Jeremy makes mochas or some shit. Jeremy would be the worst barista, he was nothing but elbows and knees. And they wouldn’t even know how to write him! Michael objected to Starbucks on philosophical grounds!

But they weren’t writing him. They were writing Michael. Even if Michael had begun to feel a little propietal of the role. Even as the real fake Michael was fading from his mind, or fading into his mind, or if he could finally point fingers and say it was the fictional character, it was the best friend, it was the gay love interest who felt a horrible writhing jealousy and horror when he saw Jeremy Heere intimate with someone else -

“Good taste in literature, honey.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Michael said glumly. He passed the book upwards, where his Mom was leaning over him with her elbows on the couch. A loose strand of curly hair from her pixie cut tangled in his own curly hair. Hereditary.

She flipped through the book, holding it down so they could both see the text. She made an impressed sound, quickly flipping through the pages with her usual insane reading speed. The text was all nonsensical and kept on going on about some kind of throbbing womanhood, and eventually she just flipped to the back cover and read the synopsis.

“Madrina, fair southern bell who has moved to the wild lands of California becomes acquainted with Brad Buckspur’s band of cowboys - and seduces all of them?” She flipped the book shut, unabashedly stealing it from Michael and casually sliding onto the back of the couch so she could land next to him on the cushions. “Book report for English?”

“God, I wish.” Michael kicked his shoes off, curling deeper around his ice cream. He was exhausted. He had been knocked out for an indeterminate amount of time, had no idea what day it even was, and his best friend was probably sitting his house right now letting a really creepy robot feel up his pecs and clean his kitchen or something. “The TV’s being petty and there’s too much narrative irony in our English class.”

She just hummed, flipping quickly through the book and draping an arm around the back of the couch. Michael scraped the last vestiges of ice cream out of the half-pint container and, before he could think better of it, snuggled up to her. She adjusted her arm so it was draped around his shoulders, lowering the book so they could both read out of it. Michael yawned, and she adopted a fake falsetto to read it out loud.

“Brad, you know I would never leave you for Thod, no matter how luscious his thighs are!” She even imitated a high, breathy gasp, making Michael laugh. He was probably too old for this, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. “Your manhood spurs my horse like no other.”

Michael adopted his own fake baritone. “Madrina, your creamy bosoms are all I live for. But I must be with another man. If you must watch...so be it!”

Michael adopted his own fake baritone. “Madrina, your creamy bosoms are all I live for. But I must be with another man. If you must watch...so be it!”

“I’ve failed in raising you.” She put the book down, stroking Michael’s hair in a motion so strangely familiar that he had to close his eyes and breathe. His own mother hadn’t done this in years. “Those pamphlets are right. Being a career mother has corrupted my child into being a homosexual stoner.”

“I’m brown, I was ruined from the start.” Michael let the silence ring for a long moment, trying to
work up the courage to say it. Trying to think of a code word, a lie, something consumable for clueless moms. It was a teenage romantic sci-fi black humor comedy. Everybody knew parents were useless. “Mom? Can I ask you something?”

“So you want homework, honey.”

They hadn’t given him any homework at all. Sometimes you had to appreciate the little things. “No, I mean like…” he swallowed. “Matters of the heart?”

She ruffled his hair, smiling down at him. “You won’t find the answers in that trash. Don’t get any false expectations.”

What a relentless woman. “I’m being serious. I’m having, like…” he’s never had to say this before, much less to a woman he barely knew. “Romantic problems. You’re married, you know what’s up. Right?”

“Of course. I’m sorry for being flippant again.” She never stopped being flippant, but Michael was rapidly learning how to adapt to that. “What’s Jeremy done this time?”

“Mom!”

“Fine. What’s Noah done this time?” She patted him on the head. “Names have been changed to protect identities.”

The name was weirdly familiar, but Michael brushed it off. “How do you know when you like someone?”

She hummed, stroking his hair. “For me and my first boyfriend? I was just laughing at all of his jokes. Even when he wasn’t funny he was the funniest guy in the room. He was the smartest, the nicest, the coolest - even when he wasn’t. And he definitely wasn’t.”

Great. “I have no delusions about how much of a loser he is.”

“Of course you don’t. You know him better than anybody else alive.” Her expression turned wistful, a half smile curling at her lips and looking somewhere far away. “That was my second boyfriend. I had known him since kindergarten and he was so comfortable. We could practically finish each other’s sentences.” She sighed. “But I was just mistaking that familiarity for compatibility. I’m not saying relationships have to be exciting, but there should be some joy in it. Your Uncle Alex and I were so much better as friends.”

Michael bolted upright, jaw dropped. “You used to date Uncle Alex? You used to date my honorary uncle?”

“We were eighteen, I’m over it.” She eyed him wryly. “Experiencing something for the first time is always tricky. It’s like you’re walking on a tightrope blindfolded, and you have no idea what would happen if you fell.”

That was the truth. Michael sighed miserably, leaning back in his seat. “He’s been all I’m thinking about. I’m worried about him, I’m trying to stop him from doing something stupid, I’m always chasing after him. But now there’s this new guy…this really, really horrible guy, Mom. He’s so bad.” Michael shivered. “But now…Noah’s the center of my life and I’m just not the center of his anymore. Am I jealous? Or is it something weirder?”

His mother was silent. Finally, she carefully said, “How bad is this guy?”
“Bad enough that I’ve been trying to break them up. Not bad enough that it’s working.”

If the Squid was an actual guy Michael would just shiv him. But it wasn’t, and things had gotten way too complicated, and Michael was beginning to give up on understanding anything. This stupid play was incomprehensible, but Michael’s heart was worse.

“All you can do is be there for him,” Michael’s mother said finally. “But you want to know how I knew that your father was the one? That I was so in love with him that it felt like I was holding my heart in my hands?”

Michael nodded cautiously.

She kissed the crown of his head, flipping the book open again. “He reminded me of you.” She rifled through the book, stopping at a likely package. “This is nonsensical trash, but something about this is strangely engaging.” She cleared her throat, adopting her breathy falsetto again. “‘Brad, I yearn for my g-spot! I’m so incomplete! Complete the chain, and come inside me!’

Michael settled back and curled tighter in his mother’s arms.

Time passed. This, at least, Michael knew for sure.

The day when Michael woke up and turned on his phone to definitely find that it was September 10th made him want to cry. He practically danced around the room when he found that it was actually, really 7:40.

That is, before he he realized that he was late to school and he was forced to stop dancing and high tail it to his car. His grin didn’t die as he passed Starbucks stores, bookstores and houses and empty lots with nothing but some scrubby trees.

When he finally made it to school that morning he noticed just a little bit more diversity in the NPCs then usual, but he couldn’t bring himself to care too much about it.

The musical let Michael rest, and for the first time he was looking forward to the rest of this timeskip. It wasn’t quiet, and it was still constantly low key stressful. But when Michael was happy enough that he wasn’t being tossed and turned like a buoy in choppy waters he couldn’t complain.

His week was marked in profound discomfort and worry, watching Jeremy out of the corner of his eyes and swallowing his pride and hanging out with Rich. In the spirit of solidarity and The Mission Christine hung out with them too, and Michael found to his disgust that when Rich wasn’t making an active attempt to be horrible he wasn’t bad.

He got along with Christine, at any rate. But Michael was beginning to see that everyone got along with Christine. Including the so-called popular kids, who were apparently beginning to grow souls now that they were moving further and further from the sheer musical logic of everything. When you let stereotypes flourish too long they tended to grow a mind of their own. Like Audrey II, or Gremlins.

And Michael barely saw anything of Jeremy. Which seemed a little counter-productive to their plans, but Michael was forced to admit that the Squid probably knew best when it came to ruthlessly manipulating Jeremy.

“Remember,” Christine said, “we have to get Michael Mell and Jeremy Heere to fall in love.” She was standing on top of a half brick wall in front of the library, where the popular kids tended to
hang out before school started. It was way too early in the morning to even be at school and the
preps hadn’t arrived yet, so Michael was stuck nestled into his ill-begotten jaket as Rich slouched
aggressively. He was leaning against the wall, tapping his fingers against it in a staccato rhythm
that drove Rich crazy.

When he listened closer he definitely heard that it was the tune to More Than Survive, which drove
Michael even crazier.

“I’ve known the guy for…” Michael checked his phone. “An indeterminate amount of time. You
can’t ask me to fall in love with a guy I just barely started tolerating.”

Christine flapped her hands, stimming as Rich rolled his eyes. “But Michael Mell’s known him for
his entire life! You’re Michael Mell, right? So Michael Mell it up!”

“Besides, you’re an asshole.” Rich absentmindedly scratched his stubble. “This’ll be easier if you
get likable or something. We still have to get you in with the popular kids.” He practically sneered
the term, which was fair. “Bubble Bath and I are working on ‘em. We’ll get you in before long.”

“But isn’t Michael Mell the loser?” Michael cried, exasperated. “I’m the one with the actual social
skills and the actual friends! I’m on the track team!”

“The track team are jerks,” Christine sniffed. “And they’re always sweaty.”

“The spray paint was one time! Isn’t the school ever going to let that go?”

“I’ll let it go when Vivian gets the dye out of her nice dress!” Whatever. Vivian could buy a new
dress. “Just because you have friends doesn’t mean people actually like you!”

“At least I have friends! You eat your lunch in the library every day!”

Christine stamped her foot. “There’s nothing wrong with liking books more than people!”

“You mean listening to the Be More Chill audio bootleg five hundred times?” Michael asked
flatly. “I’d rather have real friends than fictional characters who I can pretend I’m friends with.”

That had done it. Christine practically snarled, a gesture completely out of character with the
persona she had slotted so easily into, and Rich calmly stepped between them and pushed them
both away from each other. Michael hadn’t even realized he had gotten so far into her space, and
twisting shame bubbled in his gut.

“It’s called a compromise, asshole,” Rich grunted. He shoved Michael backwards, making him
stumble. “You have the social skills. Mell has the likability. Have your cake and eat it too.
Nobody’s saying that you have to actually run around hitting the bong and crying over how Jeremy
has real friends now.”

Great. Now even Rich had to give him advice. Now even Rich had to be right. Christine just
huffed, crossing her arms. “Michael Mell is a beloved character and the star of all of the
fanfictions. You couldn’t be beloved with your real personality if you were giving away kittens.”

“Save it, St. Mary,” Rich sneered, and Christine jerked back, affronted. “Get your head out of the
asses of your adoring fans. Just because you’re Mrs. Popularity doesn’t mean that you don’t still
have a job to do. Get the boys together and help the Squid - the SQUIP - grind Jeremy into the
ground. You’re the one who’s actually hanging out with him all the time.”

She shifted uncomfortably, looking down at the ground. “I like writing angst but I don’t want to
“Too bad,” Rich said bluntly. He ran a hand through his chair, huffing and straightening from the wall. “Jeremy’s already infiltrated us. Guy hits on anything that moves. The popular kids are all raging faggots and he has them wrapped around his little finger. Once his his status is solidified he’s going to go for you.” He locked eyes with Michael and nodded professionally. “As the resident Squid - SQUIP! - rep I gotta tell you that both of you gotta play nice with us or the deal’s off. Jeremy’s our bitch. Disrespect that and you’re disrespecting us.” He sneered, and Michael was forced to wonder if he liked saying these things. “Disrespect us and optic nerve blockers are gonna get slammed over his eyeballs so hard he’ll see spots and we’ll make him fuck that bitch Brooke instead to get to Chloe. Got it?”

Michael and Christine nodded, queasy.

Then they heard Jake calling, walking with Chloe and Brooke up to their regular spot with his regular goofy expression on, and Michael saw Rich’s expression soften as he waved back. “Don’t struggle and they’ll let you keep what you love.” Rich’s fist clenched, almost seizing. “If you’re good.”

Whatever good meant. It made Michael feel like a five year old, completely dependent on his babysitter to reach the cabinet and give him a cookie. Be good for Mr. Squid, the adult to your child, the controller over who’s being controlled, the absolute authority that the children had to bow to because it was right and they were wrong, it big and they were small, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Michael didn’t want to be good, but he knew that he had no choice.

The day began to whip by, and a few days turned into a week’s worth of nights lying awake at night staring at his ceiling with fake stars glued to it with no rhyme or reason.

It was like his fake mom said. Compartmentalization. His real life was out there, and his weird musical life was in here. He couldn’t afford to lay awake at night missing his parents, missing his friends or his own freaking bed. Missing not breaking out into song at emotionally fraught or entirely random moments.

So he lay awake at night thinking about Jeremy instead. That wasn’t much better.

When he woke up the next morning he found his new mom getting ready for work, shrugging on her blazer and snapping together her suitcases. Out of some weird filial instinct that he was trying to nurture he stopped and kissed her on the cheek, pretending he was some sort of guy with parents that demonstrated physical affection. Like some kind of loser or something.

“Hey, Mom? Can I tell you to give me a specific piece of advice and repeat it back at me?”

“I would be grateful that you are making my job so easy.” She ruffled his hair, slinging on an extra shoulder bag. Lawyers were one half student debt and one half paper. “What kind of validation do you need?”

Michael took a deep breath. “Can you just…”

When he faltered she raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

Michael was silent.

She sighed, bending down to kiss him on the forehead again. “I love you. I think you’re wonderful.
You are going to be very successful and care for your father and I in our old ages. Did I miss anything?”

“Can you tell me to be myself?” Michael asked plainly. “But in a poetic way?”

“Oh, honey.” She hoisted her shoulder bag higher, grabbing her keys off the dish next to the door. “Who else could you be?”

Good question.

But Rich had been right. From here on out Michael couldn’t afford to be just himself anymore. He had to be better and worse at the same time. He had to ditch Michael’s socially awkwardness even as he kept his dorky likability, just like how he had to ditch Michael’s jealous and possessive love for his friend in favor of his own acceptance of the fact that whenever he saw Jeremy walking through the halls, wearing douchey Vineyard Vines with weirdly perfect hair, there was the Squid following at his heels and smirking at Michael.

Michael was real. The Squid was not. Jeremy was not. Michael was real. It didn’t hurt. It didn’t hurt. It didn’t hurt.

From here on out it was method acting. Like Jared Leto with the Joker, only without so many creepy dead rats. Like Robert de Niro in Taxi Driver. Daniel Day-Lewis. Christian Bale. Channel these attractive older men. Feel their force. Sense their sensuality.

Actually, don’t do that last bit.

When Michael actually got to school a week after he had made a deal with the robot devil, and not even the gambling machine kind, he took a deep breath, reached into his backpack, and slung his headphones on.

First step: always listen to crap music.

He obnoxiously blared the music on his headphones, adopted a slouched but surfer dude posture, and blended into the musical background by bopping a little on his way too class. You love life, Michael. Your parents love you, your best friend is hot and hopefully will have a massive crush on you by the end of this whole debacle, and gosh darn it, people like you!

He even actually slid into his homeroom chair. Time to actually go to class. A class that, in the last week, had begun to inconveniently actually learn things. Michael missed the days where nobody cared if he walked out the door to go hang out with Christine, and they didn’t bother to learn anything important and have to take actual tests. Granted, the answers to all the multiple choice questions were C, and the teachers would always take a Hot Pocket break five minutes into class, so it wasn’t unbearable.

Their current teacher was sleeping under the desk as the students went crazy, with everybody twisted around in their seats to chat and work on homework and waste time in stereotypical ways. Some boys in the back were playing on their DS, some other kids by the corner were asleep, and Jenna Rolan was standing at his desk bursting with curiosity.

Shit. He hadn’t even noticed her walk up, too fascinated with the generic high school class room.

Quick, What Would Michael Mell Do? WWMMD? He jerked his chin up in a calculated loser-trying-to-look-cool move. He’s been seeing it on Jeremy a lot. “Sup?”
Jenna, meanwhile, was a shark with blood in the water. She leaned forward, grinning. “Michael, you have to spill everything. How are you friends with Christine and Rich now?”

Michael leaned back, stuffing his hands in his leather jacket pockets. He should probably go back to the hoodie, but it seriously stunk of weed. “We met in the musical theater aisle of target? Rich makes me do his homework for him?” He shifted uncomfortably, socially anxious and unpracticed talking with Women: The Alien Species. “Is that bad?”

“Oh, it’s just fascinating!” That wasn’t much of an answer. She slid into the vacant seat in front of him, pudgy eyes gleaming. “Are GBFs cool now? Are they, like, the hot new thing? I bet they’re so fashion forward.”

“I pointedly don’t know anything about the latest fashion,” Michael said. “I’m too cool for that. I’m beyond the social strata.”

Jenna shot him a skeptical look as Michael mentally patted himself on the back. “You’re just saying that because you’re a loser.”

“Loser and proud, baby.” He grinned rakishly at her. “Christine likes the confidence. Chicks dig a guy who knows what he’s about. You should try it sometime, Jenna. Insecurity is so last year.”

Zing. She flushed, looking away. “I’m confident. You have to be to hang out with Chloe. She’s a shark.”

“Why do you even hang out with her if she’s such a jerk?” Michael asked incredulously. “Pointless high school social status doesn’t matter. College is the great equalizer, man. But nasty words last forever. Trust me, I would know.”

Jenna shifted, uncomfortable. Michael hoped Michael was the type to randomly lay out some hard truths, because he couldn’t bite his tongue on them. Wrapping them in something friendlier and less biting might help. “I guess.” She whipped out her phone and unceremoniously shoved it at him. “I want your number. If you get any deets on Christine I want them ASAP. Christine’s not tight with anybody. You’ve infiltrated the circle.” Her gaze sharpened. “So jealous.”

Michael pretended to flip his hair. “Chicks love the homosexuality.” He laughed, gratified when Jenna giggled. “I’ll give you my number, but you have to promise to hand it out to any hot guys you meet.”

Jenna leaned in, eyes alight, and Michael had the sense that he had cut through to the truth of the matter. “Like Jeremy Heere?” she breathed. “He’s hot, isn’t he?”

“Oh,” Michael said intelligently. Then because he was Michael Mell and that was okay to say, he offered, “Extremely? I mean, if you like pimples.”

She sighed dreamily. “I hate pimples. But Jeremy’s skin is as clear as the driven snow. He’s really on the up and up, you know. I’m seeing great things in his future. I’d invest in him, if you know what I mean.” She winked, faux flirtatiously. “And I hear you two know each other.”

“He’s my best friend in the entire world.”

“Okay, so you’re close.” She pushed her phone a little closer at him, grinning wickedly. “And if you have any deets on Jeremy Heere...well, I knew you first.”

Michael numbly accepted the phone, feeling a little like he just threw his lot in with somebody. But who that somebody was he didn’t know. “Ah. I’ll get back to you on that.”
It wasn’t until homeroom ended and Michael was shuffled along to his next class that he realized submitting to Jenna’s creepy stalking lead him to the longest conversation with any of the fictional characters he’s ever had besides Jeremy. And the Squid. And Rich, but at this point Michael was beginning to suspect that he had one foot in the sea and one foot in the shore.

When he met up with Christine and Rich again in Spanish class, tugging their desks together to pretend to do a group project, he proudly updated them on how he had interacted with a Real Life Fake person as a perfect Michael Mell.

“You should have seen me,” Michael bragged. “I was so flamboyant I could have been on an episode of Project Runway.”

“Congratulations, I don’t care.” Rich slouched in his seat, arms crossed as Christine looked over his worksheet. It was perfect. Of course it was. “You sing your duet with that moron Brooke in Chemistry and you’ll get your solo during the extra play rehearsal after school today. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Brooke?” Christine put her pen down, looking around at them. “Don’t worry, she’s just as nice as her characterization in the play indicates. If she’s cornering you for gossip you can totally handle that.”

“That’s for the encouragement, guys,” Michael said flatly. “It cleans my pores and gives me life.”

Christine rolled Rich’s worksheet into a loose tube and whapped Michael on the head with it.

“Enough of that. You’re our friend, and as a beautiful young woman stuck in this sinking ship with you I’m obligated to care.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“I don’t care,” Rich said flatly.

“The important thing is that we’re all in this together!” Christine said loudly. She grinned uncertainty between the two unimpressed boys. “It’s a perfect two boys and a girl scenario. The girl is sensible and driven, the main boy is goofy yet determined, and the other boy is surly but whose loyalty knows no bounds. We’re a perfect three person friend group.”

Said hero and lancer stared at her, unimpressed.

Sure enough, in Chemistry the next period the miniboss approached him.

The Vice President of cool. The completely flat, vapid character with no significance besides repeating everything Chloe said in a sarcastic tone of voice and agreeing with her. She was the butt monkey of the popular girls, but that was better than not being a popular girl at all. Michael knew how it was in these movies.

Brooke leaned over the other side of his lab table from where he was ineffectually trying to put a chemical inside another chemical, hopefully creating a third chemical of a different color. She was chewing what looked like a scrap of tire.

“What color is Jeremy Heere’s underwear?”

Michael fell out of his chair.

She was laughing at him as he wrenched himself upwards, nasally and high, and Michael decided that even Michael would bite this girl’s head off. “He goes commando.”
Brooke started laughing even louder, doubling in on herself and chewing a hole in her scrap of tire. “You’re such a weirdo, Mell!”

“Are you hearing yourself,” Michael said flatly. He tugged his chemicals closer to himself protectively. Maybe he could splash her in the eyes, make her go all Two-Face. Hey, what a great thought Michael Mell would have. “Whatever happened to those good old Puritan ideals? Chastity? Prudence? I don’t associate with loose women.”

“Don’t be coy, boy.” She snickered, probably at the expression on his face. Michael made sure it stayed shocked and loose. Emotions and open book. Christine had really stressed that. “I deserve it. You cockblocked me in that mall, Mikey.”

“It was the highlight of my life.” Michael cautiously reached for a chemical he hoped might be corrosive. Her well being was not integral to the plan. “Can you, uh, leave me alone? Concept?”

She scowled, mangling her pretty little heart shaped face. “I’ll leave you alone when you leave me alone. Jeremy Heere is sexy, available, and a social climber. I’m trying to climb that like a tree but you,” she leaned over the table and tugged a beaker of a fluorescent chemical closer to her. “Are all he talks about.”

Michael’s heart leaped into his chest, and before he could consider the political ramifications he let it show on his expression. “Really?”

“Well, not really.” She tugged the chemical closer, expression tolerantly amused but dangerous. Like a cat with a mouse. “But you totally dragged him off the other day. And when I mentioned your name he totally lit up. And I dropped, like, five other girl’s names in there and it was just you.”

Michael was beginning to realize, with growing horror, that his actions had consequences now. That was never a good sign. “You’re like a metal detector of romance.” But he couldn’t help leaning forward a little too. Something else occurred to him, a flash of Jenna’s conniving face. “You seriously want the details on Jeremy?”

The tire scrap hung out of her mouth as Brooke locked gazes with him, watery blue eyes wide but piercing. Then she smiled and slid onto the stool on the other side of the table. Michael had been working alone. Again. Dandy.

“Maybe. What’s it gonna cost me?”

Score. Michael, both naturally conniving and artificially friendly, smiled. He pushed another beaker of chemical towards her. “Help me out with this lab and you’ve got thirty minutes uninterrupted access to the only boy on Earth who knows anything about Jeremy Heere.”

When she grinned it was as shark like as Jenna’s, and Michael considered for the first time that Jeremy had a good reason to be terrified of the women in this school. “Sold.”

By the end of it Brooke had another name in her contacts list and Michael was left with the self-esteem boost that came from making connections. He was networking. If Michael was going to be stuck here for the next two months there was no way he was going to spend it like a loser.

In real life you didn’t have these uber cliques, where one girl ruled the school and everyone else was forced to scrabble frantically for her attention. In real life you had people who had more friends than others, or had more money, or had more drama. It wasn’t like this. If the real world was a democracy then this was a dictatorship. Rich beat up whoever he wanted. Chloe consumed
the souls of whoever she wanted.

And if Michael could get in on that, then maybe he could be more powerful than he ever dreamed.

Maybe if he was popular enough then he could stop Brooke and Chloe from sleeping with Jeremy. Jeremy had to sleep with a popular kid to get ahead, right? Even if that was the most disgusting thought Michael was forced to think that day?

That popular kid could be him, right?

Think it over, maybe?

The final bell rang, as Michael was forced to accept that it would do every day, and when Michael packed up to head to play rehearsal he found himself moving slower than usual. All of the popular kids would be there. He had made allies, but no friendships. It was going to be a feeding frenzy and Christine and Rich wouldn’t be able to protect him. Michael had to hold his nose and dive in.

And he would be stuck in the same room with Jeremy for the first time in a week. He knew that Jeremy had been preparing for this moment. Michael had been too.

When Michael walked to the theater room it felt like he was locking himself inside a diver’s cage that would lower him into the shark pit. He should have told his parents that he loved them before heading to school today. He would have meant it.

Michael’s hand hovered over the door handle to the room. When he and Christine woke up he’d never see his parents again. His fake parents. Not his real ones.

He tried to imagine it - leaving the theater and taking his first breath of stale city air. Taking the subway home. Unlocking the door to his home, a brick brownstone with a basement that they rented out sometimes, and lying back down on his own couch, waiting for his parents to come home.

Waiting and waiting.

Michael tried to picture his real mother’s face, but all he saw instead was Mrs. Mell kissing him goodbye in the mornings as she snapped her briefcase shut.

Michael dove into the theater room, leaving the noise of the open sea behind him and taking refuge in the roar of water in his ears.

Predictably, there was no Mr. Reyes. Also predictably, Christine was standing on one of the desks shouting theater instructions to the ambivalent crowd, who were all clustered sitting on desks and chatting with each other.

Chloe, who was doing her nails as her script lay open on her lap, unread. Jake, who had taken Christine’s stern rebuff with his remarkable good humor, was fastidiously nodding along to everything she said as he sat on a table near the one she was standing on. Brooke, who had perked up when seeing Michael and blew a sarcastic kiss. Michael mimed catching it and grinding it under his heel, and Brooke rewarded him with an ugly snort that made Chloe look up, annoyed.

For a split second he wondered where Jeremy was, before he recognized the Squid sitting next to a lean teenage boy, leaning back and propping himself up on his hands as he and the Squid sat at their own table, distant from the others and facing the door as Michael walked in.

It was Jeremy, but Michael hadn’t recognized him.

The Squid was sitting next to him, Jeremy mimicking its posture, and their knees were knocking together. Creep.

The Squid elbowed him and Jeremy’s head snapped up, meeting Michael’s wide eyed gaze. They stared into each other’s eyes, Jeremy’s just a tinge too wide. Michael didn’t know what was showing on his own face. He had been acting the part of Michael Mell for a while now. Whatever it was, Michael hoped it was enough. He hoped that Jeremy bought it.

*Showtime.* The Squid gave him a thumbs-up. How supportive. *You can do this. Just like we practiced.*

Christine practically sagged in relief when she saw Michael. She was tense and rigid, practically facing away from Jeremy and the Squid. She must have been forced to be in the same room with it for an unsettling portion of the week. She was braver than he was.

“Michael!” She eagerly beckoned him over. “You’re just in time for our read throughs of the script. Everyone, Michael is going to be helping me direct today in place of Mr. Reyes? Sounds good! Great! Everyone flip to the first page so we can start.”’

“Why are you making us do work?” Chloe complained. “My nails aren’t dry.”

“This is play rehearsal,” Christine said flatly, eyes twitching. Michael couldn’t hide his snicker. She had been putting up with this all week. “We rehearse. Respect this sacred covenant.”

Jake raised his hand. “Can we take a Hot Pocket break?”

Rich was pretending to be asleep in the back.

_Come on, Chloe. You’re always saying how you’re too good to half-ass something._

“Come on, Chloe,” Jeremy said, light and teasing. His voice was deeper. Jesus Christ. “You’re always saying how you’re too good to half-ass something.”

The on point acting made Chloe look away and faintly blush. “Yeah, but that’s just something I care about. Mr. Sato said that I need to join an extracurricular to ‘sublimate my sadistic tendencies’.” She sniffed. “Whatever that means.”

_Can’t disappoint Christine._

“Aww.” Jeremy smiled at Christine, who looked away and pretended to be honored that he was looking at her. “Come on, let’s do it for Christine.”

“I would die for Christine,” Brooke admitted. She turned in her chair and grinned at Michael. “What about you, best friend of our lord and princess? Are you in this to win this?”

“I’m ready to go all the way,” Michael said faintly.

_Now._

“Oh. Hey, Michael.” Jeremy grinned rakishly at him. That was the only word to describe it. Michael didn’t even know what rakish meant. It was shiny and blinding and it would have made
Michael’s heart melt if it wasn’t so disgustingly calculated. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Yeah,” Michael snarked, put out. “Because I’m the invisible one.”

Jeremy hid a miniscule wince. The Squid whistled. Swing and a miss.

“Let’s just get on with the rehearsal,” Christine jumped in. She smiled nervously at everyone. “Sound...good?”

The popular kids, the sweaty teenage boy who was collecting trauma every second like he was mining bitcoin, the robot, the debatably aware of the nature of his reality muscle headed jock, and the expatriate asshole from the real world stared at her blankly.

Christine gave the crowd a shaky thumbs up.

Play rehearsal was unbearably awkward. Chloe refused to emotionally commit because she was bad at it while Brooke had purposefully grossly misunderstood her character and was now delivering all of her lines in a baritone and stressing each conjunction. Jake was trying his terrible, horrible best, and in general they all sounded like a group of toddlers playing on Fisher Price instruments. If Christine had actually been Christine she would have burst out into tears, but as it was she was just growing steadily more frustrated as she distracted the crowd for all it was worth to give Jeremy and Michael space to talk.

Which would have been great, if Jeremy was talking to Michael.

The Squid sat next to him as he read out his lines, making a show of looking fastidiously over his shoulder but looking up every so often to grin sharkishly at Michael. Jeremy looked up and exchanged casual, distracted conversation with everyone else except for Michael, and he was left feeling a little put down as he awkwardly hovered near Christine’s table. He could feel Brooke watching them like a hawk.

Christine finally broke them up to take a much needed Hot Pocket break, letting the boys and girls drift into their assigned pairs as Jeremy leaned into the Squid’s ear and whispered to it. They were both giggling. Like teenage girls at a sleepover.

Nobody in the play had an attention span of longer than five minutes, so even though Christine looked physically pained to give them the break she settled for squatting down next to Michael from where he was leaning on the desk and fixing him in an intent expression. “You know he’s doing this on purpose, right?”

It was stupid, but Michael had been expecting wining and dining, not forgetting and regretting. He couldn’t help but cross his arms in a huff. “Ignoring me? This is just like the actual play. He’s not even going to look at me.”

“No, dummy.” She rapped her knuckles on the crown of his head, making him wince. “He’s playing hard to get. He’s, like, leaving you wanting more. I looked at a lot of red piller website in preparation for this role.” That was encouraging. “Get super ready for him to make you feel bad about yourself.”

This wasn’t really what Michael had signed up for.

She must have read the expression on his face, because Christine straightened up and towered over the unsuspecting children from where she was standing on the desk. She pointed an imperious finger at Jeremy, who looked up attentively.
“Jeremy, you and Michael go hang out inside the small, dark costume room and fetch us the bloody rags of fairy costumes!”

But he just smiled amicably, and the Squid gently pushed him on the back so he would hop off the table and smile at Michael. Winningly. Smile winningly. Like he was some kind of stranger.

Like he knew that Michael was a stranger, and that he knew that he was impressed by shiny, cool, popular people.

It occurred to Michael, like a bucket of cold water poured over his head in the September afternoon, that if Michael had known this Jeremy in real life he would have looked up to him, wanted to be him. He wouldn’t have known at all.

“Sure.” He snapped his fingers at Michael. “Come on.”

Michael shot Christine a panicked and accusatory look but she just desperately shrugged and made little ‘Go Get ‘Em, Tiger!’ hand motions.

It was a hard fight not to flip her off as he followed Jeremy into the small room off of the main theater room, but he couldn’t sticking out his tongue at Brooke as she giggled and mouthed ‘Get some!’.

Either she had given up on the guy of her dreams remarkably quickly or she thought that the yaoi was hot. Either way Michael was very, very uninterested in the answer.

The small room off the main theater room was where they kept the costumes and a lot of props and stuff. Michael was unsurprised to find it jammed full of legitimate props and costuming, in lavish diversity and resplendence that was missing from a lot of the other generic sets. The same sets that were becoming a little less generic each day. Maybe Michael was just getting used to it.

When he followed Jeremy and the Squid in he let Jeremy flip the light on as Michael moseyed around the props. Actually, a lot of these props held an uncanny resemblance to the bric-a-brac around the school.

A large piece of paper was sticking out of one box and Michael slowly drew it out. It was the play rehearsal sign up sheet. Fantastic. If he poked underneath that he could find Jeremy’s ‘BOYF’ backpack. Spectacular.

“Remember this?” Jeremy smiled warmly at him, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. His biceps were hypnotising. Since when did he have biceps? “That was the start of all of this, huh?”

“Very literally,” Michael said truthfully. The Squid was poking through some of the weirder outfits on the other side of the room. Was that a glittery kimono? Freaking weird. “Look, Jeremy, I…”

“Michael, this has been the best week of my life.” Smile, smile, smile. The Squip hummed from behind him, poking through blue cardigans. “Everything about me is so...alive!”

“Uh.” Michael had a lot of things to say about all of this, but he really couldn’t stop looking at Jeremy’s perfect hair. “That’s...nice?”

“I’m not ugly or unsure. I’m not a loser anymore!” Jeremy stepped forward, and Michael was too dazzled to step back. “You see those people out there? Those shallow assholes who made my life a living hell for three years? They adore me. They’re falling over their feet to do anything I want.” Jeremy grinned, brighter and brighter. “I’ve finally gotten everything that I deserve.”
Michael snapped back to reality, away from Jeremy’s everything. He straightened, meeting
Jeremy’s eyes. They were blank and a little unfocused. “Are you serious? You don’t deserve
anything. That’s not how life works. We don’t get everything we want handed to us on a silver
platter!”

“Don’t get me wrong.” Jeremy rolled up the play rehearsal sign up sheet and stashed it in a box,
ready to be forgotten. “I’ve been working hard for this popularity, you know. It’s not all fun and
games.”

“Yeah,” Michael said, “I know.”

“I’m really committed. I’m super committed.” Jeremy glanced behind him to look at the Squid.
“I’ve sacrificed a lot for what I’m building here and I’m not going to stop until I have what I want.”
He turned up a soft smile again, gentle eyes. It was ruined by how glazed over they were.
“Michael, I want you.”

Michael’s brain exploded.

“Guh.”

Jeremy laughed self-consciously. “We need to hang out again, now that we can all hang out with
each other. I’m cool enough to talk to Christine now, and even Rich doesn’t hate me. We can be
together. You, me, the popular kids.”

A-hem.

When Jeremy spoke again it was clearly an aside. “And The SQUIP.” He turned back to Michael.
“Anyway, I wanna g - g-”

Jeremy shut his mouth with a click, eyes wide.

“You want to go…?”

Great. I knew it.

It threw up its hands, gesticulating with the top hat it was trying on. We spent
hours practicing that and you just had to fuck it up.

Jeremy glanced backwards in a quick aside. “I - I - I’m -”

It pulled a mocking face. Y - y- you’re a loser. I’m sorry, but I literally want to kill myself. Please
stick your head in a microwave and end my torment. A stutter. It shook its head. Shove over, let me
take the wheel.

“B - b - but you said -”

Michael physically had to hold back a wince as the Squid shot a withering glare at Jeremy, who
turned away and was forced to hold back his own wince. Neither of them wanted to be stuck in this
claustrophobic little room right now.

You have to appreciate the work I’m doing here, Michael.

When Jeremy swallowed and anxiously settled the cool look on his face again it was far more
fragile than it used to be. “You really have to appreciate the work I’m doing here, Michael.”

Michael wasn’t feeling much better. The Squid put the top hat on a mannequin and stalked up
behind Jeremy, standing far too close for comfort and leering at Michael.
“You should try to catch up. Lose a few pounds.”

Jeremy’s hand was shaking, miniscule tremors until Michael saw the hand forcibly still. “You should - you should try to catch up. Lose a few pounds.”

Ouch. Michael folded his arms, glowering back at the Squid. “I got better things to do than work out all day, thanks. Why don’t we just go back to my place and play some video games? You know, like we’ve been doing our entire lives?”

“I’m too busy for video games. I’m swole. Check out my pecs.”

“I’m too -” Jeremy cut himself off, tugging himself away from the Squid. It grabbed his forearm and Jeremy stopped trying to move away. “I’m not saying that.”

Please, he loves your pecs. You’re wearing a muscle shirt next time.

Jeremy flushed, and he let the Squid cross its arms against Jeremy’s shoulders and pull him in. I’m busy with Brooke. I think she’s really going for me. I think she really wants to give it up.

“That’s not even -” Jeremy snapped out of the aside, grinning nervously at Michael. Maybe he would have been more flippant if the Squid wasn’t clutching him. Again. “I’d love to hang out with you,” he said hurriedly. “Because you’re my best friend.”

Yes! Michael nodded firmly. “Because we’re best friends.”

“I just think that maybe we could be more -” Physical? “- adventurous!”

Yikes. Michael’s skin was beginning to crawl, and he looked away from the two figures that were melting into one. “I mean, I guess we could try out a convention. I think Anime NYC is selling pre-order tickets.”

Jeremy wasn’t so far gone that he didn’t perk up. “Really? We should totally -” The Squid squeezed. “- get outside more often. Really. You’re, uh, looking kind of pasty.”

“You’re so sweet.” This had been a bad idea. Michael backed up, trying hard to not make it seem like a retreat and failing. How were they supposed to get together like this? Creepy Jeremy was a total swipe left. “Look, this is fun and all, but play rehearsal might be starting soon.”

Was he supposed to convince him? Like, sway him away from the side of evil? Shit, how was he supposed to do that?

Michael Mell could.

Get him to stay. The Squid rested its chin on Jeremy’s shoulder. I want to see more of you -

“I bought a new video game!”

Both Jeremy and the Squid blinked at Michael, surprised. He flushed, clenching his hands. Channel the nerd! “Actually, it’s not even really a video game, I just went to this tabletop role playing game store and everyone in there was like, a mega nerd, even if they were super nice? They told me about something called Pathfinders - but it wasn’t as if I didn’t already know what Pathfinders was! Hah!” Michael laughed uncomfortably. “Pathfinders.”

Jeremy and the Squid looked at each other. “Weren’t we talking about setting up a Pathfinders game?” Jeremy asked. “But, like, we couldn’t find enough people?”
“Now we can!” Michael waved his arms around in faux-Michael Mell excitement. “Because dude, it is so totally gnarly. Let’s get stoned in my basement and play Pathfinders!” Appeal to cool, appeal to cool - “With Christine and Rich!”

Really? The Squid said, unimpressed. That’s the best you can do?

But Jeremy, gullible idiot that he was, was clearly intrigued. “Man, Christine would be so great at table tops. You know, I think Rich would work great a kind of wildcard, chaotic element -”

God, he had no idea. Michael laughed, high and tinny. “Great! I’d love to spend a lot of time with you in a close, personal setting. Yay! Buddies!”

Unbelievably, Jeremy actually perked up. “Yeah! That’d be -”

Get the extras out of there. Jeremy course corrected instantly. “You know, maybe we could do dinner instead -”

“We can have take-out while we play video games!”

“We can have take out while we actually do something that’s not embarrassing!”

“What’s wrong with being embarrassing!”

“It’s just not cool!” Jeremy cried, exasperated. “You don’t fucking get it, Michael! If you don’t play by its rules you don’t fucking play at all! Get with the program or get out!”

They stood in silence, guilty and awkward.

The glorified closet, stuffed full of corners from their high school and their lives, pressed in around Michael as a harsh reminder of their reality. Tubs of costumes that Michael could have sworn he’d seen on a few passing students. An entire rack full of Jenna Rolan’s outfit. It smelled like plastic and taffeta, and the dim light didn’t hide nearly as much as Michael would have liked.

God, this was stupid. They were both trying to convince each other to go out with them, but they were getting into spitting arguments over how they were doing it because it was just so important that Jeremy play by its rules, that every single little thing in this stupid play went along with its rules.

The Squid fixed Michael’s gaze in its marble eyes, shallow and unearthly, and it slipped its arms from where they were crossing Jeremy’s shoulders down to his waist -

“Fine!” Michael shouted. “What’s cool enough for you?”

The Squid broke free, holding both of its hands up and smirking, and Michael’s gut churned with how much he hated that smarmy, creepy, horrible CPU. But Jeremy just looked relieved, looking back at the Squid in triumph, and Michael knew that yet again it had gotten what it wanted.

“Let’s go shopping,” Jeremy said, “get you in some better clothes.”

I like your jacket, the Squid snarked, but your style’s for shit.

“I like your jacket, but your style’s for shit.”

“Okay,” Michael said, exhausted, “okay.”

“We could go to Forever 21!” Good. “Forever 21 is so in.” Jeremy grinned bashfully at Michael, as
if he was somehow buying what he was selling. “I love it. And I would love to hang out with you!”

“In a socially approved setting.”

“I love being approved to hang out with you!” Jeremy said, not missing a beat. The Squid pointed to a random point of shelf and Jeremy swept the costuming into his arms, keeping up his signature dorky excited chatter. “Really, so much exciting shit’s been happening. Chloe is totally looking at me now, and she just loves all of my outfits. My house is even clean! Michael, we cleaned my house! It’s only a matter of time before my dad actually puts pants on.”

He held the door open for Michael as they left the room, and Michael saw him carefully reign in his posture and regal bearing. But nothing could stop his happy ranting.

“I had no idea we owned so many spoons. I mean, a lot of them are weird novelty spoons, but he - I really think it’s the thought that counts. Right?”

“Right.” Michael waved at Chistine, who seemed as if she had given up on actually conducting a play rehearsal and letting the popular kids play ninja in the corner. Brooke was winning and Chloe was growing increasingly frustrated. If he guessed right then Chloe would make a miraculous turnaround as Brooke inexplicably fell short, letting her coming in first yet again, and the proper order of the universe would continue whirling on according to a script that two teenagers and a debatable third couldn’t bother to read if their life depended on it.

Which it may. They weren’t sure yet.

“You know, Dad thinks I’ve been acting kind of weird, but that can only be a good thing.” Jeremy paused a bit, lowering his voice so the other kids on the other side of the room couldn’t hear them. Despite everything Michael couldn’t help but smile. Here was the Jeremy he knew and had grown to tolerate.

What was with that ridiculous macho suave shit earlier? Sure, it was incredibly hot, but what was the point -

Well, hotness was probably its own reward.

Adorably, Jeremy got even more flustered as the afternoon went on. He dropped the costumes into Christine’s arms and went back to prattling onto Michael about whatever.

He only stopped when Brooke jogged back over towards them as Chloe crowed her Ninja victory. She grinned at the two of them from where they sat on top of one of the tables, Jeremy with his legs crossed and deep into a story and Michael swinging his legs off to the side as he tried to will away the knowledge that the Squid was writing its supercomputer calculations on the whiteboard, covering it in blocky text of fake-looking physics equations. There was some trigonometry and haikus in there too.

The title of the performance art was written in precise Comic Sans at the top of the whiteboard: ‘C:\Users\Jeremy Heere> ‘how not to be terrible.exe’

At the very bottom it wrote, ‘404 Non-Terribleness Not Found’.

Classy.

Jeremy had seen it too, judging from the way he flushed red but made an effort to laugh when the Squid looked back, grinning at them. Michael had to fight not to roll his eyes. Let him guess: all of its jokes were funny and had to laughed at, even when they were at your expense.
Even when they were all at your expense.

Brooke followed where they were looking, adjusting her gigantic sweater as she smacked on gum. Jeremy stiffened at the prospect of a girl looking at him, but he quickly relaxed and shot her an easy grin.

“Yo, Brooke. Having fun?”

“This building is giving me hives.” She was still glancing at the whiteboard, perfectly blank to her. “Is something going on?”

“How much does all that gum even cost you?” Michael asked suddenly, clumsily diverting her attention. “Like, don’t your teeth get tired?”

She shot him an unimpressed glance, smacking it extra loud to annoy him. “It’s nicotine gum. I’m trying to quit smoking.”

That wasn’t in the play. Jeremy forced himself to nod along supportively to her attempt at bettering herself through cases of gum as Michael exercised his freedom not to care by faking astonishment. “So that’s why you’re always chewing something! I thought that you just had the craziest oral fixation of all time.”

“Pity she sucks at head!” Chloe called from across the room. Brooke casually grabbed Christine’s plush turtle lunch box and, winding up in a perfect softball pitch, lobbed it at Chloe’s head. She was rewarded with a squeal. “Brooke!”

“Whoops,” she said plainly. She winked at Jeremy, who flushed. “Chloe’s just jealous that I’m amazing at sex. Mark that down. Amazing.”

“Not with that gross cigarette breath.”

She just shrugged. “Why do you think I quit?”

Jeremy forced a smile onto his face. “That’s really great, Brooke. I was just telling Michael how we were thinking about going to Forever 21 to go shopping.”

“Gay.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said, “that’s kind of the idea.”

Dawning realization rose on Brooke’s face. The penny had dropped. The idea had taken root and began to bloom. Brooke now understood -

Wait, no, she had been fighting Michael for Jeremy’s affections from day one, dammit. Who was that girl. What did she know. What has she seen.

“I don’t know about you, Mell,” Brooke teased, snapping her gum, “but I only go for guys who go straight for Spencer’s.”

Michael groaned. “That disgusting stoner teenage boy shop? The BDSM wall in the back freaked me out as a kid.”


Oh, no. Michael had dedication to the role but not that much. He stuck out his tongue. “Spare me the Cookie Monster snapback. Seriously.”
But the Squid finally turned around, its horrible attention on them, and Michael began to have the sneaking suspicion that he said something wrong.

“Yeah, totally.” Jeremy looked down at his feet, but quickly caught himself and fought to keep his casual posture. “Michael? What about discontinued soda?”

Talk about arbitrary. Michael Mell had some weird interests. Michael rolled his eyes, and despite his complete dedication to the role he couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Living for that Crystal Pepsi. It’s so different from regular Pepsi.”

“It’s clear,” Brooke supplied. “And discontinued.”

“Yay.” The Squid was still staring at them, and Michael would have felt uncomfortable if he had ever felt comfortable in the first place. “Anyway, Jer, what were you saying about mashed potatoes?” That was what he was talking about, right? Michael had kind of been zoning out.

What do you like in a guy?

Fuck, if that wasn’t a loaded question. Michael felt abruptly as if he was in middle school, talking to a girl with her other friend on the line.

Jeremy turned beet red but he asked the question anyway, a true testament to the Squid’s control. “So, uh, what - uh -” Confidence. Speak as if you don’t care about your own death. “What do you guys like in a guy?” He did his best to turn it into a joke, addressing the both of them with as ironic an expression as he could manage. It just ended up looking like the Dreamworks face, but it could be worse.

Ludicrously, Michael couldn’t help but giggle with Brooke. She made a show of twirling her hair around a finger and smacking her gum, and Michael pressed a hand to his cheek and sighed.

“He has to work out,” Michael confessed truthfully. “Like, a ton.”

Brooke nodded. “I’m talking like Fireman Calendar here.”

Mmm. Firemen “Abs for days.”

“At least a nine pack.”

Michael pointed at her and nodded fastidiously.

Hilariously, Jeremy looked freaked out. He glanced behind him, addressing a question to a very amused Squid. “I can’t get a nine pack! You’re good, but not that good!”

Relax, it soothed, you’ll get there. Quick, give another command prompt.

“What else?” Jeremy asked, despite clearly being terrified of the answer.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, what with the whole evil robot thing, Michael couldn’t help but laugh. Poor guy looked so freaked out. It was the classic look of a guy reading a Cosmo magazine and worrying about his dick size. Be what the girls want, Jeremy!

Or the boy. The boy being him. Michael felt a blush rise to his cheeks too. Jeremy wanted to know how to impress him.

“He has to be, like, sensitive.” Brooke sighed. “If he can’t read my mind I don’t even waste my time.”
“Maybe an athlete,” Michael contemplatively. “I’ve never dated outside of the track team.”

“You haven’t dated at all,” Jeremy said numbly. Whoops.

From the other side of the room Christine was frantically shepherding the rest of the popular kids into giving Jeremy and Michael room to bond. With Brooke egging them on. Michael didn’t know if he should thank her or curse her.

Rich, who had been supremely unhelpful this entire time, was doing a one handed handstand in the corner. He used the other hand to flip the pages of a very thick book he appeared to be reading. Great. You have fun with that, Rich.

“He needs a good fashion sense,” Brooke continued, ticking points off her fingers. “He needs to care about me deeply as a person, but he should do that without really knowing me, you dig?”

“I like guys who’re confident.” Michael smiled at Jeremy, trying to egg him on. “Confident and really sure of themselves. But they’re laid back too, you know?”

“If you aren’t a chill guy,” Brooke said, “why are you even trying?”

Yeah, the Squid mocked, Why do you even try?

There it went again. Always mocking and twisting words and trying to warp Jeremy’s reality to the worst possible outcome. Michael reached out a hand and grabbed his, squeezing it as Jeremy flushed and Brooke wolf-whistled.

“But I like sweet guys too.” Jeremy was growing redder and redder. “And guys who can go on for miles about something they like. Guys who have strong opinions about everything.”

Yikes. The Squid walked closer, shooting Jeremy a withering look as he fought not to hunch in his seat.

No wonder he likes Christine more than you.

That wasn’t what he was trying to say at all. Jeremy pulled away from him, glancing down at his seat and unfolding his legs so they swung off the table. “Yeah. Uh, me too.”

“And I like guys who are really good at video games,” Michael rushed in. “Like, uh…” Quick, what was a video game. Michael totally knew video games. “Halo!”

The Squid inspected its fingernails, moving to lean against Brooke with its elbows on her shoulders. Totally oblivious, Brooke was growing steadily more amused the more pointed the conversation got. I hear he’s been playing Halo with Rich a lot lately.

God, it wasn’t even subtle. “Blue’s my favorite color!”

The Squid just pointed at Brooke, who was decked out in her usual giant fuzzy yellow sweater and blue lacy shirt. Oh, come on!

But Jeremy was looking more and more miserable, and it felt like Michael was constantly raging against the tides trying to somehow play along with the Squid’s weirdo rules of trying to convince Jeremy he only liked popular kids - coming from the same guy who refurbished old pinball machines in his basement - and fighting against the persistent efforts of the Squid to be as horrible as possible.

Michael hated cowardly fights like this. Give him a boxing glove and a clean shot, not a chess game with pawns and double talk. Jeremy was a real fake person, not a pawn. He didn’t deserve to be pushed around like this. Michael didn’t deserve to have his words twisted like this.
But at this point it wasn’t even trying. It pushed off Brooke to ruffle Jeremy’s hair, patting it supportively. *Cheer up, sport. I’m sure he doesn’t hate all of you. If you ask him if he’s too cool for video games now he will definitely say yes. Then you’d have that in common.*

That was too much for Jeremy. He glanced at the Squid in an aside, shocked. “But it’s Michael! He’s obsessed with video games! He bought a copy of Chex Quest off Craigslist - you know what that says about a person?”

*It says that you have a tendency for shady drug deals in common. Ask.* It looked straight at Michael, making his skin crawl. *I know what he’ll say.*

Did Michael have a choice?

Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut, gating his courage, before he opened them to smile wealy at Michael. “You aren’t too cool for video games now, are you?”

Well, he had always been too cool for video games, but -

“Dude, do you even have to ask?” Michael buried his hands in his jacket, mouth dry. “Of course -”

*I’m too busy for video games.*

It was staring straight at Michael, shallow marble eyes intent on him.

“Maybe we could hang out the tabletop place,” Michael hinted. “Or at a concert?”

“Oh.” Jeremy’s finger twitching. “That sounds like fun, actually. I mean, concerts used to freak me out,” he glanced at an oblivious Brooke, “but I took...anti anxiety medication and I think it’d be fun now?” He paused, the little gears in his cute brain grinding. “But they have to be hipster bands and totally obscure.” He brightened, having attained a coolness thought all by himself. “We can buy band t-shirts!”

*Move.* The Squid stood up and pushed Michael off of the table, settling in besides Jeremy as Michael was forced to stand next to Brooke, arms crossed and scowling. Brooke barely noticed. Jeremy barely noticed either. *Moron. Michael only likes electronica. Why would you go to a hipster concert?*

“But Michael likes low key stuff,” Jeremy protested. The Squid smoothly moved closer to him until their elbows were touching. It shot a significant look at Michael, sending ants marching down his spine. It wanted him to agree with it. “Where he can just get high in the corner.”

It was harmless. It was along with their agreement - a cool Jeremy for the the Squid, a date for Michael. But it was telling Michael what to say, and that was one of the things Michael hated most in the world. Probably because his parents never told him what to do growing up.

Michael stuffed his hands in his pockets, clenching his fist. “I’ve been into electronica lately,” Michael admitted. “And I read this article online that says that cannabis, uh, kills people. Sometimes. So I’m trying to quit the weed.” The jacket was heavy on his back. “Trying.”


*I don’t need an ask blog to see that.* The Squid met Michael’s eyes. *Ask him about his leather jacket. Rich gave it to him.*
That was way too disgusting. Michael rolled his eyes as Jeremy hesitantly asked him the question.

“Ew. I found it at the clearance.”

*He doesn’t want to admit Rich gave it to him.*

But Michael just spoke louder, trying to drown it out, knowing that he couldn’t. “It was just his ratty piece of crap from Goodwill, I don’t know why I even bought it.”

*Dickweed, sweetie? Close your M drive.* Jeremy showed no signs of hearing it, preoccupied in being very occupied not to play with his fingers. Brooke’s cunning look didn’t help him either. *Return my results for the search bar and we’ll all be very happy.*

He hoped Jeremy couldn’t hear him, even if it was thoroughly weird how the Squid can just turn on and off Jeremy’s consciousness like a light switch. “I’m helping you, stop fucking micromanaging me. I’m making him cool, not making him paranoid.”

*I’m a PDA, of course I micromanage.* Michael was just glad that he was spared a microchip joke. *Profoundly Disappointed Amazing CPU. And you’re the one that’s disappointing me* It slung an arm around Jeremy’s shoulders, nothing but friendliness. It playfully ground a knuckle into Jeremy’s shoulder. Jeremy picked up on it, stiffening before relaxing and continuing a conversation with Brooke about the ideal amount of stubble a man should have. *Just say what I’m telling you to. It’s not hard. Even Jeremy can do it.*

“I’m not a dancing monkey, Squid. At this point you’re just standing in front of a mirror having a conversation with yourself.” It looked slightly affronted at the ‘Squid’ moniker, but at this point Michael couldn’t call it anything else if he tried. “We don’t have to go crazy on hammering Jeremy into the perfect human being like a fucking katana or something. You do remember I’m not actually attracted to complete douches, right?”

*This is about more than you, dickweed. This is about the parts we play.* The Squid reached upwards and started playing with Jeremy’s hair. Jeremy squirmed, uncomfortable but trying to hide it. *Shush. You’re okay. Brooke’s very impressed by you.* It glanced back at Michael. *Jeremy as cool as possible. You as unattainable as possible. A strong motivation works wonders for a story. All you have to do is say your lines.*

Creep. “I’m not being cruel,” Michael said, as firm as he could be while staring into that thing’s eyes. They were empty. “That’s off the table.”

*Wow. I can tell you’ve never seen this play.* The Squid tugged at Jeremy’s hair a little, making him bite his lip. *Cruelty breeds perfection. We all want perfection. Even you. You weren’t lying about your perfect man. Wouldn’t it be so much easier to fall in love with him if he was your Ken doll? I can give you that Jeremy. I can make him into exactly what you want.*

“That’s not that Jeremy I care about.” Michael sucked in a deep breath, trying to stop his chest from rattling. Jeremy was keeping up easy conversation with Brooke. He had leaned into the touch. “The Jeremy that I’m trying to save is a talkative, gullible nerd. I’m not changing my mind. I think…” What did he think? What did Michael want? “I think it’d be easier to be together with the old Jeremy. I don’t know about the new one.”

The Squid’s hands fisted in Jeremy’s hair, pulling him closer until Jeremy’s head was resting against his shoulders. Jeremy sighed, half-closing his eyes, and Michael knew that Brooke wasn’t seeing much of anything.
Jeremy will Ask Jeeves and I’ll help you. Personally. It kept on stroking Jeremy’s hair. You want my help.

“I want to put you on a magnet.”

The Squid hummed. You don’t understand how many cards I have. I could play Cards Against Humanity, even. That many cards.

“You live in Jeremy’s brain,” Michael spat. “You’re less real than usual. What could you even do?”

It raised its eyebrows at him, unimpressed. Did you forget about the cattle prod thing?

Michael stood in embarrassing silence.

It laughed, stroking Jeremy’s hair. You did! Fangirl did tell you, didn’t she?

“She mentioned it,” Michael said evasively. “When she was, uh, talking about how evil you were. Also one of the top ten villains in musical history. And that your actor was secretly a very sweet guy who starred in several other plays by the same producers.”

That girl has her priorities. It shrugged as best it could with Jeremy on its shoulder. He was looking away, blinking sleepily. Would you like a demonstration?

No. No, no -

“B - Girl! Hold Jake down so I can stuff my shirt in his mouth!”

Rich had flipped up from his handstand, calling Brooke over so she could take refuge in the carefully maintained circle of the other popular kids. This had to be her favorite hobby, because Brooke laughed and jogged back over to the other kids. Michael just barely caught a grimace from Rich as he forced himself to turn away from them. He wanted to scream. Rich knew and he wasn’t doing anything. He couldn’t. Did he even care?

“That’s not necessary,” Michael said quickly. “That’s really, really not necessary.”

Is it? That’s the output I’m getting from this program. It was stroking Jeremy’s arm now. Jeremy wriggled again, trying to get out of the grip, but when the Squid squeezed he stopped and screwed his eyes shut. It’s better if you shut your mouth and just comply.

Creep. Creep! Fucking creep!

“I’m going to stop you.” Michael knew it, as surely as he knew that the sky was blue and that Chloe was bitchy and that Rich was a weirdo. He knew it like he knew his own name. “You’re fucking destined to lose this game.”

You can’t lose at chess when you’re the chessboard. Its hand slipped lower - stop! - until it really was curled around Jeremy’s waist this time. It was pressing Jeremy against itself now, complete control, complete power.

It didn’t need the fucking cattle prod. It just needed a crooked grin and the ability to move Jeremy’s body however it wanted.

Maybe the cattle prod was for Jeremy. But this was for Michael.

Jeremy shifted again, as uncomfortable as he dared. “Hey, uh. I’m sorry, but can I go play Ninja
with the others? Please?"

*In a second,* it murmured, distracted. It squeezed Jeremy’s waist and Michael was seeing red, he wanted to kill it, he wanted to reach down Jeremy’s throat and into his brain and fucking smash it - *You don’t mind, do you?*

“No! No, it - feels nice.” Jeremy’s head was still against its shoulder, and he dug his face in so he couldn’t see the Squid’s face and maybe pretend it wasn’t there at all. “Yeah, uh - keep going.”

Great. It turned back to Michael, and he knew that Jeremy couldn’t hear what they were saying anymore. I’m really doing this AOL disc of people a favor. You know that he’s just like you. *Never really hugged that much as a child, was he?*

“My parents worked,” Michael said. He didn’t know why he was defending them, why that was important right now. “I bet - I bet Michael hugged him all the time.”

*He did.* Jeremy’s face was still pressed into its shoulder, breathing shallowly. *But Michael isn’t here right now. If you ever want somebody to touch him again you better play by my rules.*

Like fuck he would repeat this asshole’s lines. Michael made a deal with him on equal grounds, he wasn’t interested in being just another puppet.

Of course, because of course he did, because of course, the Squid started literally fucking sniffing Jeremy’s hair, because it was just going as creepy as possible, because it knew it was getting a rise out of Michael -

It kissed his temple, like Michael’s Mom had done a week ago -

“Fuck you!” Michael hissed. “You’re so fucking dead, you fake-ass robot. I’m calling fucking Chris Hansen on you!”

But he couldn’t. And the Squid just smiled at him as Jeremy screwed his eyes shut, breathing deeply. It began to drop its hand from his waist. *Don’t you think Jake’s pretty cute?*

Recycling plotlines, that piece of shit has to think it’s so clever. Even if it keeps them closer to the story, even if it saves the fabric of the whole damn universe, Michael would never -

It put a hand on Jeremy’s thigh.

Michael saw red, then white, then everything in his heart exploded so quickly and so thoroughly it shone a light on everything he had thought was gone since seventh grade. This was the angriest he had been since Maria died.

“Don’t you think Jake’s pretty cute?”

Jeremy looked up, startled and finally hearing what Michael was saying. He straightened up a little but the Squid didn’t let go. Jeremy looked a little used to it. “Jake? Yeah, I guess.” *What do you like about him?* “What do you like about him?”

A horrible writhing python was screaming in Michael’s stomach, but he smoothed his expression and kept it impassive. That was something the real Michael Mell couldn’t do. Maybe, so long as he kept it up, Jeremy would never know how well Michael could lie now. He would never have to live knowing that his best friend was a liar.

*Tall. Buff. NHS. Debate team. How could I not?*

It said a lot that saying Rich was cute was not number one on the list of creepy things that had happened that day. “Which one do you think is cuter?” Michael asked obediently. “Jake or Rich?”

Jeremy visibly bit down on a stutter, gripping onto the Squid’s hand in a panic. It silently laughed. *Those are the most popular guys in school, Jeremy. What makes you think you have a chance?*

He didn’t. There was nothing he could say or do that would set him apart from the coolest kids in school who were apparently their friends now. Not without the Squid.

Maybe that was why Jeremy didn’t struggle against the grip. He pulled himself in tighter around the arm, almost curling up, and the Squid indulgently began playing with his hair again.

*Shush. It’ll be okay. I’ll help.* It waited for Jeremy to nod before going on.

“Tell him this.”

“I don’t know,” Jeremy repeated. “I think I have one thing that they don’t though.”

*Tease.*

“Oh, yeah?” Michael was going to throw up. He felt the nausea climb in his throat. “What’s that?”

“A ticket to a movie with you,” Jeremy said. He grinned. It sparkled. “How about that?”

*Accept, obviously. Be indifferent.*

“What day? I gotta see if I have anything else going on.” Michael tugged at his hair, jacket heavy on his backet. “I’m busy a lot.”

Jeremy hid his disappointment. He desperately looked up at the Squid, who had finally, finally, taken that stupid hand off his thigh and wrapped it around his waist again, thank god, anything was better than that -

But that wasn’t true. It could be tazing him instead.

When the Squid wanted to impress and intimidate only one person, with the manipulation of another was a bonus -

*Maybe we can all go. “Maybe we can all go.” Good. Better not push your luck. Get yourself in through increments.* It nodded sagely. *We’ll get there, Jeremy. “Let’s go to the outdoor theater. I think they’re putting on a Shakespeare production.”*

“I love plays,” Michael said, dizzy with confusion and fear. “Live and breathe them.”

*Mmm. That Upgrade was worth it, wasn’t it?*

“Yeah,” Jeremy said softly, and even if Jeremy was an open book it was difficult to tell if he was telling the truth or not. “Let’s have a really good time.”

Was it a date? Were they both leaving it ambiguous?

Michael was beginning to understand how this song and dance was going to go. Tease and belittle and string along, until Michael was being pulled along farther and farther out of Jeremy’s grasp, until Jeremy pushed himself to the limit and snagged him.
They would go on that date. They would date. Ultra cool. Jeremy Heere with a boyfriend. Boyfriend’s also cool. Obviously. Then they would fall in love, and have true love’s kiss and their scripts would have a tug of war with Jeremy in the middle.

Would Jeremy try and Squid the school out of love for Michael? Or would he turn away from the Squid out of his love for Michael?

Would he submit or rebel?

“Let go of him.”

Aw. It sneered at him. Jealous?

“Fuck you.” All of he hate Michael felt, all he had to give, he gave it to the Squid. A burning hot coal choked his throat and kept him quiet, even as his heart burned.

Burning hearts weren’t quieted so easily. Not even Michael could douse them.

If you say so. It shrugged and pushed itself off of the desk, not letting go of Jeremy’s hand and helping him down off the table like a princess. Come along, dear. We have shopping to do.

“Wow,” Jeremy said glumly. He was shivering. “Shopping.”

“I’ll see you later?” Michael asked the both of them. He didn’t want to see them later. He didn’t want to take his eyes off them. No matter how much he hated the Squid he never wanted it to leave his sight, because he didn’t know what it was doing to Jeremy. He had to ask Christine.

But Christine would have mentioned this. If this was true to the play, if any of this was right, she would have told him. The script was being rewritten as Jeremy’s expense and it was all Michael’s fault.

Jeremy shot him a relieved look and a hesitant smile, but the Squid tugged him along without looking back. “I’ll be - I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Stutter.

Jeremy flinched.

That was the last Michael saw of him. He couldn’t move, standing stock still in silence as the duo left and play rehearsal wound down. The popular kids packed up and moved, laughing as they slung coats over their shoulders and gathered up backpacks, letting Christine shuffle them out the door and shoot worried looks at Michael. She hadn’t noticed the disgusting scene, and Michael suspected that her obliviousness had been enforced.

Eventually only Michael, Christine, and Rich were left. Michael hadn’t moved, still shaking, and Christine eventually softly guided him to a seat. Rich stood at the periphery, arms crossed and face blank like a statue.

“What did they say?” Christine asked anxiously. “You look so wigged out, Michael.”

Yeah, well, he felt wigged out. Michael’s heart was still jumping and he took several steadying breaths, the jacket suffocating and warm on his back. He wasn’t going to take it off. He needed the reminder of the deal he’d made.

“You mentioned the fact that it tazed him,” Michael said weakly, “right?”
Christine nodded uncomfortably as Rich looked away. “Um. Yeah. It’s kind of nasty. I guess I never really thought of it as…” she swallowed. “Happening to a real person. I saw it taze him once and I had to go to the bathroom and throw up afterwards. That never happened when I was listening to the play.”

A lot of things never happened when they had been standing in the spotlight, all eyes on them and pancake makeup flaking on their faces. This shit was offstage, behind the heavy velvet curtain and where eyes that cared could never see.

“How about you, Rich?” Michael asked wetly. “How does it feel to be electrocuted?”

Rich was silent, looking away.

“Yeah,” Michael said, “that’s what I thought.”

They stood in silence together, three teenagers with nothing to say and too much to feel, until the scene ended.

This time he wasn’t graced with falling forward into darkness, with hearing the spotlight click out. He had to drive Christine home in silence, he had to wave goodbye to Rich and pretend not to see how white his face was. He had to drive back to his home, opening the door with his key that had an eight bit Mario keychain on it, change into his pyjamas and fall into bed.

It was only six, blessed with an actual time, but Michael didn’t want to be anywhere else besides in bed. He barely wanted to be anywhere at all.

He didn’t even want to be back in his real home. He didn’t want to face his parents, face his friends and his teachers and his team. He couldn’t abandon Jeremy.

He had never been so wrapped up in someone else before. Not for a long time, anyway.

Michael stared at the mishmash of stars stuck to the ceiling, thinking of a hand on a thigh, waiting to go to sleep so that he wouldn’t have to think of it anymore.

But when he dreamed it wasn’t of Jeremy, of the Squid or even of Christine and Rich.

It was of Maria, sitting at the kid’s table of the family reunion, and when she turned around to pass him the rice the Squid was behind her and Michael yelled but she couldn’t hear him, could never have heard him, and when he reached forward to touch her his hands passed right through, as if he was the ghost and she was real instead of the other way around.

Chapter End Notes

Image credit to Nymm_at_night. Catch the fanfic cameo.
Apocalypse of the Damned! Level Nine!

Three days later, the Thursday before Michael was scheduled for his date/not-date/game of chess/beating off gropey evil robots with a stick on Saturday, he was stuck in his basement sulking and playing video games.

He hadn't been spending the entire three days sulking. He had gotten a lot done. Brooke was now a genuine...person, Christine had almost completed her infiltration, and Rich was unexpectedly useful as the Token Evil Teammate. When he was around it was hard to forget which side Michael had unintentionally allied himself with, but he had unintentionally dropped some useful information too. Guy was a leaky faucet of Squid secrets, and he was pretty good at keeping out bullies. Through being a bully. Or helping Michael and Christine infiltrate the bullies. Because he was a bully.

Still - ugh, fucking zombies!

Michael had been stuck at the fourth level for ages before he actually learned the controls. But level nine was really something special, something about a cafegymalockatorium that was just chock full of zombies. It hearkened back to teenage dodgeball trauma, while still thrusting you into an unfamiliar zombieland. Poetry.

Dammit - blood!

Michael leaned forward subconsciously, dipping to the left when a zombie made for his right. It was all about the motions, it really drew you into the experience. So long as you moved with the game it was like you were really in the game, and you could truly immerse yourself in the gorey experience -

Claws!

Just one last checkpoint and he’d be home free to tackle the Girl’s Locker Room -

“Michael! Women are here, apparently!”

Pause.

Michael groaned, saving his game and turning it off. He had completely forgotten. So much for the rest of that afternoon.

“I have friends, Mom!” He called, pushing himself up off the bean bag. He forced himself not to look at the other one pushed up against the wall. Someday. Someday soon. “Stop embarrassing me!”

When he ran up the stairs he found his mother snickering, holding the front door open for a very unimpressed Christine and Brooke. Christine was decked out in an imitation of Christine’s eclectic style. She had never gotten it quite right, since Christine was one of those people who had five hundred different pieces of clothing that were hideous by themselves but beautiful together, but she even looked pretty nice today with a small bedazzled jean jacket and a sundress with the words ‘PHENOMENAL WOMAN’ against the front. Brooke, who had a sweater addiction just as bad as her gum one, was in her usual. She had once shown him one of her old sweaters from freshman year, where one of the sleeves was almost completely unwound from being picked apart in an old
nervous habit. The gum, apparently, was an improvement.

Christine arched an eyebrow at him. “You didn’t forget, did you?”

“No?” Michael looked down self-consciously at his outfit. He was wearing a giant sweater with the word AWESOMESAUCE inscribed across the front in cheery, stoner-like letters. And sweatpants. “Ah. I may have.”

Brooke, mildly offended, pushed past him into his house, surveying it with an imperious gaze that could only suit the second most popular girl in school. Michael felt abruptly self conscious that the Vice President of Popular was infiltrating the dumping ground for his mother’s papers, his father’s laptops, and Michael’s video games, but then he remembered that it was Brooke and that she would have disapproved of him anyway.

“Your home is lovely and your mother is a sophisticated woman,” Brooke said finally. She offered her hand to Michael’s mom, who was dazzled. “I’m sorry you’ve been cursed with your son. I’m Brooke Lohst. Future law student. Rutger’s.”

“Someone needs a reference for law school.” But Michael’s mom shook her hand anyway, and Christine’s for good measure. “Michael, when did you meet real life women?”

“They aren’t aliens, Mom,” Michael said plainly. “I got outside these days. You should try it.”

“It gives me hives.” His mother looked him up and down critically. “You’re free to dress however you like and I’ll always support you - but are you really wearing that out?”

Before Michael could answer Brooke cut in. “He’s not. Michael, if you aren’t back in here in ten minutes I’m drinking all of your sparkling water.”

Michael ran off.

By the time that Michael had gotten dressed, dragged Christine away from investigating his silverware, disentangled Brooke from interviewing his mother on how to get into law school, and actually got them on the road to the mall, he was already missing Zombipelocalypse.

“Look, the port on the Switch just wasn’t as good,” Michael complained. Christine was in the passenger’s seat, shooting him worried glances, and Brooke was loudly complaining about PT Cruiser hives in the back seat. “Like? Go NES or go home.”

“Would you describe your feelings for zombipelocalypse as...strong?” Christine withdrew a notebook from her jacket pocket, complete with a tiny pencil. “On a scale of one to ten.”

Weird. “Uh, six? I’m just on a kick right now.,”

Christine hummed, making the note in her notebook. “On a scale of one to ten, how good was the Street Fighter movie?”

“Ten,” Michael said instantly. He pulled into the mall parking garage, going through the familiar motions. “Criminally underrated.”

“Uh-huh. Interesting.” Christine flipped to another sheet in her notebook, this time already with writing on it. “Can you recite that one Castlevania speech to me? The Dracula one.”

Could he talk? “ ‘Die, monster! You don’t belong in this world!’ Then Dracula goes, It is not my by my hand I was once again given flesh. I was called here -”
“Okay, I get it.” Christine flipped her notebook shut, frowning at him as Brooke eagerly escaped the PT Cruiser and redid her makeup in her reflection in the glass. “Michael? Are you feeling okay?”

“As good as I can be, considering all this shit.” Michael dug around in his giant pockets, checking for his Legend of Zelda chain wallet and phone. The phone’s lock screen and home screen were both selfies of him and Jeremy. Which - gay, but it was probably gayer how Michael constantly switched between taking them down because they were too painful or keeping them up as a reminder of his holy mission. “And, like, considering the fact that we’re hanging out with Brooke now. She’s a little intense.”

Christine leaned forward in her seat, grabbing Michael by his chubby little cheeks. She met him in a determined expression, like Link doing his spin attack. “Michael. Think about the conversation we just had.”

Michael thought about the conversation that they just had.

He cursed, slapping the grimy wheel. He regretted it immediately, cursing again and shaking out his hand, cursing his weak little video gaming limbs. Lifting game manuals all day should totally count as exercise -

Fuck! He was doing it again!

“I don’t even know what the fuck Castlevania is!” Michael screeched. Christine winced and covered her ears. “Shit! Shit! I’ve been playing retro video games all day!” He grabbed Christine’s arm, wild eyed. “I’ve been eating Doritos! Christine! The fuck!”

Hitting the steering wheel again didn’t help, but he did it anyway. Brooke, full witness to his Fists of Fury impression against the car, tapped on his window.

Michael reluctantly rolled it down, glaring at her. She snapped her gum, raising an eyebrow. “Buy a punching bag at Academy and let’s go already.”

Christine must have made a hand gesture behind him, because Brooke shrugged and backed off. She went to go sit on the hood of the car and Christine leaned in, whispering and gesturing for Michael to do the same.

“Look, I know you’re upset.”

“What do I have to be upset about?” Michael bit out. He snapped his seatbelt strap to against his t-shirt with the cosmic cat on it. Then, once he realized that he was wearing the cosmic cat t-shirt, snapped it again. “Everything’s hunky fucking dory!”

But Christine just looked sad, and Michael bristled at the pity. “I know what’s going on with Jeremy is hard for you -”


“Michael!” Christine grabbed his arm, softening the harsh motion by moving her hand down and squeezing it instead. Michael had a horrible flash of memory of the Squid holding Jeremy’s fucking hand, and he had to shake the memory away. “It’s okay to be upset. I - I don’t know what happened, because you won’t talk about it, but it was bad. Michael?” Christine’s expression crumpled, and Michael saw that she was worrying at the edges of her own dress. “I’m worried too.
And whatever has you this freaked out worries me even more.”

It would have been easier to stay silent. Just like it had been easier to play Apocalypse of the Damned until three am again. Just like it was easier to hate Christine and hate his fake parents and his fake life, and especially fake Michael Mell, who didn’t even have the decency to even exist.

“Do you remember Philip Nelson?”

Right on cue Christine recoiled, thoroughly disgusted. “That fucker?”

Michael nodded miserably. “And Jason’s party?”

Even saying it made his gut recoil. Christine looked down, clearly feeling the same way. “I, uh, heard about it.”

They were silent, afraid to even say it.

Michael’s fingers twitched towards his seatbelt strap. “It was - it reminded me of him. A lot. Like, a lot. I actually saw Rachel, you know.” His throat was dry and he took a second to stop and swallow. “Before. And after. She was...she was different.”

“Oh.” Christine paused awkwardly. “Were you friends?”

Michael shrugged. “A little. Enough.”

They sat in silence again.

“I’m not actually friends with Jeremy,” Michael said haltingly, “because I’m technically only pretending to be his best friend, whose body I kind of stole. Before this whole thing happened I didn’t actually know him that well.” Jeremy’s face flashed past his eyes. Playing video games, making mashed potatoes, his gaping fish expression at the thought of his darling crush even talking to him. “But I actually...for a little while there we were actually friends. A little.” Something deep in his gut twisted. “Enough.”

They sat in the car until they knew that they couldn’t anymore, but by the time they joined Brooke nonchalantly playing Texas Hold ’Em on her phone they couldn’t help but hold each other’s hand. Just for a little while.

It was a little nice, until Brooke started making grossed out noises and Christine started hitting her on the head with her bag. Brooke laughed, Christine laughed, and Michael tugged down the hem of his cosmic cat shirt and dug his hands into his relaxed fit jeans with voluminous pockets and his gigantic Vans.

He thought about Jeremy until it hurt too much, and returned to thinking about Zombiepocalypse instead.

“Hey, Christine?” Michael let Brooke take the lead as they ascended into the mall, rising to their destinies, meeting their clothed fates. “Can you be the mature one? Just for a little while?”

Christine squeezed his hand again. “Yeah. I think it’s my turn, anyway.”

Anyway, so malls had never really been Michael’s thing.

In either of his lives, though the Michael Mell one was really beating out the other one right now. The mall was gigantic, brightly colored, full of children and tired moms and giggling teenagers and
strange, shuffling men, and it stank of weird perfume and the sweet musty scent of overheated sweat. Suburban shopping malls were never a good idea in the first place, and Michael dove for cover as Brooke ruled.

She swept them through the Macy’s entrance as Michael and Christine cowered in her wake. The ladies in the perfume even recognized her, greeting her warmly by name as Brooke swept by and gave her blessings onto the besmocked peasants. Christine, who hated any store that wasn’t the bookstore, was practically clinging to Brooke’s oversized sweater.

She patted her hand reassuringly. “I will be your guide for the evening. Buckle in your nerd t-shirts, guys. We are going for a ride.”

“My shirt’s from Hot Topic!” Michael protested. “That’s, like, cool nerdy!”

“Child, are you listening to yourself.”

The mall had been Brooke’s idea, obviously. She had bonded hard with Christine, who had been completing her mission of becoming besties with the popular kids swimmingly, and had established a friendly-antagonistic relationship with Michael over Chemistry worksheets and checking out hot guys.

It wasn’t like Michael wasn’t open at his old - at his real high school. He just wasn’t flamboyant about it. Like most people. Like normal people.

That was okay. It wasn’t important to him.

But he had never sat on a grimy courtyard bench and guy watched with a hot, popular girl before. He even got to obnoxiously wolf-whistle at people, and not get beat up over it because Brooke was with him.

She was actually...pretty cool. Don’t tell anyone.

It secretly bothered Christine, mostly because her real characterization was drastically different from her play one. She had described Brooke as ‘Beta Bitch, but secretly nice’, but it seemed that her dungeon of lies went deeper than that. Like different levels in Pokemon Mystery Dungeon, the deeper you went the more you realized she was only pretending to be “Beta Bitch, but secretly to be nice’. This let her attain hereto unforetold levels of bitchiness.

Of course, that raised the question of why she toddled around behind Chloe and agreed with everything she said, even if she totally went behind her back afterwards, but she grew evasive about it when asked. There was no way she was actually afraid of Chloe, so the mystery went unanswered.

At least until Christine pulled him aside and, in a shocking display of actually telling him something useful, informed him about the wide, wide world of ‘Pinkberry’.

Whatever. That was just crazy fan stuff. People on the internet would ship anybody. Brooke was as straight as a rake.

“Okay, guys. Remember our mission.” She stopped them in the mall square, in front of a giant and unnecessarily big fountain that was probably pretty mod. Probably. Michael had never been one for interior decor. “Now that Mell is putting on his big boy pants and talking to people who aren’t on the internet -”

“Internet friends are valid!”
“- he needs actual clothing, for actual people.” She paused a beat. “Also I’m living vicariously through him and totally getting him laid with Heere.”

“Yeah,” Michael said glumly. “Get in line.”

She looked at him incredulously, her majesty backlit by the fountain. It had spotlights on the top, and if she stood in a certain way and if the light hit it was as if she was standing in her own spotlights, with a dramatic backdrop and a frothing chorus behind her.

“Michael, you’re a weird ass guy and I choose to accept that about you, but I have no idea why Jeremy’s even into you.”

“Technically it’s really none of your business.”

“Please.” Brooke sniffed and flipped her hair in a precise imitation of Chloe. The sparkling fountain gave her a golden halo. “I’m a slut for yaoi.”

A classic background character thrusting herself into the spotlight. Michael and Christine couldn’t help but exchange uneasy glances. What else were they changing?

Hopefully a lot. Michael wouldn’t know.

She began towing them to and fro, walking so quickly and pointedly Michael and Christine had to jog to keep up. She made shopping an extreme sport.

They nabbed the free samples from Teavana, Michael steered them far away from Payless, they stopped by Barnes & Nobles and completely lost track of Christine, and Brooke had pulled them into the Disney Store for a surprisingly long amount of time. She had apparently been a total princess girl as a kid. Surprise, surprise.

Brooke was tearing out her hair as she realized the mistake of dragging three very ADHD children to quite possibly the most stimulating place in their little suburb that Michael hadn’t quite bothered to learn the name of yet. She had finally given up and had practically started dragging the two to an actual Plato’s Closet when Michael found his heaven and broke away from her iron grip to escape to the store that Michael knew best.

It was his commercial holy ground. It was his sell out play to sell his life’s blood. It was a diluted strain of Michael’s true vision, an underground and self-directed endeavour facilitated by eBay and sketchy Japanese websites, but it kept the dream and the kitchy memorabilia alive.

Calling upon his actual dude muscles Michael pulled the two girls to a stop, gasping happily as they skidded to rest in front of GameStop.

The girls groaned. Christine surreptitiously made a note in her notebook but Michael was way too dazzled to care. Without giving a second thought to the total scrubs behind him he dove in.

Ah. That sweet nerd musk. The exhausted employees. The two dollar compensation for trading in a thirty dollar game. The mysterious clearance bins, holding the forbidden secrets. Michael’s stomping grounds as a child, where he and Jeremy used to loiter for hours. In this mall, actually - in this very store!

That aisle, right there - with the Pokemon toys. Man, Jeremy loved Pokemon as a kid. Michael secretly liked Digimon better, but he didn’t have anyone to engage in cutthroat Digimon battles with, so Pokemon it was. Besides, the only thing better than enjoying something was watching Jeremy enjoy it.
Jeremy, who was busy being felt up by an evil computer.

The thought flooded him with pain and confusion and he pushed it away for favor of - video games! The panacea to all woes.

He beelined towards the XBox One aisles, scanning it for the latest edition of Destiny. It had gotten great reviews, and they might even have the collector’s edition. Michael was a slut for collector’s editions. He still had some money left over from that Mermaid’s Dream pinball machine refurbish - man, had that been a tough one.

He barely even noticed the girls cautiously filing in after him, Christine furiously scrawling in her notebook as Brooke uncomfortably tugged at her sweater sleeve in front of the Funko Pop display. Girls.

“Can we go?” she complained. “I’m getting nerd hives.”

“You made your bed, now lie in it.” Michael scanned the shelves and surveyed the store. Kids were playing demos and rubbing their grimy little hands all over Minecraft displays, but it wasn’t as if he didn’t love Minecraft too. Man, how long had it been since he played? What even was his login?

Still, every day video games were being swapped for cheap scrub memorabilia and granny Funko Pops. Disgusting.

Christine had hesitated over Animal Crossing, making a show of looking over it even as her eyes darted towards Final Fantasy. Brooke was wandering around awkwardly, hesitating in front of the Legend of Zelda shelf. Man, they had a tiny recreation of the Master Sword!

It was Michael’s responsibility to stan nerdiness, so he sidled up next to her and coughed.

He dreamed of a world where nerdiness was socially acceptable and common to the average citizen. Where anybody who touched a video game was not an instant social leper. Where popular kids didn’t get hives if they played Minecraft recreationally. Where -

Oh, wait. That was the real world. Where nobody cared if you cared video games or not. Popular girls went on the internet too.

Brooke was gazing mournfully at a Wolf Link and Midna amiibo. Michael sighed and sidled up to her. “Long time since you played?”

She nodded, playing her grief off as casual. Sorry, Michael was the expert. “Grade school. In seventh grade Chloe said it wasn’t cool and that was that.”

“That makes total sense.” Michael paused a beat before clapping a hand to his forehead in faux-surprise. “Oh, wait! It doesn’t!”

Brooke scowled at him. “Get real, Mell. It doesn’t have to make sense. Popularity is like the gold standard: it only means anything so long as we all agree it does. Like, societal contracts. Laws. I’m going to be a lawyer, I know how this works.”

“Sorry, is this a financial metaphor or a legal one?” Michael grinned at her as she rolled her eyes. “Dude, who cares? You only have one life. Popularity’s a social construct. Just remove yourself from it. The minute we get out of high school nobody’s going to care. Just do your Legally Blonde impression and kick ass in the courtroom with killer heels.”
She was silent for a long moment, picking up the Wolf Link amiibo and tossing it from hand to hand. “Easy for you to say,” she said quietly. “Your only friend for, like, twelve years is pretending that he transferred here this semester.”

“You know, I think that makes it a little more difficult for me to say.” It also wasn’t even that true, but he was rewarded with a flinch anyway. Michael crossed his arms. “Brooke, you’ve literally arm wrestled me and Christine simultaneously and won. You’re at the top of the heap and you do whatever you want. What makes Chloe more important than you?”

Of course, in the musical world the lines are clearly demarcated and the food pyramid is everything. Brooke shot him a bizarre look. Of course Chloe was more important than her. It was in the casting call. It was in all those derogatory names Michael kept calling her.

“Seriously,” Michael said, pressing the boundaries of her reality. “You’re the one letting Chloe be the boss of you. Nobody else is enforcing you being number two except yourself. If Chloe’s not as much of a psychopath as she pretends to be then she cares about you, and she wouldn’t want you to be unhappy on her account.”

Where was this strange pep talk impulse coming from? Why was he standing here trying to rock Brooke’s way of thinking? Michael literally did not care. He was also probably the least supportive person ever. Why -

Oh, yeah. She was holding an amiibo.

Brooke looked as if she was going to ask the same question, so Michael beat her to it and pointed to the amiibo. “That’s my sales pitch to buy that. I will convert everyone in this school into a nerd. We will run the asylum.”

She snorted, smirking at him in her usual ‘better than you’ expression, but she clutched it to her chest anyway. “I’m down.”

She bought the amiibo. And Breath of the Wild. Michael felt very successful.

Of course, she had reverted to her full on Shopping Satan personality the minute they left the store, but it was the experience that counted. Out of some lingering embarrassment about the damage to her ego she pushed them even harder towards Forever 21, where hopefully no Jeremies and their associated evil boyfriends lay.

Christine lingered behind them, barely looking up as they entered the chick haven of Forever 21. She was bent over her notebook, frowning.

Michael hung back, glancing worriedly at her as she didn’t even look up at all of the cute scarves. Christine had been down to pretend to be Christine and be really into shopping, but it was clear that she was one of those girls who would rather hide in a corner of a dark library like some kind of gremlin hissing at light and living in hoodies.

But she wasn’t even trying. He gently prodded her with an elbow, shooting her a worried look. When she looked up it was a little wild-eyed, gnawing at her pencil and looking at Michael as if he were a stranger.

“I know that it’s a little weird that Brooke’s into video games,” Michael offered, “but I don’t think it’s going to ruin the play.”

The little crinkled notebook didn’t look that new, and she was pretty deep into the pages. What an organized person. Christine searched him up and down, wanting something, finding nothing.
Eventually she just sighed and flipped it shut, stashing it in her back pocket. “We’re safe. Just...enjoy yourself, okay?”

Uh, okay. Michael shrugged. “As much as I can enjoy myself shopping.”

He was rewarded with a laugh and punished by noticing that Brooke had finally dragged them towards the men’s section.

She stopped in the middle, arms crossed and surveying the kingdom. “This is the moment of reckoning. Michael, it’s time to choose an aesthetic.”

Great. Michael looked around, bored yet intimidated. “Can’t we just go for some jeans that fit and flannel?”

“You’d look like a lesbian.” She strode towards a likely rack, pulling out a striped button down with a chest pocket. “This is in style.”

“That looks like I own a yacht.”

“Since when do you want to give that impression?” She tossed it over her arm, wandering deeper into the thicket. “This is a nice blazer, wow. Why don’t you pick out a blazer?”

Michael surveyed the hall of crisp, clean blazers. “I’d just get tomato sauce on those.”

She sighed. “Fair. Cardigan?”

Michael groaned.

They spent the better part of twenty minutes like that, but as they went deeper into it the clothing began to look more impressive. He hadn’t worn a legitimate shirt with a legitimate collar in a while, and Michael knew that it would work wonders for how his image had gotten so grungy. He picked up a soft wood sweater that he had been informed was a little effeminate, but it had a wonderful weave and it went in the basket.

When Brooke piled it in his arms he couldn’t help but hug it, clutching it to his chest, feeling warm and strange inside. It was the kind of thing he may have worn a lifetime ago.

Well. He had never really been worried about his appearance. He had always just gone for the dude dresscode of a t-shirt and jeans, but he did wear shirts with a collar sometimes. Besides, Brooke kept on encouraging him to go a little bit more effeminate, which he didn’t mind.

Still, Michael had to put his foot down when the pants she was giving him got way, way too tight. “I’m a homo, not a ballerina.” He pushed them back at her, who made no attempt to hide her disappointment. “Look, can you stop throwing v-necks at me? I’m not your GBF.”

“You are without a doubt my GBF and you better fucking accept that,” Brooke said without hesitation. “You deserve it for how you stole my boyfriend.”

“You weren’t even dating!” Really, her anger was perfectly legitimate, considering the fact that the play was technically supposed to have Brooke dating Jeremy and he had very purposefully ripped that plan apart like a handsome lumberjack and a log of wood, but still.

“Don’t you want to get together with Jeremy Heere?” She shook the pants for emphasis. “He’s been popular for, like, two weeks, but he’s already become the male President of Cool. It’s ridiculous. You have to keep if you ever want to match that.”
“I don’t care,” Michael said bluntly. “I don’t care how Jeremy did it, you can’t magically make me cool through dressing me in stupid clothes. Look, I just came so I could get some halfway respectable date clothes and some respectable normal clothes.” Since Michael’s wardrobe didn’t boast any article of clothing that wasn’t ridiculous. Michael had been stuck wearing a black t-shirt and the pants that fit the best out of pride, and if Jeremy had noticed that Michael’s aesthetic had taken a turn for the biker gang he didn’t mention it. “Can we not go overboard? I’m not changing who I am to get the guy. This isn’t Grease.”

Thank god. He didn’t know what he would have done if he had been stuck singing ‘Summer Nights’ all over the place. Granted, Grease probably wouldn’t have made him afraid for his life, so maybe he would have been better off.

The mention of the musical with a horrible moral made guilt shine over Brooke’s face, and she hesitantly put the clothing back. “Sorry. I’m kind of channeling Chloe right now.”

“And it says a lot about you that you’re embarrassed to be acting like your best friend.” It was harsh, but he was rewarded with the flinch. “Look, can we look at just an Adidas jacket and shorts? Jeans that are just a little tight? A baseball cap?”

Brooke shot him an incredulous look. “Why do you want to look like a track runner?”

She really had no idea. “I have aspirations?”

That had done it. Dressing like a jock-lite was good enough for the both of them, and before long Michael had found a distressed slate grey spandex shirt that accentuated his nonexistent muscles and well fitting jeans. He even picked up a v-neck at Brooke’s pleading. He was really burning through his pinball money.

He had just finished sorting through clothing based on price when Christine finally rejoined them. That was awkward, since he hadn’t even noticed that she had left. She leaned against a shelf, panting as Brooke patiently shoved an entire rack of random baseball caps on Michael’s head.

Christine shoved a neatly folded lump of clothes at him. “There. Got some threads for you. I guessed your size, but my Christine brain knows I’m right.”

Michael shuffled through the clothing.

It was all nerd stuff. Not, like, insufferable nerd stuff, but nerd stuff. Here was Captain America Shield logo, this one has that Ghostbusters icon. Aw, Michael loved Ghostbusters. He even liked the 90s cartoon. That was dedication.

Hey, you even had that Japanese type stuff of random words stapled onto them in non-visually appealing ways. He held up a novelty t-shirt that said ‘Help me, I’m trapped in a T-shirt factory!’.

Heh. Relatable.

“This is sweet!” He shoved it onto the pile of clothing he was already carrying, noticing with satisfaction how they were all on sale. “Did you find any Snapbacks?”

But now both girls were looking at him, arms crossed and unimpressed. Brooke pulled out the Nickola Tesla shirt, holding it between her thumb and forefinger like it was a dead rat. “I thought you wanted to get together with Jeremy, not make him run away crying.”

Christine arched an eyebrow in a very un-Christine gesture of condescension. “Since when do you wear Adidas?”
Michael looked down at both stacks of clothing, at the nerd stuff and the sports stuff, at the baseball cap and the novelty socks.

When did he wear Adidas?

Back in his old life. You know, the useless one. The one that wasn’t solving his problems, the one who just couldn’t handle bad shit happening to him, the one that refused to go through anything that hurt ever again. The guy who had been hurt and who had never recovered, like some kind of moron, like some kind of asshole.

Since when did he wear nerd crap?

That was useless too. He couldn’t infiltrate the popular kids acting like a cringy loser all the time. He had to tap into what used to make him - okay, not cool, but someone who had friends and who went to parties and who had a ton of extracurriculars so that he would put off going to an empty house as long as possible.

It was just like in Spider-Man #33, ‘If This Be My Destiny’. ‘Anyone can win a fight when the odds are easy. It’s when the going gets tough, when when there seems to be no chance - that’s when it counts!’.

Yeah!

Michael stuffed his hands in his jean pockets, afraid to commit. Spider-Man would have known how to choose between doing what is right and what is easy. Michael had never really cared about right and wrong before. He was out of practice.

“You have to pick one,” Christine said, gaze picking him apart trying to separate himself down into his separate components. “Adidas and baggy jeans look dumb together.”

Brooke wrinkled her nose. “There is no way you're wearing runner’s pants and a shirt with a dinosaur on it.”

But he couldn’t decide.

Michael shook his head numbly, head throbbing. “Guys, I can’t. I just - you two handle this, I can’t.”

The girls looked at each other. Christine leaned over to whisper something in Brooke’s ear and the other girl’s eyes widened. When she straightened she clapped him on the back in a stern yet supportive way.

“I’ll help you with your rampaging identity crisis. That’s, like, what I’m best at.”

“I thought you were best at giving sophomores anorexia.”

“Same thing.”

Jesus Christ.

It hurt Michael’s head a little, which was slightly worrying, but shopping had always been pretty stressful for him anyway. He had always made his girl friends do it. They had similarly been excited to have a GBF, even if Michael had always been a little boring as a gay person, but Brooke’s bombastic yet subdued demeanor paired with Christine’s exaggerated Christininess overlying her snarky and cunning interior crowded those thoughts far out of his mind.
By the end of it everybody had settled on halving each part of the stack and leaving him with two outfits on either side. The girls had made noises about social coding, as Brooke argued for a gradient of old to new and Christine insisted on dichotomy so Michael could feel comfortable in whatever persona he was feeling that day. He really had no idea what either of them were talking about, he just wanted clothing that didn’t smell like weed and that was acceptable to go outside with Jeremy.

But not too acceptable. Because fuck evil robots.

Michael spat in the direction of the Apple and Microsoft stores as they passed them, uncertain of which of them were to blame for the technology gone too far and more or less uncaring. Technology is evil and Thomas Edison’s a witch.

He had been expecting them to go back towards the food court, but a large part of him really didn’t want to go even for their chili fries. Too many bad memories. Actually, just one bad memory, but the memory was pretty overpowering.

Thankfully, an Auntie Anne’s stall boasted slushie posters was set up next to it, and Michael immediately beelined for the slushie machine heaven.

Just the sight of a slushie machine calmed him down. The gentle hum. The rhythmic stir of the mixed ice and corn syrup. The dead eyed employees. Like Moana and the sea, it called to him.

A memory of that perfect slushie from when he first woke up struck him. God, that slushie was perfect. The cashier girl pouring it over the counter practically gave him a heart attack. Girl was an artist.

He stood in line and bought a large iced Slurpee, ignoring the way Brooke rolled her eyes and Christine made fastidious notes in her notebook.

“Why do I hang out with you?”

Michael paused a beat and bought her a blue slushie. Small. Didn’t want to overwhelm her.

“Because I’m flamboyantly gay and I don’t try to suck up to you like all of your other hangers-on?”

It was true. Brooke accepted the slushie, sticking the straw in the wrong way before flipping it. “Ugh. This is, like, so bad for my diet?” But she cautiously sipped at it anyway, and Michael was rewarded by the way her eyes widened.

“Good?”

She just sucked at it some more, gnawing on the straw.

Good enough. Michael shifted his bag onto his elbow, ignoring Christine’s furious notes, and took a long drag of the slurpee.

It was good.

Michael looked down at it.

“It’s good,” he said, lost and confused. He looked up as Brooke discovered the little shovel part of the straw and Christine furrowed her brows at him, worried. “It’s really good.”

“Fine, whatever.” Brooke sucked at it. “You tell Chloe about this and you’re dead meat.”
“I’m dead meat if I even talk to Chloe,” Michael drawled. He took another sip of the slushie, worried that he had imagined it, but there was no denying it.

He took a hand off it, rubbing his fingers on his palm a little. Wet with condescension.

Christine grimly took an extra note in her book when Michael displayed her palm to him. “Musical slushies don’t melt.”

“My musical slushie was perfect,” Michael complained. “It was like the most perfect mash of corn syrup and ice I had ever stuffed into my mouth. This slushie is awesome, but the girl at Sev’ Elev’ pours it so much better.”

“If you tell her that she might pour some extra for you.” Christine carefully tucked the notebook in her jean jacket pocket. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed how nothing in this world is generic anymore. Besides the normally generic things.”

He had, probably. At one point. At several points. Michael didn’t have a great memory.

“Oh how there’s racial and body type diversity in the NPCs now.” It was nice how Michael was no longer the only ugly person in the school. Also, how there were more than twenty kids that they just saw repeated over and over again. “Or how we have to take actual math tests now because the teachers are actually lecturing.”

“I mean, we don’t get any grade reports back, but still.”

“I turned in an empty test and I got a one hundred,” Michael confessed. “Which is kind of awesome.”

“Many things about this are awesome,” Christine agreed. They both glanced back at Brooke, who was currently suffering from massive brain freeze. “Girls like Brooke made fun of me back home. Now just because I’m Christine and the only intelligent character in the normal play we’re friends.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Michael said thoughtfully. “But I’m with you. This is getting weirder. And weirder because…it’s not weird.”

Christine stared at him, and Michael shifted uncomfortably. It wasn’t just him, right? Christine had adapted really well. Michael had been the one kicking and dragging his feet.

Well, now they had both adapted. Now it was easier for both of them. Everything came easy to heroes. Wasn’t that was Michael was? A hero?

Did losers get to be heroes? Did sidekicks? Did track stars?

“Hey!” Christine shouted, making them all jump. “Spencer’s! Yes? No!”

Brooke and Michael glanced at each other, confused. Brooke sucked at the slushie. “I’ll accept the cold reflex hitting the roof of my mouth and constricting my blood vessels but I refuse to look at the weird BDSM stuff.” She shot Michael an accusatory glance. “You said that you hated Spencer’s.”

“I do and no amount of Dancing With Wolves style brainwashing will ever compromise that,” Michael said honestly. “But I do have a guy there who can hook me up with vintage sodas, and I sacrifice my disdain for the sweet, sweet Crystal Pepsi.”
“We’re going to Spencer’s!” Christine said loudly. “This is not a vote!”

They went to Spencer’s, although they did not understand why. Both Christine and Michael could basically do whatever they wanted so long as it was not anti-evil robot - Christine was famously quirky and Michael was at the bottom of the social ladder, so they both had relative freedom in their weird plans. A little more freedom would be nice, but who’s counting.

Brooke, on the other hand, was beginning to look hunted. Poor girl. Still, stretching her boundaries had to be good for her. Probably. Making Brooke look at snapbacks wasn’t going to explode the play. Probably.

Spencer’s was right next to the Hot Topic, which Michael craved to go inside for reasons he didn’t understand and didn’t approve of. You knew the situation had gotten out of control when you had a desperate need to buy Doctor Who merchandise. Christine had to shove him the inside the adjacent hive of scum and villainy, something he would probably be grateful for once he sobered up from the video game high, but when he walked into lava lamp hell he couldn’t bring himself to be thankful.

God, his life had gotten out of control. Both of them.

If the cluster of teenagers technically weren’t supposed to be there, which Michael was pretty sure they weren’t, nobody said anything. Christine and her asexual ass tried to take refuge in looking at the mugs before she realized one of them had a novelty dick at the bottom, and Brooke settled for calmly comparing vibrator prices.

The most horrible part, worse than the tacky BDSM wear in the back and the lava lamps in the front, was that one of the sales clerks recognized them. He nodded at Michael as they came in, and Christine pushed him forward towards the grasp of the strangely attractive teenage clerk.

“Hey, Mike. Where have you been? I’ve been sitting on this thing for ages.”

“Where haven’t I been?” Michael asked cryptically. He leaned against the counter, looking the clerk up and down. He was actually Michael’s type - tall, ropy muscles standing against his black t-shirt, close cropped blonde hair and dimples. The gauges were a turn off, but -

Huh. They weren’t a turn off. Times, they were a’ changing.

Slightly bolstered by the knowledge that Jeremy Heere’s impeccable hotness was partly artificially induced by the body he stole, Michael treated him to a small smile and silent prayers of thanks that he had changed out of his cosmic cat t-shirt into a spandex sports shirt and well fitting jeans. With a good haircut he could probably make even Michael’s body look serviceable.

Mmm. He missed his arrangement with Jason. That had been great. He would have to call him when he got back to his reality.

“How much?” Michael asked, despite not knowing what he was buying. “You totally overcharged me last time.”

Hot guy - when Michael checked his name tag he saw that it was Damian - laughed. He reached underneath the counter and pulled out a plastic bag containing a pair of two liter bottles of soda.

Wow. Soda. Michael did his best to look impressed, looking inside the bag.

“Crystal Pepsi,” he said, doing his best impressed impersonation. “Gnarly.”
“I know, right?” Damian leaned on the counter, tapping the cap and smiling mysteriously at Michael. Michael returned it, straightening a little from his lean and shifting to showcase his now nonexistent muscles. “It’s like regular Pepsi. But it’s clear!”

“It’s discontinued, which is the important thing,” Michael adlibbed. He pulled out his wallet, mourning the last of his pinball money. “Major gratitude, man. You’re the best.”

Hah. Perfect Michael Mell. Damian just laughed and waved his hand. “Please. After you hooked me up with that case of Silly Bandz it’s on the house.”

“The peak of my life,” Michael agreed dizzily. He picked up the soda, catching the receipt underneath the bag and slipping it into his pocket. “But thanks, dude. That means a lot.”

Damian had just opened his mouth to hopefully flirt with him and inform him that his pecs had mysteriously returned when Christine popped up at Michael’s elbow like a groundhog. Michael startled, clutching the soda close to his chest as Damian blinked.

Her ferocious expression was adorable on her little face, but Michael knew well enough how deadly it could be. “Where’s your Mountain Dew Red!”

Damian recovered impressively quickly, scratching his stubble. Mmm. Stubble. “I mean, I’d have to order it!”

“When can you get it here!”

Okay, that was enough. Michael gently pushed her back, rapping her on the head. “Dude. Rude as hell.”

“This is important, Michael!” She shot him a very obvious significant glance, confusing both Damian and Michael. “Mountain Dew Red? The color wheel counterpart to Mountain Dew Green?”

“You mean...regular Mountain Dew?”

Christine screamed into her hands. “Did you even check to see if you have it?”

Why would he do that? Michael didn’t go through his own closets. “No. Am I supposed to?” He turned to Damian, who just looked confused. “Did I order that?”

“Nope.” He shrugged as Christine draped herself across the counter in distress. “I could order you some?”

Christine jolted back up. “When would i get here?”

“Two months?”

She slumped over the counter again, dejected. “Two months. Of course it’s two months. Why wouldn’t it be two months.”

“Is...that bad?”

“You know,” Christine said glumly, “I would not be surprised at all if the GPSes on all of the Mountain Dew Red secret delivery trucks went haywire and crashed all of the world’s supply of Mountain Dew Red to spill into a gory, messy fate onto the interstate highway and cause a ten car pileup. Because all of the Mountain Dew Red was destroyed. Because of robots.”
Wait, what did robots have to do with -

Michael smacked his palm with a fist. “Mountain Dew Red! That’s a plot point!”

Christine tugged at her hair, two seconds away from screaming at him, but at Damian’s increasingly alarmed expression she settled for grabbing Michael’s arm, whistling for Brooke, and towing the both of them with admirable haste out of the door. Brooke joined them after a few minutes, sketchily shoving a box into her purse.

It was easier than would be reasonably expected to get Christine hopping mad, but Michael had definitely achieved it this time. A five foot girl yelling at a thankfully stylish guy and a prep in front of a novelty gift shop and/or tacky sex store would have been funny if you weren’t the one getting yelled at.

“Did you bother to remember any of the plot points at all!” She was practically hopping up and down. “You were fucking there when he drank the Mountain Dew! Don’t tell me you forgot!”

Ouch. “How could I forget that? It was fuckin’ traumatic.”

“Then how come you forgot that Mountain Dew Red was -” She abruptly cut herself off, teeth clicking, and instead settled for pulling Michael down to her height and anger-whispering into his ear. “How come you forgot that Mountain Dew Red is what you use to shut off all the Squids!”

Several connections sparked in Michael’s mind, and something dusty in the corner of his memory wiped itself off and reminded him that yes, in fact, they knew the ending of the play. Michael slapped his forehead. “Shit, I forgot.”

Christine stared at him incredulously. “You forgot.”

This was embarrassing. Michael clutched the soda tighter to his chest. “Yeah, what about it? I’ll just check to make sure I have it when I get home.”

If Michael thought harder about it he remembered that he actually collected vintage soda. What a weird, arbitrary hobby that just so happened to be narratively convenient for the weirdest possible way to beat the bad guy.

It was quite frankly exhausting each day to somehow live on a twisted, backwards logic of narrative power that demanded the weirdest corners of Michael’s life be important. He was steadily amassing an army of skills that were completely irrelevant for everyday life in the real world but were proving to save his ass in this one. Go figure.

The soda sat heavy in his arms as Brooke snapped her gum from behind them, scrying their fortune on mall maps. It was weirdly appealing. Michael looked down at them. “I remember now.”

“The actual plot? Because you always forgetting is what keeps getting us in trouble -”

“No, not that.” Michael gently lowered them, tying the plastic bag tighter around his palm. “The appeal of discontinued soda.”

“Yeah?” Christine propped her hands on her hips. “It’s not the charming quirkiness that defines Michael’s characterization off an off-the-wall guy who is nevertheless more grounded than the lead?”

“It’s because nobody else has some.” Crystal Pepsi: like regular Pepsi, only clear. “It makes you pretty unique, you know?”
Christine stared at him for a long time. Brooke had long since noticed, her powers of obliviousness only going so far, and Michael caught her texting carefully on her phone pretending not to stare at them.

“Michael, what’s your mom’s name?”

“Stop talking to me like I’m an infant,” Michael snapped. “I know my own brain, thanks.”

“You sure as hell don’t know your own memory! I know I’m telling you these things, Michael!” She faltered. “Like, not well, but still. I have notebooks and scrapbooks and audio recordings of everything we need to know to beat this thing, and it feels like you aren’t even trying.”

Great, so they were playing this game. “I’m the one who accidentally made myself the love interest, I don’t call that not trying. I’m a major character now! You’re purposefully taken yourself out of the narrative, it’s not like you still have a job that’ll get us all killed if you don’t do it. I have a lot of responsibilities now, okay?”

“Responsibilities playing video games?” Christine asked snidely. “You’ve just been sulking. Like you always do.”

“Responsibilities to Jeremy!” Michael burst out. “To you and that fucking robot and this entire play! There’s a lot riding on me and - and I just want to play video games! And I know my mom’s name!” His face crumpled. “I do!”

But he didn’t offer it, and Christine knew better than to ask.

When Brooke tapped Michael on the shoulder they both started, and Michael abruptly remembered that they hadn’t exactly been talking quietly. She was still popping her gum, arching an eyebrow at them. “Yo, I’m not sure if Michael has Alzheimer’s or you’re super into some nerd tabletop thing, but I really want some chili fries. I’m going and once you two hug it out you can come grace me with your presence.”

Neither of them had any intention of hugging it out. But neither did they want to air their dirty laundry in front of Brooke, and when she left them to go live her own self-assured, if somewhat low self-esteem life, they both felt a little ashamed. Brooke was acting more existant than they were.

“Look,” Christine said finally, worrying at her fingers. They really should go catch up with her and stop being such children about this. “I think I’m getting mad at you about things that aren’t your fault. I have a couple theories…” she took a deep breath, puffing out her cheeks, I then exhaling gustily. “Well, let’s just say I’m jealous.”

“About what?”

“Even if I did explain I’m not sure that I could.” That sentence made very little sense, but whatever. She just shook her head. “But Michael, you need to step up. I get that this is scary, and that what’s happening to Jeremy totally sucks right now, but you gotta get your head in the game and start working with me for plans of attack. You’re integral to our scheme, and we kind of need you to remember it? Or just remember that there’s a scheme at all?”

“Please stop saying the word scheme.”

“Michael, do you even want to remember?” Christine asked finally, completely exasperated, and it hit Michael like a punch to the gut. “Or are you just running away again?”
Running away?

Michael stepped backwards, shaking his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I love my mom. I’m not trying to swap her out for the newer, better model here.”

“No, nobody said that -”

“My life was amazing,” Michael snapped. He didn’t know why he was getting so defensive. “I had boyfriends and friends and a family and good grades and everything I needed. Michael Mell isn’t exactly a fucking step up, you know. I’m a nerd now. I collect Mountain Dew, Christine! Mountain Dew!”

“Then why do you want this?” Christine pressed, and it was like she was pressing down on Michael’s heart. It cut off his breath. “When the Squid being gross freaked you out you disappeared in your room for a week, and when we dragged you out you started acting all nerdy and endearing. Michael, it’s okay to be scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Michael said stiffly. “I’m a dude, we don’t get scared.”

But Christine’s expression just crumpled. Well, good for her. Christine used to have meltdowns over the fire alarm in their real high school, she was just great with expressing emotions. “Michael, it’s okay to feel bad.”

That’s weird. It felt like Michael had enough of feeling bad for a lifetime.

Michael worked his jaw, hating the way his eyes were stinging. If he thought too hard about this then it would all come rushing back, and the horror and fear would close up his throat and choke him.

There was never any point in feeling bad. All it did was - well, make you feel bad.

The memories were beginning to crowd back in, choking and poisonous. It sent his heart rattling in his chest, and when he spoke it was more to himself than Christine. That was the only way he could say it.

“It’s not running away. It’s ducking and covering. Everybody was feeling so bad already, I didn’t want to just add to it. Then overnight it felt like everybody was getting over it and getting better and I couldn’t admit that I still felt it. I just kind of…” he shrugged helplessly. “Kicked dirt over it. Then I stopped thinking about it. I stopped thinking about a lot of things.”

“Michael, what are you talking about?”

“It’s not important,” he said, and he realized it was true. The IVs burned into his vision were disappearing, the hoarse sound of his mother’s crying was fading, and if he forgot her name too then that was a small price to pay. “I’m sorry I keep forgetting shit, okay? I’m going to keep trying, but GameStop is really fucking important to me all of a sudden and if I don’t respect that it feels like I’m going to get hives.”

Christine fluttered her hands, face scrunched up in consternation. “I still think -”

“Drop it.” Christine really sucked at picking up hints sometimes. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“If it’s important -”
“If what’s important?” Michael looked around, suddenly uncomfortable. It felt like he had been zoning out and he had only snapped back to awareness by missing a step. “Our chili fries are going to get cold if we don’t hurry up, dude.”

Christine grunted, flapping her hand in frustration, but she finally dropped it. Either that or she gave up. Same thing. “Okay. We’re going to walk back to the food court and I am going to tell you the entire plot of the play in excruciating detail. I’ve read the script ten times. Very excruciating.”

“Oh, joy.”

“And then you’re going to repeat it back to me! And we’re going to be doing this every day.”

“Good thing I don’t have any other hobbies.”

“And you have to stay an hour after school each day so we can scheme.”

Jesus Christ.

But maybe she was right. Scratch that, she was definitely right and he just didn’t want to admit it. He was a smart guy, he didn’t have the memory of a goldfish. He didn’t have the memory of someone who constantly forgot the plotline of the play that they were living.

This wasn’t like him.

“Hey, Christine?” Michael flicked his phone screen on - him and Jeremy - and off, on and off. On - Michael and Jeremy - and off. “This is random, but how does Michael respond to stress and slight Squid induced trauma?”

“He sulks, starts burning his possessions, and has to be revived through the Pants Song,” Christine said immediately. She paused. “Which is why I was kind of worried. Because, like, I remember that one time in Math? When you caught Dijon cheating off your test?”

“I was fourteen! It was a rough day!”

“The point is, Michael might sulk. You don’t sulk.” She reached up and casually slapped him against the head. “You take action. Like, for example, digging up your Mountain Dew Red. That kind of action.”

“Thanks for reminding me.” He dug his hands into his pockets, looking away. “Really.”

He didn’t specify whether he was talking about the Mountain Dew or about his own personality, and she didn’t ask.

Great. He barely even knew this girl and now she was the dragon on the hoard of his actual personality. Keeping track of these things should really be his job.

True to her word, by the time the that they had almost reached the food court Michael felt like he had memorized everything his friends were going to say from Halloween on and that he could break out into any of their musical numbers right now.

Michael didn’t care how crazy the situation had gotten. He didn’t care that he had apparently vored Michael and was now actually turning into Michael. There was no fucking way he was singing Michael In The Bathroom. God, how pathetic would you have to be?

He was really going to step up the game on remembering his own personality. There was no way
he was going to become the kind of person who has panic attacks in fucking bathrooms. Michael
didn’t even get panic attacks. Those were for losers with anxiety disorders. Everybody knew that if
you were anxious all the time you were just supposed to suck it up. That medication business was
stupid.

Yeah. Michael held out his chin just a little higher. Even if Michael Mell had a weirdly nice life he
was still a loser and didn’t deserve it.

In fact, his life was probably wasted on his sulky, Pac-Man tattooed ass. Maybe it was better off
with Michael. He was just, like, more responsible with it. Like how people wrote self-insert
fanfiction because the main characters were morons and it was frustrating.

Was...was his life just a self-insert fanfic?

That was too disturbing a thought to linger on, and Michael was relieved when his phone buzzed.
When he first checked his phone right after his initial, panicked musical number it had been pretty
depressing how there were about five contacts in his phone. And that was including his doctor.

Yeah. Michael’s life was way better off in his hands. Jeremy’s life too, probably. According to
Christine’s comprehensive account, the fate of the world was also on the list.

He checked his phone, idly deciding to change the lock screen back to him and Jeremy.

Lauren Marcus: yo i found this sketchy dude in a payless he’s trying to sell me drugs lol

Lauren Marcus: is this were jeremy got his roids or what

Michael tossed the phone to Christine and set off at a sprint.

God, where was it - the mall had practically been a conveyor belt the last time he was here, it was
like he had no choice but to move and keep moving. He couldn’t even rely on Michael’s memories
of malls, considering the fact that the boy only had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Mega Man
wiki.

But just when he was flagging Christine came roaring up behind him, clutching a copy of the mall
map and sprinting faster than he was despite her tiny little legs. It was downright humiliating how
he was supposed to be a cross country athlete and now he wasn’t going to reach a stupid store in a
stupid suburban mall on time to stop an epically stupid popular girl from chugging Mountain Dew
and being brainwashed just because his legs were noodles!

He only let himself skid to a stop once he saw a familiar blonde girl lurking outside a Payless,
chewing the plastic lid to an empty slushie. Christine called her name the minute they saw her, and
if Michael felt like a moron flailing at the feet of a blonde bimbo then it wasn’t much of a
deviation from his supposed norm. Christine was already chattering in a steady stream of
increasingly panicked anti-drug PSAs.

Brooke patiently waited for her to finish, arching one plucked eyebrow as Christine ranted on
about how Jeremy’s steroids were indicative of low self esteem and flawed coping mechanisms
and how we should never, ever be like him, and drugs were bad literally all the time.

She chewed serenely on the plastic lid, and when Christine finally fell short of breath she raised a
hand. “Do you honestly think I’m stupid enough to buy drugs from a sketchy dude in a Payless?
Who do I look like, Jeremy?”

Michael gaped at her. “I thought you had a crush on him!”
Well, if there had ever been a crush she had been casual about it. She had threatened to arm wrestle Michael for his love, and whenever he happened to be around her sugary sweetness was ratcheted up a thousand percent, but Brooke was a bit of a serial monogamist and it looked like her heart would go on.

She just shrugged. “I have a crush on his pecs, not his brain. Sorry, but your man crush is a bit of a moron.”

“God, tell me about it.”

But Christine just ignored them, diving into the store. Michael had only just opened the door to follow her in and give some masculine backup in case he had to beat off a sketchy store clerk with his bare hands, only to find -

Nothing.

Not just no store clerk, no store. Christine was standing in the middle of the store, jaw dropped, as she looked around the stripped shelves with clearance signs propped up in the corner. Empty display stands, empty floors - empty shoeboxes. The small store was abandoned, even if it wasn’t locked, and when he turned around Brooke was just as shocked as he was.

“I can’t believe I hallucinated a sketchy dude giving me drugs.” She looked down into the empty container, as if it would hold hitherto undiscovered secrets. “What the hell do they put in these slushies?”

“Good question,” Michael said dizzily. It was a textbook case of musical logic, but if that was true then Brooke really shouldn’t have even noticed. Time to play dumb, maybe gaslight her a little. It was for the greater good. “That’s not a funny joke, lady. Drugs are serious business.”

“I wasn’t lying!” But she looked as if she was doubting her own reality, double checking her phone to make sure she sent the messages. Good. Her reality made no sense. “I totally did not hallucinate an entire store. Oh my god. What if the drugs give you short term memory loss?” She was looking well and truly spooked now, and Michael could relate. “What if I pulled a total Jeremy and swallowed a sketchy Tic Tac?”

Wait, what?

Christine didn’t waste any time, scouring the store for any abandoned Women’s Nike shoeboxes. She ducked below the counter, shouting in triumph when she pulled out a battered, yet very realistic shoebox. “Was this what he was holding?”

Brooke nodded, tugging her sweater over her hands and chewing on the fabric. “I would never dream something that dumb. Oh my god. I was totally fucking roofied!” Her expression darkened, and she dug inside her purse to withdraw a small oblong pill. “I’m totally going to post the #MeToo hashtag.”

Whatever else you might say about Christine, she was a woman of action. She wasted no time in diving forward, snatching the pill from Brooke’s open palm, and was winding up for the pitch into the opposite side of the atrium when Michael finally managed to grab her arm and force it down. Brooke was left blinking, jaw agape at Christine’s decisive DARE attitude.

Michael bent down to hiss in her ear, pressing on her palm so he could wrest it from her hand and stick it in one of his voluminous pockets. “If the police exist in this dumb musical then we might need evidence.”
It said a lot that the police existing was more far fetched than a quantum nanotechnology CPU, but these days anything could happen. Christine saw his point and let him stuff it firmly in his pockets, and even as he shoved it as far down as it could go it still felt like he was hiding a bomb. He should find one of those pill cases so it wasn’t burning a hole through his pocket. One with big radioactive warning symbols on it.

“What drug is that?” Brooke asked, fascinated. “Do you know what it is?”

Michael and Christine started, and they both moved to quickly hide something behind their back like guilty TV show characters before they realized that they weren’t holding anything incriminating.

“Opium,” Christine said.

“Cocaine,” Michael said at the same time.

Neither of them knew drugs.

Disappointingly but unsurprisingly, Brooke knew drugs. She crossed her arms, big sweater sleeves tangled up in each other, and scowled at them. “That was not a roofie.”

“Xanax,” Michael quickly followed up. He gave himself a pat on the back. Xanax was a pill.

“Totally Xanax.”

“Vicodin,” Christine said simultaneously. “Like in House? If House still exists?”

Brooke narrowed her eyes. “You two are up to something.”

The two reality jumpers started sweating. Christine offered a shaky smile. “No? We aren’t?”

Great. For two compulsive liars who were literally living a lie they were not great liars. If Brooke, an established force in the in-group and a wild card, ever found out that the Squids were trying to brainwash the school -

Wait. What would happen?

“Why can’t we tell her?” Michael asked. Christine’s jaw dropped as Brooke rolled her eyes. “Like, seriously. What’s stopping us?”

This time when Christine tugged him down to whisper in his ear there was no way Brooke didn’t notice. “Michael! The fabric of reality is stopping us!”

“The situation’s gotten out of hand already,” Michael pointed out. “We need the edge. And an unpredictable element.” Whatever else you could say about Brooke, for a shallow character in a musical she was surprisingly unpredictable. “We need to break away from the Squid’s game. This is our chance.” When Christine faltered, looking hesitant, Michael pressed his point. “Look, we both know I’m getting compromised. You need somebody with a clear head on your side. She’s an asset!”

“And our friend,” Christine whispered.

So much as fictional characters could be their friends.

But when he looked back at Brooke - a very unamused, quickly becoming angry Brooke - he found that he couldn’t look at her that way at all. Maybe he was becoming compromised. Maybe he had
to admit that if his feelings for Jeremy were real, that his hatred for the Squid was real, then maybe everything else was real too.

Maybe they didn’t have a choice anymore. They hadn’t had a choice since Michael started rattling off Castlevania monologues. Maybe this was just admitting it to himself.

He took a deep breath, aiming for even but coming out a little shaky. From beside him Christine and her poor anxious ass was coming out even shakier, and Michael fought against his touch aversion to reach out and clasp her on the shoulder. It was time he picked up the slack and swallowed his pride.

“So,” he said, “how do you feel about drugs?”

By the end of the story she felt pretty badly about drugs.

Badly wasn’t the right word for it. She felt very strongly about drugs, but in a negative way. She felt very strongly about a lot of things: Jeremy, drugs, the societal construct of popularity, Payless, Michael and Christine, Rich, and robots.

She also felt very strongly about why Michael and Christine were keeping secrets from her. The secrets that she knew about. Not the actual secret, which was so deeply under wraps it hardly counted as a secret and was more the falsehood that their entire existence was based upon. Like the Earth’s core, only the core was pretending to be nerds.

Michael half-wondered what would happen if he did tell her. Her mind might genuinely just gloss over it, as it did when the Squid would manipulate perceptions of ‘reality’. It was likely she just straight up wouldn’t believe him. It wasn’t like they had proof.

It wasn’t worth the risk. The only kind of mind that was even capable of accepting and believing that kind of knowledge was...well, it was Rich’s mind.

Whether the information had made Rich’s psyche into the piranha pit that it was or if Rich had been like that the whole time was up in the air. Michael wasn’t really sure which was worse.

It was a long story. It carried them until they reached the food court, and it wound on as Christine ordered them all triple helpings of chili cheese fries - “I have better things to worry about than my diet, christ!” - and by the time that they all sat down to eat Michael had been forced to take a break from explanations for favor of ranting.

“His thigh? That piece of shit creepy Michael Jackson evil robot was straight up feeling him up as he was threatening you?” Brooke had straight up pulled out a stress ball and was squeezing the fuck out of it. Her ADHD should really be medicated. It would cut down on the school wide impression that she was an inattentive ditz. Then again, maybe that was why she did it. “I’m stapling a magnet to Jeremy’s fucking face!”

“Get in line,” Michael said darkly. He wasn’t the biggest fan of cheese fries normally, since he was an athlete and actually had to worry about stuff like nutrition and calories, but his body was craving them hard and grease didn’t seem that important right now. “We’re going to murder this thing and we’re going to murder it hard.”
“No, I’m going to murder this thing.” Brooke squeezed her cheery yellow stress ball until her knuckles were white, gritting her teeth. “He’s been flirting with me nonstop. He was so trying to get into my pants until Christine torpedoed him. Brooke Lohst is not a fucking stepping stone!”

It had to sting, that you were always second best. It probably wasn’t the first time, but he could already tell that it was going to be the last.

“Don’t forget the taking over the world bit,” Christine offered weakly. “There’s that. On the list of sins. It’s my number one, personally.”

“You know.” Brooke leaned back in her seat, squeezing her stress ball and over and over. “I’m really fucking sick of letting people walk all over me.” Michael opened his mouth to perhaps suggest that the Squidpocalypse maybe wasn’t all about her when she held up a hand. “No. I’m serious. Jeremy let this thing walk all over him and look where he is now, getting groped and tazed and what the fuck ever by an evil robot. I can’t fucking imagine what it’s like,” Brooke squeezed the ball over and over again, “to have some bitch tell you again and again what to do and how to do it, how to dress and how to laugh and how to be just perfect enough that I’ll get all the boys, but not perfect enough that the boys won’t jump to her after they’re done with me. I’m sitting here calling Jeremy a moron when I’ve been letting the same thing happen to me for four years, and I have fucking woke up.” She grit her teeth, watery blue eyes alight with righteous fury. This was Michael’s kind of girl. “No more Squids. No more BS. I’m going to kick this thing’s ass into high heaven, and then I’m going to put my foot down with Chloe.”

“Saving the world should be a good motivator too,” Michael said. “Just putting that out there.”

It had probably been a difficult day for Brooke. She leaned back in her chair, pressing her thumbs to her eyelids as if the starbursts would wipe Michael and Christine away. But when she opened her eyes again they were still sitting there, looking at her hopefully. She sighed, releasing the stress ball and tucking it back into the hidden folds on her sweater. “How did you guys even find out about all of this?”

“The internet and intrepid detective work,” Christine said immediately. “Also our Token Evil Teammate Rich is a bit of a leaking faucet.” For whatever reason.

“Don’t worry, Rich is our token evil teammate too.” Brooke sighed, giving herself a few seconds to feel bad for herself. Then she straightened, taking a deep breath and leaning forward on the counter. “You two get the soda. I’ll kick everyone’s ass. No offense, but you two are noodles. You need muscle.”

Michael eyed her up and down critically. “Are you secretly jacked underneath that sweater?”

The other girl looked around the food court, and although it had livened up considerably with NPCs that were no longer exact replicas of high school students it was still suitably subdued. Michael didn’t really want to know what she was about to pull that would have to involve nobody looking.

Then she lifted up her sweater and shirt slightly in a move that would have been more exciting to somebody any less homosexual than Michael, displaying a solid patch of her actual stomach.

“Holy shit,” Christine whispered. “Is that a four pack?”

She nodded proudly. “Weights.”

Jesus Christ.
Michael dumped their trash on a bright red plastic tray, and as he walked to throw away their food so they could finally ditch this godforsaken mall he caught himself thinking about how it would feel to have another person in on this. It might be nice, if just a little. She had already been a friend, so much as Michael could be friends with fictional characters, but now she was...

Maybe a little bit less fictional. They had pushed back the curtain just a little and now she was seeing the wires on the stage show. Maybe that would have to be enough for them to connect.

He was already planning out the best route to leave the mall that wouldn’t take them past the black hole of GameStop when he saw a familiar, horribly bitchy figure standing at his lunch table.

Fuck. Speak of the Devil Wearing Prada and she shall appear.

His first reaction was to break out into a sprint and drop-kick her in the face, but if face kicking was truly necessary Christine was closer and he knew that she was willing to do what had to be done.

But when he jogged closer so he could hear their conversation he saw that their new wild card had pulled her first unexpected move of the day. Well, third. Her unpredictability was rapidly becoming routine.

“ - busy.”

Chloe’s scandalized gasp/screech combo was hilarious. She was like a rubber chicken. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Brooke’s fingers were twitching, visibly reaching for her stress ball or to pick at her sweater or her gum, but she settled for curling them into fists instead. “We’re talking.”

“I can see that,” Chloe drawled obnoxiously. Jenna was behind her, slowly eating a chili dog with eyes the size of dinner plates. Girl had an eidetic memory for drama. “Your new friends are fun and all, but I’m sickened. Sickened, Brooke. You lied to me!”

“I wouldn’t have had to do that if you weren’t always nosing around in all my business,” Brooke said sharply. It was no better or worse to her usual biting sarcasm, but from the way Chloe reeled he could guess that she wasn’t on the receiving end of it very often. “I’m allowed to have my own friends. Buzz off, we’re busy.”

Chloe’s mouth dropped open, and for the first time she raised her bug eyed leopard print sunglasses to reveal warm brown eyes. “Brooke?”

Ouch. Brooke looked away, tangling herself up in her sweater, and Michael surreptitiously slid into the sticky, bright cherry red plastic seat next to Christine. If anything, his presence only worsened the situation. That was a popular sentiment lately.

Still, he had to be impressed by Chloe’s actress. She had just the most expressive face. The slack jawed expression of horror, disbelief, and offense stirred into a truly impressive cocktail of a flabbergasted bitch.

“You hanging out with Michael? Voluntarily?”

“He’s in play rehearsal with us,” Christine added. “Every time.”

“You’re hanging out with Michael and Christine over me?” She even had the audacity to look wounded. “You said that you were too busy to go to the mall with me.”
“Too busy going to the mall with them.” Brooke’s expression twisted, and Jenna slowly polished off her hot dog. Chili was stuck in the corners of her mouth. “I’m allowed to hang out with other people. People who aren’t scared of you.” Her lips thinned. “Your least favorite kind of people.”

Any slight between dramatic teenage girls could easily light the fuse of the powder keg of two truly explosive firecrackers, and Michael was both deeply uninterested and deeply afraid of the fallout. He wasn’t the only one - Christine was fighting the very un-Christine urge to hide underneath the table, and Jenna just tugged quietly at Chloe’s elbow.

“C’mon.” She tugged harder Chloe’s pointy little elbow. “Payless is totally having a sale.”

“It closed down,” Michael said flatly. “But you should go check it anyway.”

Christine smiled reassuringly at them, wiggling her fingers. “Bye!”

It was as clear as a dismissal they could give without outright telling her to fuck off. Chloe, knowing when she’d been beaten but not understanding why, let a sympathetic Jenna tug her away.

Jenna shot them a backwards glance and silently waved her phone around, a silent invitation to text her. Michael raised an eyebrow and mimed zipping his mouth shut, and she just settled for an amused smile before she turned around to help Chloe limp away from the scene of total desolation.

Or the scene of her best friend telling her to fuck off. Either one. One of them implied that Chloe was the Libby who existed for Sabrina the Teenage Witch to hoodwink, and the other one implied that she was an insecure teenage girl who was just robbed of the one safe harbor she had.

Well, it was definitely the former. But Michael had the sneaking suspicion that if she hung out with them enough it would gradually turn into the later. He had no idea what Chloe Valentine would look like as a real person, but the idea was a little terrifying. He wasn’t sure if the musical was ready for this. Hell, he wasn’t sure if he was ready for this.

No, he definitely wasn’t ready for this. Any of this. But too bad, right?

He watched her limp away, sitting back down only to steal the last remaining packet of chili fries jealously hoarded by Christine. “Why don’t you just ditch her? She’s a bitch. That’s like, her job. Being a bitch.”

Brooke looked away, letting her hair fall in a curtain over her face. “When she’s not being terrible she isn’t that bad.”

“But she’s always being terrible.”

“She has good qualities,” Brooke said evasively.

Christine licked the chilli off a fry. “Is it her ass?”

They stared at her. Christine shrugged, unrepentant. Michael facepalmed. There was such a thing was too much fanfiction, Christine. Just go on PornHub like the rest of us.

But Brooke was just staring at her, jaw dropped. She leaned forward, finally deciding to surreptitiously lower her voice when shouting about killing evil robots didn’t do it. “What makes you say that?”

“Uh, I have eyes?” And an entire AO3 tag. “Look, I think Chloe secretly has hidden depths too. Really, really hidden ones.” Christine turned on her best ‘Look at me, I’m Christine and genuine
about my emotions instead of being a nerdy, anxiety ridden compulsive liar’. “Saving Jeremy from the Squid should work to break down the entire social construct of perfection and reveal to Chloe how she was complicit in the creation of an ideal that nobody, not even her, can truly attain.”

But Brooke wasn’t buying it. She looked away, fighting to keep a blank face. “Chloe doesn’t care about anybody but herself. Not even me. You can’t change her.”

“You’d be surprised.” The sweet, cold bite of a slushie lingered behind his teeth. Michael couldn’t forget it if he tried. “Sometimes people just need someone to change for. And maybe that person, or maybe a lot of people, just needs to help them out of that pit.” He faltered. “I guess you’d need somebody to care about you first.”

“Whatever.” Brooke stood up from her chair, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “Michael, you and Calamari Boy have a date at the outdoor theater on Saturday?”

Michael eyed her dubiously. “That’s why we went shopping, yeah.”

“Good.” She propped a hand on her hip and pulled a superhero pose without any shame whatsoever. “I’m going to round up as many people as I can and we’re crashing. I’m going to beat this robot’s ass and you two are going to help me. I’m saving the cheerleader, then saving the world.” She took a deep breath. “And if Chloe - if she sees how awesome and badass I am and stops making fun of me, then fine! And if she - if she wants to go out sometime because I am so cool and saved the world, then I guess I’ll have to say yes!”

“Yeah!” Christine cheered. “Fourth teammate!”

His social life had never been so complicated. “I really don’t want to count Rich.”

“Rich is a lunatic sadist, but he’s not so bad.” Brooke gestured for them to get up, and they reluctantly followed her. “I mean, we’ve only ever known him as a robot Muppet, right? We have no idea what he’s really like.”

“I have no interest in knowing,” Michael said flatly. He didn’t know until he said it that it was a lie, but there was no use ruminating on it now. “Come on, I need more date clothing.”

Maybe he should dress as slovenly as possible, just to mess with the Squid.

Maybe he should dress as much like himself as possible, just to remember himself.

By the end of it Michael walked out of the mall with three more things than when he had walked in. Considering how little things Michael had, that wasn’t too shabby.

A miniature wardrobe full of clothing in various stages of Michael to Michael Mell, all carefully calculated to display Michael’s new semi-cool status, dazzle the pants off of Jeremy, and guarantee that Michael would not have to wear any more clothing that smelled like weed. Of course, nothing in the outfit was up to the Squid’s standards, and once Brooke was updated on that she found joy in giving Michael the perfect style that was five years out of date.

A new weird friend, who apparently lifted weights on the weekends and had a raging crush on her bitchy best friend. Michael, who was facilitating a romance between a reality hoper douche and a increasingly preppy sweaty loser and his attendant abusive boyfriend robot, didn’t have any room to talk on relationship complexity. Still, it was a little ridiculous. It was even more ridiculous how Christine had sworn on the spirit of the actual Christine Canigula to get them together, fulfilling her dream to the fullest of pairing up her favorite gays. She had assured Michael time and again that she had a lot of practice doing this, what with every time she had gotten Brooke and Chloe
together in her fanfic.

When Michael pointed out that she had probably made Chloe drastically nicer in her fanfiction, and that their main problem on that front was to rub their realistic little hands all over her stereotype of a character, it had slowed her down but not stopped her. She was a miniature freight train, brakes screeching on a fast track to nowhere. Girl was a bit of a shrinking violet in real life, but for her becoming Christine had become liberating.

Sometimes Michael worried that Christine had actually gone full Christine, the same way he was slowly going full Michael, and that he just hadn’t noticed. Christine had assured him that she was fine, and faithfully answered his pop trivia about their high school gossip, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. It would have been a bigger problem if he cared. The last thing he walked out of the mall with was a better picture of who he was. He was going cold turkey from all Michael Mell related shit. He was going jogging in the mornings, he was wearing his nicer clothing, and he was going to grind the Squid under his heel in a characteristic display of his horrible temper.

Michael knew exactly what he was, who he was, and what he had to do. And he wasn’t letting a few pesky feelings get in the way. Michael was great at not feeling things. He did it all the time.

When he got home he shrugged on his slightly evil yet very cool leather jacket, pulling on his new jeans that actually fit and a warm, form fitting flannel over a slate gray t-shirt. He brushed his hair, he shaved, and when he looked at himself in the mirror he told himself over and over again that this was himself. His true self.

The boy in the mirror had wide, dark eyes. No Pac-Man tattoo, but no callouses from his weight training either. His vision was fine but his body was thoroughly out of shape. His posture was good, his teeth were yellow, and when Michael crossed his eyes he saw double vision, Michael to his left and Michael Mell to his right. Was it Michael’s body, or was it Michael’s? Was there even a difference? Was there nothing but a difference?

Two Michaels: the one looking in the mirror and the one in the mirror. Two different realities even as only one was real. The boy looking into the mirror was the boy looking out, but one had a soul and a mind and a spirit and one was a cheap reflection. He couldn’t tell who was who.

He brushed a hand over his nose, which had always been embarrassingly big. It was big now, and a little weirdly shaped, but he couldn’t tell if it was his nose or Michael Mell’s nose and it was driving him crazy. It was his dad’s nose. Almost all of his relatives on his dad’s side of the family had it. His Abuelo, Abuelo Tío David, Tío Carlos, Tía Karina...it was practically their family’s trademark. Michael Mell couldn’t fucking have it. It was his own, only his, and the only memory he had left of his family.

Maria had this nose. If he could just remember her little heart shaped face then he would be able to tell the difference. Everything would be so clear for once and for all: here Michael Mell was, with his discontinued soda and robots, and there he was, with his bitterness and resentment, and never the twain shall meet. God, if he could just know her face, then he could remember his own -

But he had worked too hard to forget, and even though Michael drank in his own reflection like Narcissus, searching desperately for something he used to love, all he found was the empty spaces that he had scrubbed clean when he could not find it.
Chapter 6

It was a little embarrassing how much his mother had been shocked that he actually had a date. She had to have a lie-down when he told her it was with Jeremy. His father was practically crying into a tissue.

His mother lay on the couch, one hand raised to the sky as if she could pull God down towards their little home to give answers. “I never thought they’d admit it. I was prepared to walk Michael down the aisle on my deathbed. Does this mean I’ll become a grandmother?”

“It’s one date, Mom, christ!”

But his father was sitting on the arm of the couch beside her, dabbing at his eyes. “Our boy has escaped a life of singlehood. I was worried you would be trapped in your homoerotic tension with that boy forever.”

Michael distinctly felt his face turn beet red. “We’re going to the outdoor theater, it’s not exactly a wedding proposal!”

“You’ve been pining for him for four years, honey.” His mother got up from the couch and made a motion for a hug, and Michael obediently gave her one as she patted his back. “This is probably the happiest day of my life. No more complaining. No more sighing. I’m free.”

“That’s why you’re happy?” Michael cried incredulously. “That I’m not complaining anymore? I never talked to you about it at all. I barely even mentioned it!”

“Yes, but listening to you not talk about it was very annoying.” His father ruffled his hair, making him scowl and half-heartedly restyle it. On second thought, he would leave it. The Squid seemed like the type to be a stickler on hair styling. “We really are happy for you, honey. Just use protection.”

“Don’t put out until your third date!” His mother pinched him on the cheeks. “A virginity is a special thing!”

“How are you two even real parents!” Michael screeched. He grabbed his car keys, stuffing them inside his jean pocket and shrugging on his jacket as quickly as possible. It was a damn warm jacket, suitable for the September winds, and it complimented his flannel and form fitting shirt well. “I’m gone and you better not be here when I come back!”

He escaped the house to the sound of his parents cackling, but Michael couldn’t bite back the smile on his face. Sure, the occasion was way more depressing and with way higher stakes than they thought, but he really was going on a date with Jeremy Heere. His best friend. His super ultra mega ridiculous crush for four years. Ever since Jeremy saw that puppy in the park and practically cried petting it, Michael had known. He had wanted to pet puppies with Jeremy for the rest of his life.

Wait. Michael shook himself as he slid into his car seat. Bad thoughts. Incorrect thoughts. He slapped his forehead a little, as if it would dislodge the good memories. He had already known all of this empirically, that Michael and Jeremy were best friends and that they probably low-key already had a thing for each other, but he hadn’t known it was this strong.
It felt so warm. Like an apple pie in his chest. Like a smile that couldn’t be repressed. Like Michael was truly complete, like his life had finally slotted into place, and the missing piece had been Jeremy’s warm hand in his.

Wow. So this was what it was like.

It was half-remembered, more a memory of love than anything more powerful. The game was to try and really like Jeremy for himself, on their own terms. He wasn’t going to cheat.

Michael drove to his place by sheer muscle memory, and even after he parked he took a few seconds to sit in the car seat and breathe. He checked his B.O., he checked his hair, he checked himself in the mirror to make sure it was himself looking back and him and not - you know, himself.

There was a metallic tang to his heartbeat, and his mouth was dry. He was nervous. Of course he was nervous, it was his first date. First date with Jeremy. Michael had been on dates before.

Losing his virginity. He really was stuck in the body of a nerd. Michael’s first boyfriend had been in the seventh grade, the minute he came out of the closet, and his latest boyfriend he had only broken up with...

Michael checked his phone before remembering that time had no meaning. It was recently. He had recently broken up with his last boyfriend. He wasn’t in love with him, and he genuinely wasn’t too broken up over it. They had been drifting apart for a while. He had lost his virginity to his third boyfriend at fifteen. Now there was a guy who he had been in love with.

No point in ruminating. This was a relationship that he had never experienced before. Michael shook away all thoughts of Will, of Jose and Raj and Brandon, and pretended that taking Jeremy out on a date was only scary because of the evil robot and not because he was the only boy who he had felt this way about for a long time.

The strong feelings were about the danger. The weirdness, the dance numbers, how this reality wasn’t even real. He had just been having a lot of feelings about everything lately. There were a lot of things to be emotional about. It wasn’t anything else.

Okay. Michael took a deep breath, exhaling as he opened the car door and walked towards Jeremy’s front door. That was the fake Michael talking. Not the real Michael. Emotions were not his middle name. No emotions about this.

Michael knocked on the door. His heart was beating triple time.

No emotions. It was just a date with his best friend. A date that his two other friends were planning on completely ruining for the good of the universe.

His mouth was dry.

No emotions. He was great at no emotions. It was his forte.

The door opened.

Michael suddenly felt a lot of strong emotions all at once.

The Squid arched an eyebrow, crossing its arms as it stood in the doorway. Michael had literally no clue as to how it consistently kept manipulating reality despite being some kind of mental projection, but it was definitely pulling its best bratty younger sister impression. Michael felt
whiplash from the expected rise of love, wonder, and fear, and instead was smacked in the face with the salty tang of burning hatred.

“Uh,” Micheal said intelligently. “I’m here to pick up Jeremy?”

*He’s still booting up.* The Squid sighed, truly put out, and leaned backwards to call up the stairs. *Jeremy! Michael’s here!*

Something crashed upstairs. The Squid rolled its eyes again, and Michael had the distinct impression that Jeremy had been spending the entire morning freaking out and annoying the fuck out of it. They both waited patiently until a pair of feet thumped down the stairs, and Jeremy practically flew down the steps before he remembered just in time that he was supposed to be playing it casual.

Jeremy collided with the floor so he could greet him in some kind of cool, affable way, but whatever he wanted to say died in his throat as he turned around and saw Michael. He waved weakly.

He looked good, but Michael had expected that. He was wearing a striped button up shirt, trendy sneakers and a supreme brand jacket. It was more streetwear preppy than Michael’s own jacket, but the resemblance was there. He was wearing a black muscle shirt underneath, highlighting his mysteriously apparent muscles.

But even as Michael checked Jeremy out approvingly he saw that Jeremy’s jaw had truly dropped. His eyes were wide, drinking in how his best friend had apparently grown a fashion sense and become weirdly attractive. It occurred to Michael that even as he had been mildly freaking out because Jeremy had started out his pretend best friend and had transformed into something far stranger, Jeremy had legitimately been best friends with Michael for twelve years and now he was on a date with him.

At this rate Jeremy was going to say something very un-cool and make the Squid yell at him, so Michael tapped into the memory of puppies and smiled at him. “You look great.”

Jeremy was still staring. The Squid sighed, pinching its nose. *Anything. Anything will work here.*

“You look great too!” Jeremy interjected. “I like your...everything! Clothing - new?”

“I went shopping,” Michael said dryly. He spun his keys on his finger. “Christine, Brooke, and Rich are trying to pull me away from dork central.”

“Right,” Jeremy said. He glanced at the Squid every two seconds, desperate for a cue, but it was clearly still a little peeved at him and just kept its arms crossed. “Christine, Brooke, and Rich. Your new friends. Our new friends. A date!” The concept clearly just occurred to Jeremy, as if he had forgotten that his best friend had shown up at his doorstep mildly attractive and that the Squid looked like it wanted to die. “Us! Let’s go!”

*The picnic basket, darling?*

“I’m not forgetting the picnic basket!” Jeremy cried, and turned on his heel to sprint towards his kitchen, where he had stashed the basket and blanket they were going to sit on for the outdoor theater. The Squid and Michael let him go, and he had the distinct feeling that for quite possibly the first time ever they were experiencing the same sentiment: Christ, this guy.

It rubbed its temples, turning back to Michael. *This was your idea. When you regret all of your life choices that lead to the point of taking this loser out for date I want you to remember that.*
“Jeremy could never be a mistake,” Michael said stubbornly. The only mistake here was a mistake
of God that this situation was happening at all. “Besides, aren’t you supposed to be helping me?
This is your fault too.” Maybe more accurately, Michael was helping it. Either way it wasn’t a
sentence that he had ever wanted to say.

As a quantum nanotechnology supercomputer all of my decisions are precisely calculated to have
the best possible outcome. Every move I make is guaranteed to further the goals of both me and, by
extension, Jeremy. Something in the kitchen thumped and clattered to the ground. It looked pained.
My personal preferences do not factor into it.

“Is that why you’re such a dick?” Michael asked, fascinated. It would have been confirming a long
held suspicion of his. “You’re just one of those kindergarten teachers who hates kids?”

Jeremy skidded back into the living room, holding the insulated plastic picnic basket in the crook
of his arm and a tightly wound blanket in the other. “Let’s go!”

The spiteful supercomputer shot Jeremy a look, one that Michael couldn’t interpret but apparently
one that Jeremy knew all too well. He straightened, letting Michael take the picnic basket and
blanket and put them by the door as he pretended he couldn’t see Jeremy comb himself over like a
dog looking for fleas.

It was methodical, starting at rearranging his hair and moving down to straighten up his outfit and
fix his posture, ending at even fixing his shoelaces so they were perpendicular. The Squid stood in
front of him, arms crossed as Jeremy frantically tried to prove that he could tie his own shoelaces.

When some kind of invisible standard had been reached Jeremy smiled uncertainly at it,
completely ignoring how Michael was staring openly at them. His tail was practically wagging,
tennis ball in his mouth.

*Cut it out on your twitch.tv impersonation.* Jeremy flexed his hands out, holding them stock still. It
sighed and brushed invisible lint off his shoulders, lightly straightening his shirt and correcting his
posture. It grabbed Jeremy’s chin, turning his head up and down and to the side as it inspected for
something only they could see. *Your heart rate and blood pressure is up.*

Of course he was afraid. The robot was terrifying to Michael, much less its actual victim. But
Jeremy just bit the inside of his cheek. “Yeah. It’s Michael. And me. On a date. Us.” The sentence
was weird enough to Michael, and he couldn’t imagine how Jeremy felt. “I don’t want you to - I
want to make you proud.”

*Oh, Jeremy.* It smiled benevolently down at him, clasping its hands on his shoulders. Michael
would sacrifice a goat to Ares if it would make that stupid robot stop touching him. *You haven’t
managed that yet.* Jeremy didn’t react. *But cheer up! I’m sure you will this time. Just remember
everything I said.*

“You said a lot of things,” Jeremy whispered.

*Good, so remember them.* Jeremy, who couldn’t memorize a shopping list, subtly panicked. It just
laughed, kissing Jeremy on the temple. He scrunched up his eyes. *Have a nice time and enjoy your
Shakespeare. After all the work I put into getting you two together there’s no way you’d fuck this
one up. Right?*

“He,” Jeremy said.

*I thought so.* The Squid stepped away and clapped him on the back, subtly pushing in towards
Michael so they were left facing each other, shocked and afraid of each other and of the world. *I’ll give you two a little privacy. But not too much. Just pretend that I’m not even here. Toodles!*

On that charming note the Squid turned on its heel and disappeared, and left the two boys alone with the full awareness that neither of them could pretend that it wasn’t there even if they wanted to.

They stared at each other helplessly, Jeremy clearly still mentally revisiting the Squid’s words as if he could pick them apart through sheer repetition. Michael couldn’t help but wonder if Jeremy was happy the Squid was gone or afraid because he felt as if he couldn’t handle anything without it.

Out of lack of any better way to handle the situation, Michael grabbed the picnic basket and hoisted it up. “Do you want to go?”

Neither of them really did.

“Yeah,” Jeremy breathed. “We can do that.”

They stood still, looking at each other. Jeremy really did look nice. He had a button up shirt and form fitting jeans, on the masculine side of skinny. His hair really was perfect. Michael wondered what Jeremy was seeing in him. They had both changed.

“Well,” Michael said, “gotta go.”

“Yep.”

Nobody moved.

Okay, he was interjecting just a little bit too much Michael Mell in here. Michael sighed and moved to grab Jeremy’s hand so he could tow him out the door.

But Jeremy shied away, swallowing a gasp and clutching his arm to his chest. He released it in the next second, as if he could pretend that Michael hadn’t seen him refuse to touch his best friend, and Michael abruptly felt like a complete and total tool.

He opened the door instead, slipping through as he let Jeremy catch up to him with no further words said.

The outdoor theater was a large theater manned by the local city college, locked smack dab in the museum district and boasting a beautiful stage with a relatively small collection of seats that you had to pay for. The real appeal was how it was located at the space of a large, rolling green hill, and you could park yourself way back over from the stage and have a picnic and talk without any worrying about disturbing the play or the other patrons. Picnic blankets littered the hill, children running amok and young people drinking up a storm as everybody looked for a free and somewhat classy good time.

It was a pretty great date spot, with something to fill the space if the conversation subsided, and something to ignore if your conversation actually turned interesting. You could even heckle the stage in a primal bonding activity of hating something together, which did wonders for facilitating that warm connection between two young nervous queers.

The car ride over was unbearbly quiet. This was probably the most awkward date Michael had ever been on, and that seriously said something. The previous top contender was when Alec dragged him to a Magic the Gathering convention at the very first date, and Michael had basically wanted to kill himself the whole time. It goes to show that nowadays Michael and Alec would bond over
It took a very frustrating ten minutes to even try and find a parking lot before Jeremy worked up the courage to say something. “Um, Michael?”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.” Damn, was he going to have to parallel park? Michael couldn’t parallel park in either of his lives.

“You’ve been acting...weird lately.” Jeremy fiddled with his seatbelt strap. “Not that it’s bad, but it’s just...weird. I don’t know.”

Hypocrite. “I just made some new friends.” That was for sure. “I’m going to circle in the zoo parking lot, keep an eye open.”

“Fourth row down from exit L, three spaces in,” Jeremy immediately said. Michael gritted his teeth. So much for leaving them alone, robot. Still, he went for it. Jeremy took a deep breath, clutching onto the strap. “Since when do you even like hanging out with people?”

“I don’t,” Michael said truthfully. Was that car even moving? Children splattered the lot like sesame seeds, only with more screaming. “I just clicked with Christine, and she came prepackaged with other friends. It just kind of happened.”

“And Rich?” Jeremy asked quietly. “Did you click with him?”

Michael’s immediate reaction was a knee-jerk ‘Fuck No’, but he did have a secret identity to keep up. Still, it was Rich. “I’ve been helping him out with play rehearsal.” That was one way to put it. “Look, is it honestly that weird to have friends other than you?”

“Yes,” Jeremy said bluntly. When Michael managed to finally, finally find a parking spot he pulled the car in, setting it to park so he could twist around and meet Jeremy’s eyes. They were still clouded and a little distant, but he was more there than Michael had seen in a while. “Look at me. Look at you! Our clothes are nice, I don’t stutter anymore, and you don’t constantly smell like weed.” Jeremy bit his lip, clearly fighting the urge to escape the car, escape to anywhere so he wouldn’t have to have this conversation. He took a deep, shaky breath. “You know I took the pill and you know that it actually worked. It really, genuinely worked.” He turned pleading eyes at Michael, as if he had magically not noticed that Jeremy had been doing his best Elvis impersonation for the past two weeks. “I’m cool now. But you didn’t even need it.”

Was he jealous? Michael would understand it if he was. Michael didn’t have to swallow a Raspberry Pi to get dumped inside a musical where he didn’t feel like playing a socially awkward nerd. “Maybe you inspired me,” Michael said lightly. “Maybe I wanted to be the kind of guy who deserved you.”

Jeremy flushed. “You know, I thought the same thing.”

It was cold inside the car, the September air whistling in through the cracks. It hadn’t gotten truly cold yet, but it was far from hot. Michael, who had grown up - somewhere, was used to it. It may have made an outdoor picnic a strange idea, though.

“If we have to change,” Michael said hesitantly, “I’m glad we changed together.”

It had been the right thing to say. Jeremy sagged, giving Michael his first true smile of the day, and he couldn’t help but return it. “Being allowed to talk to you is the absolute best. Dude, Rich has the newest Super Shooter Sublimation at his place. Have you been playing it? It freaking rocks!”
“Oh yeah,” Michael said blithely, not knowing what he was talking about. “Love me those first person shoots. I love the...story mode.”

“I know, right? So much pathos in the intergalactic love story!”

And then he was off again. The light switch of Jeremy’s irrepressible nerdom had been flipped back on and he was back to his annoying ranting.

Michael tuned him out as he delved into the many facets of Bayonetta and how she was secretly feminist or something. The theater was a good walk from where they had parked, because museum district parking is a bitch, and as Jeremy finally released the pressure he had been under for two weeks Michael couldn’t help but smile. Maybe listening to Jeremy ramble on wasn’t so annoying after all.

They were almost there by the time that Jeremy dropped in a casual compliments on the physics of Super Smash Bros Wii U.

That could not fucking stand. Michael gasped, scandalized. “You take that shit back! Melee is the only decent Smash Bros game in the competitive sphere!”

Jeremy threw up his hands. “There’s such a thing as modding! You can still have a decent competitive game with the better graphics and array of characters. Classic is not always the best.”

“When melee is the best even without modding,” Michael said flatly, deeply offended. “You can’t just mod all the other games and expect them to measure up.” Unbelievable. “Besides, Bayonetta is so freaking broken.”

“They nerfed her!”

“There’s nothing wrong with Brawl and Wii U if you’re playing casually,” Michael lectured. “Shit, I like playing casually. But when it comes to competitive stuff modding and fancy tricks will never substitute for the real thing.” He paused. “And Bayonetta is fucking cheating.”

And so it went on, and on and on, but Michael found himself slipping casually into Jeremy’s spiels as if they had been exchanging them their whole lives. Michael realized for the first time that Jeremy wasn’t naturally this talkative - actually, Michael tended to do most of the work. But Michael had been so quiet lately that Jeremy had felt the need to fill in the silent spaces between the beats of their friendship. So Michael mocked him for it.

What a tool.

They were different now, but since both of them were it was okay. Michael had been so caught up in his conversation with Jeremy that he barely noticed his feet walking by muscle memory up the hill where the theater was. Jeremy laughed when he tripped over his feet, and Michael swung the picnic basket to hit him in the kneecaps in retaliation, and soon enough they were both fruitlessly trying to kick each other in display of masculine dominance.

Then Jeremy stopped, and guiltily straightened up and fixed his clothing again so he could pass the concession stand and climb up the hill with Michael in a far more refined way. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes, but as Jeremy stopped to tug at his shirt again Michael took the opportunity to check his phone.

Stephanie Hsu : We’re on the far side of the hill next to the spotlights. Locked and loaded and ready to go.
Michael typed out a response.

**George Salazar:** We’re here. Jeremy score 7/10

**Stephanie Hsu:** :D We’ll wait until scene 3 to strike.

**Stephanie Hsu:** Nice job in picking out the play, by the way! I love this one. It’s so ironic.

Hamlet? What was ironic about Hamlet?

But when Michael looked over he saw that Jeremy had picked up a small stack of brochures from the concession stand they had passed. Michael caught a glimpse of the title and wasted no time in snatching it away from Jeremy, eliciting an offended squeak.

Great. Just great! Jesus fucking -

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead?” Michael cried. “Are you fucking shitting me?”

Jeremy slowly tugged the brochure out of his hand, spooked. “It’s noon, dude. Hamlet’s at three. It’s one of those cool double features where you have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then the play opens directly into Hamlet with the exact same actors, and -”

Jesus Christ!

It was laughing at him. It was totally laughing at him.

Jeremy spread out the blanket, and Michael tore himself away from his righteous anger to help him set out the food. There was a peculiar sort of excitement in withdrawing food from a picnic basket. Even if you already knew what was inside it was always an adventure. The food was good, too. Hummus and plantains and all that white people food.

“You went shopping, huh?” It was a far cry from mashed potatoes.

Jeremy looked away, cheeks red. “I’m on a new exercise plan. I needed a good diet.” His eye twitched. “I was eating junk food all the time like a pig.”

“If you’re a pig I am too.” Michael sat down next to him, but keeping a safe distance. There were rules to these things. You went for the old arm around shoulders about two hours into the movie, then you made sure he could smell your awesome cologne. “Relax! I’m going to watch this narratively ironic play and I’m going to fucking like it.”

“Uh, okay?”

Of course, like was a strong word. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was an intellectually interesting play, but one that basically featured two guys standing on stage flipping a coin for ten minutes. Besides, Michael was feeling increasingly called out.

He resentfully watched the two actors flip the coin again and again, landing heads each time for eighty times. It was supposed to demonstrate how they knew they were in a play and how everything was made up and the points don’t matter.

Out of sheer spite he dug out a quarter from his pocket, double checking it to make sure that it wasn’t weighted or double headed. Jeremy, who had been watching the play with confused interest, gave him an equally confused look.
Michael flipped it professionally, letting it land on his arm. “Call it.”

Jeremy shrugged, humoring him. “Heads?”

Michael checked the coin, groaning. “Heads.”

For the sake of Jeremy’s sanity he made his next ten coin flips a little more surreptitious. The Squid probably noticed, but the Squid probably thought it was hilarious, so who cared.

He was so occupied in flipping heads for the twentieth time that he almost forgot he was on a legitimate date. Maybe a date. With a fictional character. It should have been hard to forget.

Instead it was easy, easy when Jeremy actually understood one of the jokes and laughed, easy when he finally looked up from his increasingly frantic coin tossing to see Jeremy passing some Pita bread to him with a hesitant smile.

“This is different,” Jeremy said inanely.

“Yep.”

They sat on the blanket, incredibly awkward. Michael wondered when the second scene was going to pass. Jeremy was leaning back on the blanket, and Michael figured it was time to stop pretending to be absorbed in the personally offensive play.

He scooted a little closer, letting his knee knock against Jeremy’s. He stiffened, and Michael had a brief second to kick himself before he relaxed. Jeremy scooted a little closer too, but they both pretended that he didn’t.

They watched the play together in companionable silence, something Michael and Jeremy had so rarely experienced but welcomed all the same.

Then they heard a shout from a fair way down the hill, and they saw a diminutive figure stand up and face them, waving happily.

“Michael? Jeremy! Hi!”

Jeremy started, squeaking as Michael mimed surprise. Oh, wow. What a coincidence to see you here, Christine! No, please come here and eat our food. We insist.

They did nothing of the sort, but Christine was excellent at following a script. She beamed happily at Jeremy, practically bouncing over towards them. “What a crazy random happenstance to see you here!”

“Hi Christine,” Jeremy said dizzily. He retracted his knee from Michael’s, curling up a little closer on himself. “You’re at a play, huh?”

“I go to literally every play!” Laying it on a bit thick, Christine. But Michael made appreciative and welcoming noises regardless, and accepted a high five from her. “I can’t believe you two are here at a play! Crazy, right?”

“We’re on a date,” Michael said smoothly. Jeremy choked on his spit. “Want to join?”

Jeremy twitched, and hurriedly jumped in, “That’s not really necessary -”

“I’d love to!” Christine yelled, while somehow keeping her voice down. There was no point - everyone around them had realized that they had accidentally stumbled into a philosophical treatise
on the nature of fiction, and had long since stopped paying attention. “Do you mind if I bring a few friends in?”

“Actually,” Jeremy said quickly, “I think -”

“Sure,” Michael said over him. “The more the merrier, right?”

“Fantastic! Luckily, I’ve brought everyone I know. “

“Wait,” Jeremy said, losing track of his life, “what?”

Christine’s oppressive enthusiasm had distracted them from the small hoard approaching them, but once she gestured theatrically to the teenagers rapidly encroaching on their small gay oasis Jeremy began sweating.

That was a generally proper response to seeing Brooke. She was dressed up pretty nicely, with her formal sweater instead of her everyday one. They looked pretty similar. Musical characters weren’t really known for their outfit diversity. Tagging along behind her was Chloe and Jake, who looked varying degrees of happy to be here, and Jenna, who was clearly just happy to be included. It had been a stroke of genius including Jenna.

Rich was lagging behind them, lugging their own oversized picnic blanket, expression carved from granite. The boy was either not very good at facial expressions or way, way too good at them.

Christine happily directed their migration, Brooke controlling the crowd with subtle maliciousness. With a flurry of teenage giggling, enthusiastic back slaps that demanded to be returned, and Michael faking a look of embarrassment, in a few short minutes the impossibly awkward date had turned into a group outing.

Score.

The Squid fizzled into existence, thoroughly unamused as Michael didn’t bother to hide how smug he was. He did his best not to pay Brooke any special attention. They probably shouldn’t tip their hand.

You realize you’re cock blocking yourself, right?

Chloe and Jenna had dived for Jeremy’s throat, depositing themselves on either side of him and grilling him about his love life. Jeremy was doing his best not to display the appropriate reaction on behind flanked by Chloe and Jenna, but he wasn’t doing so hot.

“So you and Michael, huh?” Chloe gushed maliciously. “I totally called it. I hope we weren’t, like, interrupting anything.”

“Just go back to whatever you were doing.” Jenna was holding out a camera and was obviously filming them. Michael had to admire her entrepreneur spirit. Real life yaoi fetched a fortune on the black market. “Really, it’s like we’re not even here.”

Jeremy shrank in on himself, breath hitching. Michael couldn’t keep back his smile of grim satisfaction. Sometimes to foil a Squid’s plans you had to break a few eggs. Eggs in this case being Jeremy’s composure.

I was under the impression we had the same goal. The Squid stood behind Jeremy, who was well aware. You’re ruining your own chances.
“Jeremy deserves friends,” Michael said calmly. “Not that you would know.”

He deserved friends more than he deserved Michael. Pursing romance, chasing after a guy and turning on the full Squid induced charm - it was all bullshit. Boyfriends didn’t make you magically happy or cool or whatever. Michael would know.

It was too late. Whatever kind of romantic macho bullshit the Squid was going to try and pull, the same shit it tried to pull in that closet in the theater room, was done with.

Have fun having fun, asshole!

The concept of Brooke’s crush/sex object being gay clearly thrilled Chloe, and she was practically oozing excitement and smugness. Jake was grinning vapidly, confused by the concept of two guys on a date.

“So, like, you two are…” he made an interpretive gesture that failed to make sense, “Right?”

“You’ll have to be a bit more specific, buddy.” Michael offered him some pita bread, which he easily devoured. “You called us faggots like a month ago.”

Jake made a noise of acknowledgement through the bread, and Michael patiently waited for him to finish. Jeremy’s ears were burning red. “Christine told me all about it. Love is love or something.” He nodded sagely. “I get it. You’re a cool guy, Jeremy. I don’t care if you’re into dick or whatever.” Something clearly occurred to him, and he grinned and shook Jeremy’s shoulder in companionable masculinity. “Now I don’t have to worry about you sleeping with any of my exes! Sweet!”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said weakly, “sweet.”

But he was smiling too, small and hesitant, and Michael couldn’t help but gently bump shoulders with him. They smiled at each other, and the mood was somehow lightened.

The play raged on, and the teenage party with it. Brooke, who already had a history of getting her rocks off by royally fucking with Jeremy, had skittered the bar into first gear as she relentlessly sweet talked him.

“So Michael totally took me to GameStop at the mall? I, like, loved it?”

Jeremy adorably perked up. “Really? Popular girls go to GameStop?”

“Yeah, Brooke,” Chloe said waspishly, as if she was a five year old was trying to steal her Barbie back from Brooke. When the Barbie was on a date. A gay date. A gayte. “Popular girls go to GameStop?”

“I’m popular and I go to GameStop,” Brooke said reasonably. “It was fun. I totally bought Breath of the Wild. I think it’s going to be a blast.”

Jeremy’s tail was practically wagging. “You play Zelda? I love Zelda!”

Ha! Argue with that, Squid! Brooke’s smile was perfect and pure. “I really think it’s the coolest. Link is just so hot.”

Score. Jeremy’s eyes were wide as dinner plates, nodding slowly. “So hot.”

“I like Animal Crossing,” Jenna volunteered, playing with her fingers. “The animals are so cute? I
swear I’m not a furry.”

“I just adore Animal Crossing,” Christine gushed. It was true. She had an Animal Crossing aesthetic tumblr. Michael hadn’t wanted to know this. “Can we switch Friend Codes?”

“I have no idea what’s going on,” Jake said excitedly. “Is this like Halo?”

“Let’s all play Halo,” Christine swore. “As best friends!”

Jenna high fived her. The Squid was gritting its teeth.

Below them Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were gesticulating. One of the actors, confusingly similar to the other one, brandished a hand and spoke clearly into his microphone. The spotlights shone down, and if Michael closed his eyes he could feel their own spotlights burning the back of their necks.

“Our do on stage things that are supposed to happen off,” Said Rosencrantz, or maybe Guildenstern. “Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else.”

You’re telling me, dude.

Jeremy. These children are ruining your chances.

But Jeremy was laughing, caught up in Chloe’s snide impersonation of Dustin Kropp, and he wasn’t listening.

Jeremy.

“I’ve always wanted to learn about competitive Smash,” Brooke gushed, despite Christine only having whispered the concept in her ear five minutes ago. “Bayonetta looks like such a feminist icon?”

Jeremy!

“That’s what I keep on saying!” Jeremy cried. “She’s so confident in her sexuality!”

The Squid was done with warnings. It squatted down behind Jeremy, chin just barely brushing the top of his head, and gripped the roots of Jeremy’s hair, working its fingers in until Jeremy winced with pain. Move closer and put your arm around Michael.

Jeremy did so, and Michael let him. His arm was heavy across his shoulders, and it was impossible to miss how his arm was curling away from Michael as much as possible. Jeremy’s breath was still hitched, and Michael stayed stock still. He wished he could do something.

He had known that this might happen. But he had to. A little discomfort now, but it would be good for him in the long run. This would be good for him in the long run. Michael had a cold heart. He could do this.

It released him - didn’t it? - and rose, hands clasped behind its back. Jeremy subtly wheezed. Closer. You look like you have a gun pointed at you.

Jeremy adjusted his body language, pressing himself closer against Michael, and Michael obligingly leaned into it. Jenna whistled, taking a picture of them, and Michael felt more than saw Jeremy twitch.
“You didn’t tell me this was going to be a group date,” Jeremy said lightly. He was slurring his words a little, as if his tongue was thick or his lips were numb.

“I didn’t know,” Michael lied. “But you know Christine, always going to plays. Statistically it had to happen.”

Liar. He didn’t want to be alone with you. The Squid straightened, hands clasped behind its back and surveying the arrayed children with a sneer. He thinks you’re disgusting.

“I don’t mind,” Jeremy said. His eye was twitching hard. “It’s nice having them here.”

Everybody thinks you’re disgusting. Your whimpering is disgusting. Nobody likes children who whine.

If Jeremy really was whimpering it was only mental. He was smiling weakly at Jenna, nodding as she blabbered on about how the school totally deserved a GSA. Maybe Jeremy should start one?

“I’m very busy,” Jeremy demurred. He smiled at Michael, small and shy and perfect. “I still have to think of ideas for our second date.”

“Our first one is going so great,” Michael said woodenly.

Your limbs are a privilege, Jeremy. I don’t think you deserve them.

Michael’s blood ran cold.

The arm around Michael’s shoulders was cold and limp, and it wasn’t Jeremy’s it was the Squid’s, Jesus, Jesus -

Michael practically threw the arm off him, ignoring Jenna’s concern. Christine noticed, and she immediately dived to cover for the both of them like a hostess at a cocktail party. Jeremy still hadn’t moved, breathing slowly and evenly, and Michael’s skin crawled.

It was just so disgusting. Michael didn’t know if this was worse than all of the groping. What he wouldn’t have given to be stuck in Singing In The Rain instead of a black comedy with a creepy robot.

There was nothing he could do. Michael gently took Jeremy’s hand, both for appearances and for himself, and gave Jeremy the gentlest smile he could. Gentle like a spotlight, like a sonnet, gentle like someone who was trying desperately to care.

“I’m glad I’m here with you,” Michael said quietly. “Despite everything.”

Jeremy cleared his throat, mouth dry. When he spoke again his speech was still slurred. “Me too.”

For the first time since the Squid manifested next to them Jeremy turned his head and spoke in an aside. “Can I have them back?”

Impossibly, offensively, the Squid snickered. Say the magic word.

“Please,” Jeremy whispered. “Can I please have them back?”

The Squid inspected its fingernails. Try begging.
That was it. Michael cut in swiftly, tugging Jeremy’s hand in until he captured his attention. The hand was curled up into a loose, frigid claw. “Is the guy in the caravat Rosencrantz or Guildenstern? I can never tell them apart.”

Nobody had really been paying attention to the play. The Squid rolled its eyes as Jeremy placidly squinted at the stage. “I think he’s Guildenstern. Or maybe Rosencrantz. Does it matter?”

“I would think it matters to them,” Michael said glibly. “What do you think about the...the meta narrative themes? Of...the play within a play? Shakespeare does that a lot. Hamlet has a play within a play within a play. It’s turtles all the way down, right?”

A play within a play within a play...when Hamlet came on after this it would be a play within a play within a play within a play. Of course, that was why Michael wasn’t sticking around for Hamlet. The sooner they could successfully convince Jeremy of the unconditional support of his friends the sooner they could get out of here. The Squid could manipulate Michael into doing what it wanted, but not the whole group.

How could something invisible control the tangible? How could a machine of neurons influence the machines of flesh?

“You’re a child,” Michael said out loud, not realizing it was true until he said it. “You’re just desperate for attention, aren’t you? If Jeremy isn’t worshipping you then nobody knows you exist.” He whistled. “That has to suck.”

Anger flashed across the Squid’s face, lightning quick and powerful, before it wrestled a cruel expression over its vulnerability. Jeremy hunched in on himself a little, understanding that it was mad but not knowing why, and he opened his mouth to apologize again before Michael squeezed his hand. His hand was warm again, clasping lightly onto his own, and Michael let Jeremy retract it, clutching it to his chest. His breathing had slowed, with his jaw going slack in a strangely funny expression. Jake was laughing at one of Christine’s jokes, innocent of crueler people. Chloe was fixing her eyeliner pointedly at Brooke, still under the impression that she was as bad as it got. They were teenagers, real or not, and their brightly colored musical world was pure and simple, in its own way. Chloes were bitches, Jakes were jocks, and Jennas were gossips.

Michael wanted to ruin it, smash a hammer through their obliviousness and scare them into seeing how cold the world really was, but he wanted to protect it too. They were contradictory impulses, but in their own ways the same.

Anthropomorphization? Really? Nothing’s beneath you, is it? It dug its fingers into Jeremy’s hair again, just to prove a point, and Jeremy’s breath hitched. Brooke bit her lip, and Rich slowly stood up and moved to crouch next to them. His face was still blank. Inanely, bizarrely, Michael felt bad for him. He was even more powerless than Michael was. Maybe he had mistaken that powerlessness for callousness. I’m a robot. Robots can’t be petty.

“But you’re a child,” Rich said, unimpressed. “Seriously?”

Michael couldn’t help it - he burst out laughing. From the other side of the blanket Brooke swallowed a snort, but Michael may have been the only one who noticed. The Squid was gritting its teeth again, and it rounded on Rich.

Excuse me? Rich obediently cowered, but it didn’t really look like his heart was in it. What’s next, are my pet pigeons going to revolt?

“I only have a gerbil, sir,” Rich panned. Michael snorted down another laugh. Jeremy wasn’t
noticing the conversation at all, only ever half-aware of the tug of war over his psyche. His breathing was deep, and when the Squid released its grip he practically fell over. His eyes were glazed over.

“I have a cockatoo!” Christine volunteered, finally having placated Jenna. She sidled up to sit next to Jeremy, carefully holding his hand and checking his temperature. It occurred to Michael that she didn’t really get into conversational death matches with the Squid very often. Lucky her. “Those things are impossible to get a handle on, though. I don’t know how I did it.”

*You think you have problems.* The Squid pinched the bridge of its nose, exhausted of children and their varied neuroses. Serves you right for trying to control four different teenagers at once. They could be cowed but the sass would never end. *If you actually had a gerbil I would make you strangle it, Richard.*

“That’s why I don’t have a gerbil.”

*That’s it.* It snapped its fingers and Rich shivered. *What is he doing, falling asleep? Wake him up, you’re going home.*

“He put himself on do not disturb,” Rich protested innocently, or as innocent as Rich ever got. “He said you would take care of me.”

*I’m relinquishing my custody rights. Head home now or you’re in for it.*

Rich shrugged. Jake was sitting at the front with Jenna, who were both apparently actually getting invested in the play. “J-Man! Wanna head out? I need a booze break.”

But Jake just absentmindedly made shooing motions at him. “Hold on, dude. We’re just about to find out if Rosie bro and Guild homie die.”

“Seriously?” Christine asked, unimpressed. “How stupid did you write this guy?”

How stupid was anyone in this play? No wonder she had torpedoed that ship so fast. Rich just shrugged innocently at the Squid. Again, for a given value of innocent. “Sorry, sir. It would be suspicious.”

*Were you always like this?* The Squid asked, exasperated. *You used to be docile. A stupid, immature teenager who sang our songs and pushed our pills. What happened to you?*

On the stage beneath them Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were on a ship, carried towards their fates, the backstage of their last lines. Their real deaths had been offstage, the news of their real fake fates carelessly dropped in a throwaway line. But in their own play, in their own lives, the supporting characters reigned.

Rosencrantz, or maybe Guildenstern, looked at the sky in stoic resignation. “We’ll be free.”

“I don’t know,” Guildenstern, or maybe Rosencrantz said.

But Rich just looked up at the Squid, arms crossed over his knees drawn up to his chest, as placid as Rich could ever be. Beside him Jeremy was leaning on Christine, eyes far away. He was smiling.


On stage the two actors, the only actors, met their fates together. Rosencrantz, and it was definitely
Rosencrantz this time, carried the emotional final scene. “We’ve come this far...and besides, anything could happen yet.”

Anything could happen.

Michael had a thousand snide comments for the Squid, a million more assurances to drive home the fact that they were mortal enemies, the moustache twirling villain and the intrepid hero, but he just reached for Jeremy’s hand instead.

When Jeremy didn’t wince away he squeezed it, and found a smile as he leaned in and spoke clearly so he could hear him. “Do you like the play?”

Jeremy mumbled something. Christine, from where she was propping him up, didn’t touch him any more than she had to. He was limp, almost sinking into her shoulder, and his weirdo height made him almost drape over her head. No wonder dude was so tall, his actor has to be thirty. Of course, they all looked like teenagers.

*I drugged him*, the Squid said impatiently. Michael had figured as much. *There. Now at least one of you doesn’t talk back to me.*

Michael delighted in ignoring him. “I had a pretty rocking date, dude.” He squeezed his hand, finding a gentle smile. “Where do you want to go for our second one? LAN party? Arcade?”

The touch brought Jeremy back to himself, grounding him and letting his eyes focus in again. He smiled weakly at Michael, more a reflection of Michael’s own steady affection than any real joy. “Bowling.”

“Seriously?” Probably not seriously, but Christine was giggling. “Shit, man, let’s bowl up a storm. We’ll rent clown shoes and everything. My treat.”

Jeremy giggled, high and plastic, and slumped lower over Christine. “Yay.” He reached out a hand and patted her knee. “Y’can come.”

“Can Rich come?” Christine asked, as if it was actually important. Granted, Michael was beginning to soften up to him, but still. Rich. “Short people make excellent bowlers. I read it in Scientific American.”

“Yeah,” Rich said, “uh, what the fuck?”

Jeremy was cackling now, burying his face in Christine’s hair. It was, quite frankly, adorable. “I love Rich! I love bowling. I love...” he squeezed Michael’s hand, as if it meant anything at all. “I love fucking...”

His speech slurried, almost falling off of Christine, and she frantically tried to prop him up. The end of that sentence didn’t matter. Guy was high, he was having a deep and personal affinity for bowling shoes now. It wasn’t important. What was important was that Jeremy was safe, and not being molested by evil robots, and maybe that he would be happy someday too. In that happily ever after.

On stage Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had finally gotten around to fulfilling their own destinies. Guildenstern was squeezing his friend’s hand, one last time. “We’ve traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.”

Jeremy rocketed upwards, careening off of Christine like a pinball, and he had the biggest and
dopiest grin on his face. It was adorable.

“I love Michael!”

It didn’t matter. That was why Michael could say it back.

“Shit, dude,” Michael said, inexplicably choked up. “I love you too.”

“Michael Mell loves Jeremy Heere!” Christine cheered. “It’s just like in my fanfic!”

“Was he high in your fanfic?” Rich drawled.

Christine looked sketchy. “Depends on the fic.”

Michael Mell loves Jeremy Heere, overcome by their momentum, moving idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve -

“Dude!” Jake called, desolate. “They’re totally dead!”

Brooke was filing her nails next to him, pretending that she hadn’t been listening in on the whole thing. “They were totally gay for each other.” She winked at Michael and Jeremy, only one of which had shame. “Really? Jeremy loves Michael?”

Sitting next to the picnic blanket, cramming chips in her face, Jenna was snickering over her phone. “And I got it all on video.”

Great. Just great. Chloe was looking over Jenna’s shoulder, and her and Brooke’s snickers of schadenfreude were disturbingly similar. Maybe it was like with old married couples and how they started to look the same after a few decades, only with bitchiness.

“This is totally going on Instagram.” Chloe was already opening up the video Jenna sent her. Her glittery fake nails tapped in a staccato beat against her bedazzled iphone case. “I’m going to get so many followers.”

Kill me now. It didn’t even look mad, just resigned. Iconis & Tracz save us from eternal teenagers.

Were they eternal teenagers? Was Chloe destined to stick her tongue out of the corner of her teeth forever, giggling over SnapChat? Or would her life only extend so far as the production, or even only so long as the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were dead, doomed kin a throwaway line in what was otherwise the world’s most famous play.

What happened if you lived through the play?

Shit, Michael didn’t know. He didn’t even know what would happen if he lived through real life. Go to college, probably. Pay taxes. He didn’t know if he should pity the swarm of teenagers or envy them.

Play’s over. The Squid professionally clapped its hands. All of you get out of my sight. Date achievement unlocked. You can now access level two of romance. Michael really didn’t like the sound of that. Agreeing to work with you was quite possibly the worst decision I’ve ever made, so just make a note of that.

“It’s the only decision you’ve ever made,” Christine pointed out. “We were supposed to be the spanner in the works, right?”

Yes, you’re in the third standard deviation of horrible. I’ll have to run some nonparametric tests to
get the story back on track. Michael really, really didn’t like the sound of that. It snapped its fingers at Rich, who scrambled up. Richard, you take Jake home. The minute you get back to your house hop on the groupchat. I am going to be having serious words with you two.

Rich winced. Michael had the feeling that words weren’t going to be the only thing they were having. “Yes.”

Yes what?

“Yes, sir.” Rich sulkily started packing up the picnic basket, and Christine rushed to help him. The girls were standing around chatting again, and Brooke was the only one who helped Michael pack up their own stuff. Jeremy was too high to really help. It was a good thing Michael had driven them there.

They were packing up to go, stretching and yawning as they pretended that they had actually paid attention to the play, and they were all exchanging hugs and promises to text over the weekend as the Squid hovered over Christine stuffing apple cores in a plastic bag and babysitting the very high Jeremy. It said something to her in a low voice, and even as Michael strained to hear it he was distracted by Brooke shoving the rolled up blanket in his hands.

She leaned in close, masking the motion by smacking her gum and angling the blanket. She was covered in dirt flecks and glass clippings from the picnic, but her eyes had an uncanny glint to them that he had never seen. “That shitty Keanu Reeves look alike is supposed to be the evil robot? All it did was make lame computer puns.”

Michael choked on his spit.

He quickly straightened up, double checking to see that the Squid was currently getting chewed out by a very enraged Christine and that Rich was pasting on a smile for a philosophical Jake. This was not supposed to happen. He ducked back down, spreading the blanket even more over them in what was probably a really sketchy move, and tried not to let his panic show.

“You could see it the whole time?” Could she hear it? Could her little fictional mind comprehend the nature of her reality?

“Duh. He’s hot, I guess, but so not my type.” She bent over the picnic basket, pretending to shove something in as Michael leaned in to help her. When she spoke again it was even lower. “What kind of asshole pulls his partner around and drugs him because he isn’t getting enough attention?”

“The kind of asshole who lives in Jeremy’s brain now,” Michael said flatly. He decided not to comment on Brooke’s choice of phrase. It was as good a word as any. “You do know that it’s supposed to be fucking invisible? How can you see it?”

“How can you?”

Great. Michael bit his lip to keep from screaming. Time to rampantly make something up again. “Christine and I were there when it activated. It - uh, synced us? So it could talk to us?”

Brooke opened up the picnic basket, withdrew an apple, then put it back in the basket. “Yeah, you talked about your chess game from hell. Honestly, I don’t care why I can randomly see it now. Maybe it’s like in Percy Jackson. Once you know the Mist’s there you can see through it.”

It was as good of an explanation as any. It wasn’t something he could afford to worry about now. Brooke hadn’t broken the fabric of reality yet, and so long as Christine didn’t start showering her with Pinkberry fanfiction she wasn’t about to. Yet. “Look, the SQUIP doesn’t know that you
know. We need you to be a chaotic element right now, okay?” A brief, horrible memory flashed in his mind. A hand on a thigh. A smile. A repetition. “It can threaten Jeremy in order to blackmail me and Christine into doing whatever it wants. If you can’t hear its threats it can’t threaten you.”

Brooke smirked, schemes dancing behind her eyes. “Wild card.”

“Wild card,” Michael agreed. “Come on, let’s draw the curtains on this play. I’m getting hives.”

Sure enough, on the stage far below them the techies were already setting up for Hamlet. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were dead but they would live again, and the inescapable wheels of the tragedy would churn. Whatever Michael’s fatal flaw was he didn’t want to hear it.

The date from hell dissipated, and by the time that Michael waved goodbye to the increasingly tolerant crowd, exchanged significant glances at Christine and Brooke, and began packing Jeremy into Michael’s car, he was thoroughly exhausted.

Poor Jeremy was still a little loopy, but he was coherent enough to pat him on the head as he slid into his car seat. Michael locked it, and on a hunch he stepped back and craned his head so he could see the Squid standing on the hood of the car.

It smirked down at him, arms crossed in an eerie mimic of their previous confrontation in the garage at the mall.

“I’m picking the location next time.

“Didn’t like the play?” Michael asked innocently. He swung the picnic basket around, feeling the scraps of food and uneaten apples roll around inside. “I thought it was very thought provoking.”

Funny. I won’t let you sabotage your own date a second time. It jabbed down a finger at him. Our deal was that you would drive him to be as cool as possible so you could snag him and play Christine’s part in the finale. The play ends and everyone’s happy. You must stop choosing ‘Remind me later’.

Michael crossed his arms. “Our deal was that I snag him and have him unbrainwash the Squids through the power of love.” Even better, stop him from brainwashing in the first place. If he could somehow show Jeremy how he feels, if he could somehow even develop those feelings, then the finale wouldn’t have to happen at all.

Our deal was that I manipulate him to Squid - SQUIP the school out of a desire to attain you. It bared its teeth. Making him feel ‘loved’ and ‘accepted by his friends’ will not do that.” It dripped the phrases ‘love’ and ‘accepted by his friends’ with complete condescension. I’m picking the next date night. None of your cute friends are invited. It will be very romantic and somewhat traumatizing. It raised an eyebrow. How traumatizing is up to you.

Whatever. Michael dug around in his picnic basket and found one of the uneaten apples. Before he could think better of it, he casually lobbed it at the Squid.

It caught it, surprising the both of them, and the Squid experimentally looked it over before shrugging and biting into it. Its eyes widened.

“Never had food before, huh?”

I’m a robot, I don’t eat. But it kept on chewing the apple anyway, like Brooke with the slushie, hesitant before wolfing it down.
Michael quirked an eyebrow. “Same way robots aren’t petty?”

You’re more tedious than Tetris. Without further ado it dumped the whole apple in its mouth, core and all, and Michael watched with fascination as the Squid swallowed and made whirring noises as it semi-digested the apple.

Once it finished swallowing it turned back to Michael, but its sneer was somehow weaker than before. My person will call you. It waved its hands in a cute toddler ‘bye-bye’ motion. Say goodbye to Jeremy’s sanity! Bye, now!

It turned on its heel and blipped out, and Michael was left to try and figure out how to explain to Jeremy’s dad why his son went to a Shakespeare play and came back high.

He didn’t need to worry. Mr. Heere wasn’t even awake. It was three in the afternoon, and Michael threw an arm around Jeremy’s shoulders and dragged him inside, dumping Jeremy on his now immaculate bed in his now immaculate room.

It really was immaculate, every surface wiped and soaked in lemon scented cleaner. There were no toys anymore. No action figures, no Transformers, no boxes of comic books cluttering the corners. Jeremy’s room had always been a mild example of the total organized chaos of Michael’s room, but they had always complimented each other in their own ways. The room should have been as familiar to Michael as his own, twelve years of friendship spinning the hot summer days away playing video games at Jeremy’s house. But it was the house of a stranger instead.

No. It was the Squid’s room.

Jeremy lay sprawled on his bed, his stylish outfit askew, and Michael couldn’t stop himself from sitting next to him and fist his hands in the blanket. He wanted to touch him, to stroke his hair or even just put a hand on his arm, but he knew Jeremy would hate the touch if he was sober and that he shouldn’t take advantage of him just because he was high. That monstrous robot had ruined a lot of things for him.

But when Jeremy turned his head to look at Michael it was as if he had seen him for the first time since the picnic, and his jaw slackened. He cleared his throat, but when he spoke his speech was still slurred.

“Michael? What’s going on?”

God, he wanted to lean closer. He wanted to comfort him. All Michael could do was offer a shaky smile. “I took you home from the play. You just get some sleep.”

“Why is my head…?” Jeremy raised a hand and let it drop in an interpretive gesture. “I can’t think…”

There was no socially acceptable code of conduct for what to do if your best friend slash love interest slash acquaintance was involuntarily drugged by his brain robot, so Michael settled for smiling as gently as he could. He probably wasn’t going to remember much of this, thank god. “He helped you relax. It’s just...just the sedatives.” Michael swallowed. “They’re just sedatives. You’ll be okay tomorrow morning.”

Jeremy face crumpled. “But I don’t want ‘em.”

“Yeah,” Michael said, “I know.”

He couldn’t stick around any longer. The Squid would keep an eye on him. This was too much.
Michael swept out the door, feeling like a coward, feeling trapped, feeling the phantom tingle of sedatives nestling in the corner of his own mind and sapping his soul from his borrowed body.

Michael left Jeremy’s house afraid, but that really wasn’t anything new.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Slightly longer chapter to make up for missing last week! I'm really embarrassed by how long this story is. Sorry, guys. I got carried away.

A week passed in fits and spurts, marked by Zombiepocalypse and jogging, internet forums and scheming, Christine and Brooke and even Rich.

Christine knocked on his door on a frigid Sunday afternoon, and Michael ignored his parents cackling over him having more than one friend in favor of letting her in so they could turn Michael’s room upside down looking for the Mountain Dew Red. He was glad she had volunteered to help him - when he opened up the door to see her he had been under the impression that she was here to help him beat Zombiepocalypse.

He had horrible headaches a lot, a pinching and twisting of his temples, and sometimes when he thought too hard about the nature of reality he had to go lie down. He wondered if this was what an existential crisis felt like. Only, you know, real.

By the time that Michael gave up looking his strategically messy basement had been stirred into actual messiness. He was stuck rifling through his third cabinet, pushing aside old Pokemon cards as if he could magically find what he was looking for behind Bulbasaur. He sighed and stood up.

Christine, who was occupied going through his second grade book reports, shot him an impatient look. “Don’t you dare drift off again, Michael. Are you sure that it isn’t in his room?” She kicked a precious childhood relic stuffed shark, watching vindictively as it skittered across the floor. “I have no idea why one teenage boy needs so much crap.”

“Makes up for the emptiness in his life.” Michael surveyed the room - the now slightly dusty game consoles, thank god, the moth eaten tapestries and the faint hiffs of weed from a lifetime long since passed. “Every Sailor Moon figure is practically having a real friend.”

“Congratulations on being the most popular guy in class.” Ouch. Maybe the novelty of meeting her favorite fictional character in person had hardened her to the world. Maybe she had just been having a very stressful month. That was fair too. “If we don’t find this soda then the Squid is going to make Jeremy laugh at its unfunny jokes for the rest of time.”

They all still had play rehearsal together. Michael, Christine, Brooke, and even Rich were all being forced to watch Jeremy and the Squid play besties. It had gotten to the point where every time the Squid materialized Jeremy reflexively began smiling. Because you should smile more, Jeremy! Give us a smile!

Creep.

Michael took a deep breath, exhaling softly and trying to let the frustration and fear drain out of him. He stood in the middle of the room, quietly shucking his jacket and leaving it draped against a bookcase, and took several more deep breaths.
“What are you doing?”

“What,” Michael inhaled - one - and exhaled - two. You were no longer in your body. You were your body. You are more than your body.

Then Michael thought really, really hard about Zombiepocalypse.

He thought really, really hard about Bob Marley.

He thought about Jeremy’s lips, about his biceps and his skill in Super Shooter Sublimation 2, his ugly little dog toy laugh and gigglesnort. He cast his consciousness backwards, threw himself over the cliff of reality and the present into the distant cotton-wrapped yesterday.

Jeremy seeing a puppy in the park and losing his shit, running forward and laughing to pet the puppy because it was his favorite kind, because it was a beagle and Jeremy just loved beagles so much.

Michael opened his eyes.

He looked around his basement, still pleasantly relaxed from the gnarly meditation or whatever. He liked weed for relaxing better, but that hipster stuff was pretty cool too.

“Aw, man! This place is a total disaster zone!”

Christine rolled her eyes, rummaging through Michael’s desk drawers for the tenth time. “You can clean it up later. Does Michael have an attic? Maybe he stashed them in the attic.”

Uh. Michael cautiously waved a hand. “Michael does not have an attic. Does Christine know what Christine is looking for?”

“What do you mean you -” Christine rounded on him, hands on her hips, before she froze. Her jaw dropped as Michael shifted uncomfortably, unused to cute girls staring at him. Or, you know, talking to him. He had no idea how they had even become friends. “Shit.”

“I’m concerned.” Granted, Christine was a little concerning at the best of times, but still. Michael’s closet was turned upside down, his bed sheets pulled up so everything under his bed could be pushed out of the way, and half of chest of drawers were left open. “I thought I invited you over to set up our Pathfinders campaign, not to tear apart my room.” A genius idea occurred to him, and he snapped his fingers. “Unless we’re looking for Legos to build our maps with! My Legos are absolutely fucking everywhere! Christine, you’re a genius!”

Christine screamed into her fist.

But she cut off abruptly, darting forward to grab Michael by the arms and give him a less than gentle shake. Her expression was Christine-brand thunderous, but there was a sour tint beling a very real temper honed by chronic stress.

“Michael! Legit Michael! Do you remember buying a case of Mountain Dew Red?”

How could he forget? Tenth best day of his life. Michael sighed dreamily. “It was only the highlight of my discontinued soda collecting career. Its lifespan on the shelves was but only a mayfly’s breath. They say that somewhere out there lies the fabled Diet Mountain Dew Red, but many believe it only a myth - nay, a legend.”

“So you have it,” Christine flatly. “It’s a thing that you own.”
“Are you kidding?” Michael puffed out his chest. “I wrote the Mountain Dew Wiki page on it! I’m probably the only person that has any in the city!”

“I should start videotaping you when you’re like this for blackmail.” Christine pinched the bridge of her nose. Someone was having a tough day. “Where is it, Michael. Where did you hide the discontinued soda.”

“Why would I hide discontinued soda?” Michael asked blankly. “It’s in the garage fridge next to the durians.”

Christine gaped at him for a long second before turning on her heel and ricocheting out the door. Michael really wished he knew what this was about.

He waited patiently for Christine to come back, head buzzing with cotton wool. His brain felt strained, as if he was trying really hard not to think about something even though it was bursting at the seams. He tried to remember if he had done anything really embarrassing lately that he was trying not to remember. Nothing was coming to mind.

In record time Christine was jumping down the stairs with both of his 2 Liter bottles of Mountain Dew Red.

He winced at her three point landing. “Can’t you be gentle? They’re going to lose their carbonation.”

“They’re thirty years old, Michael. They died a natural death long ago.” She cradled them both protectively to her chest, scanning the room with narrowed eyes. “We need a really good hiding place for these. I totally wouldn’t put it past the Squid to make Jeremy break into your house and steal your discontinued soda.”

The thought of Jeremy and the Squid in matching black turtlenecks and balaclavas was hilarious, but she hadn’t started making any sense. “What would an evil robot want with my old soda?” His expression darkened. “Maybe it’s jealous.”

Christine took a deep, calming breath. She exhaled, and upon finding that she hadn’t attained serenity she gave up. “The soda deactivates the Squids.” She took another deep breath, exhaling softly. The serenity had not reared its ugly head. “Repeat that back to me.”

“Repeat what back to you?”

Her eye twitched. “That the soda deactivates the Squids.”

Michael squinted at her. “You know I don’t speak Mandarin, dude.”

“Okay, I give up.” Christine propped the two bottles of soda under her armpits and fetched her cute turtle tote bag. She carefully slid them into the bag, moving aside her stim toys and pens so they didn’t mark it up. “I’m borrowing these. I don’t trust you to remember not to drink them all in a late night World of Warcraft session. This is for our own good, Michael.”

“Are you seriously stealing my soda?” Michael cried, incredulous. “I can stop collecting any time I want! Put that back!”

But she just clutched her bag closer to her chest, pouting with determination. “Search your feelings, Michael. You know this to be true. I must steal your soda.”

This was unbelievable. He never should have started making friends with actual women. They
always steal your discontinued soda. “Holy shit, you can’t just take my stuff.” He made a reach for it, but Christine jumped back and tightened her grip. “Give that back!”

“I can’t! You’ll forgive me when you’re more...or less...yourself!” She hid the bag behind her back, as if he seriously couldn’t see where it was, and made an expressive head nod that was probably supposed to convey something. “This is an excellent time to snap out of it, by the way. Your innovating and disturbing problem solving has provided the solution. So just,” she jerked her head towards the door, as if she was politely asking him to leave. “Go back to being you?”

This was seriously what he got for inviting women in to his man cave. Not that there was anything wrong with girls, but they tended to be inscrutable at the best of times. Besides, Christine was his first friend who was a girl. And his second friend at all, generally. There had to be a learning curve. Be patient.

Wait. This was Christine. All of her weird behavior could be traced back to one source. “Are we doing play rehearsal?” Is that why he invited her over? He didn’t really remember doing that at all, really. It was probably for play rehearsal. “Was I supposed to be in character this whole time? I totally zoned out on who I’m supposed to be playing, dude.”

Christine groaned. “It’s more like trying to get you to stop playing somebody.”

His head was seriously beginning to hurt. “Did I give you any of my weed?” Michael pressed a hand to his temple, wincing. “You’re still making no sense.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Christine said glumly. “You’re...I don’t even know who you were supposed to be playing.”

“Cool. Neither do I.” Michael wandered back over towards his TV, digging through his bin of SNES games. Maybe he could convince Christine to play one. She couldn’t replace Jeremy, but nobody ever could. Besides, a player three didn’t sound so bad.

Yeah. When all of this was over, that’s what they would do. Him, Jeremy, Christine...even Brooke and Rich. They could have a Smash Bros tournament. They weren’t bad people. Maybe he should give them a shot.

Christine had given him a shot. He had the bad habit of trying to make everything about himself all the time. It wasn’t hard when all you had was yourself.

Well, yourself and your best friend. But they had both had lifestyle changes recently. Michael had started hanging out with real life women and Jeremy had started dating an evil robot. You know, the normal evolution of teenage relationships.

“What play did you want to run lines for?” Michael ran his fingers down the game boxes. One player game, two player game that he used to always play with Jeremy, JRPG, two player game that he used to always play with Jeremy. They were all dusty. Michael hadn’t actually been playing video games in a while. It hurt too much.

Right?

“You really don’t want to know,” Christine said faintly. Michael picked up an old copy of Spore, beating back the memories of playing it with Jeremy. “Look. Uh, Michael. Can you help me with a character? I’m having problems getting a read on him.”

The request was almost a relief, saving him from having to admit that video games weren’t making him happy anymore. He leaned against the TV stand, feeling the glass brush up against his chest. If
he made some interpretive gestures and a fake smile he could be mistaken for a talking head on Fox News.

“Is this the guy you want me to read lines for?” Christine nodded guiltily. “Okay, shoot. Give me the casting call.”

She hugged the soda tight to her chest, the mysteriously important soda to compliment the mysteriously important theater geek. Something about him had just clicked with Christine, in a way that he had never clicked with anyone else besides Jeremy. Something about her had been familiar and easy, even though people had always been hard for Michael. She was someone who he actually liked.

“Uh. Male, 16. Ethnicity...uh, something. He’s an athlete, but not really a jock. He’s really smart, which means he kind of thinks he’s better than everyone else. He has no patience for anything, isn’t afraid to make fun of people, and he’s always trying to do things by himself because he thinks that he’s the only one who can. As if there aren’t actually other cast members in this play. There are many different cast members, Michael.”

“Noted?”

Christine took a deep breath, puffing out her cheeks. Her brow was heavy in thought, and Michael realized that she had never really relaxed. “But he’s really brave too. And once he bothers to care about people he’s pretty good at it.” She faltered. “I don’t know if our characters are friends. My character’s a socially awkward nerd with no actual friends, and she’s so high strung and she talks too loudly all the time, and she just rants on about stuff nobody cares about endlessly and she’s really ugly. So I don’t know why he would be friends with her.” She clutched the soda tighter to her chest, as if she was worried it was going to run away. “I was really, really happy to meet you, Michael. You have no idea. You, Jeremy, Christine and Brooke and even all the self-confident popular girls and the dumb jocks with surprising depth. You and Jeremy just always seemed like you’d be my friends, no matter who my character was. That was the appeal, you know?”

It had turned into more of a confession than a casting call, but Michael found something strange pulling at his heart, as dusty as his video games. “I’m glad we’re friends too, dude. You’re pretty cool.”

“It says a lot about my life that the real, actual Michael Mell telling me I’m cool is only 95% awesome.” When Christine smiled reassuringly at him it was somewhat forced. “And you two are great, really. Everyone’s been great. It’s weird, because here I have all the friends I could ever want. I’m cool and popular and I’m a total action hero.” That was pretty self-aggrandizing for Christine, but she had always been confident. It was kind of her thing. “But I just want to know if he even likes me. I mean, my character. Because he won’t tell me anything and I’m sick of not knowing. I know we only reason we even know each other is because we’re stuck on this sinking ship together, but...” she shrugged helplessly. “I just want to know if we’re together, because being apart doesn’t sound like fun anymore.”

Michael wasn’t really great with complicated relationships like this. He wasn’t that great of an actor, and he clearly wasn’t as much into method acting as Christine was right now.

Still, it was Christine. They were the only two people in this world who were alike. He had no choice but to understand her. Even if what she was saying made no sense.

“It looks like the two characters are the leads, right?” Michael scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I’m not really hip on the musicals. But in Final Fantasy Seven when Cloud refused to emotionally commit to Tifa and the rebellion due to childhood trauma and a soldier’s background, Tifa refused
to let him forget his childhood promise to her. I guess your character should just hold my character accountable for being a hero.” He smiled weakly at her. “The power of friendship always works in fiction, right? The power of friendship will see you through this. If it’s anything like Scott Pilgrim it’ll give you a level up.”

Christine stared at him for a long moment, as if she was trying to draft an appropriate response but couldn’t remember her lines. But then she just giggled, a high pitched and reedy snort, and Michael couldn’t help but laugh too. “It’s a musical! Of course the power of friendship is real. It has to be! The fabric of reality depends on friendship!” As an antisocial nerd Michael wasn’t too sure about that, but whatever floated her boat. “Thanks, Michael. You helped more than you know.” She jutted out her lip, posing heroically. “I’ll save the day when you’re too busy having multiple personality disorder to help. And you’ll save the day when I’m too busy being asexual to care about boys. Our friendship will save the day! And if it doesn’t I’ll - I’ll make a call-out post on Tumblr!”

“You’re problem solving skills are as impeccable as always,” Michael said flatly. He pointed at the door. “Steal my soda and lay off tricking me into listening to your friendship speeches.”

But Christine just laughed again, making Michael grit his teeth. “You were totally bamboozled into listening to me talk about my feelings! I knew I would find the courage someday!”

An awkward stab of guilt punctured his gut, and Michael dug his hands into his jean pockets. “You could have just said something, you know.” Probably. He might have listened. “For the record, I don’t think we’re stuck in a sinking ship together. I think it’s more like copiloting the Millennium Falcon. The kessel run is, like, Jeremy’s love.”

It wasn’t a sentence he would have said two months ago, but Christine wouldn’t have been the person who he would have said it to a month ago. She giggled, finally slipping the sodas into her tote bag. She had play rehearsal soon after this, and there would be no time for video games. Maybe next time. “Is Princess Leia Brooke? She’s so badass. Or is Jeremy Princess Leia? If Jeremy’s Luke we can totally work in some Han and Luke shipping, since they’re obviously the best couple. Or maybe the Squid’s the Emperor and Jeremy’s Darth Vader!”

“Please leave my home.”

“If I had my phone I could show you pictures of all of my lightsabers!”

“I have no desire to see those.”

Christine silently pointed to the top of a bookshelf, where Obi-Wan’s lightsaber sat on display. Busted.

He shoved her out the door as quickly as possible, partly out of fear that his inner nerd would rear its ugly head again and partly because she might make him talk about his feelings and he had no time for that. He didn’t know where she was going to hide the soda and he had made a point over not knowing. He really had no idea how much he could trust his brain right now, and if he ever left themselves vulnerable because he didn’t understand the danger they were in he could never forgive himself. It would be a royally stupid way to die.

But he could help but falter as he waved Christine out the door, tote slung over her arm and a purloined bottle of sparkling water under her elbow.

He took a very, very small pinch of Michael Mell for courage and said, “I don’t really want to call you my friend.”
Christine froze on his front steps, then quickly busied herself with looking inside her tote bag and not meeting his eyes. “That’s cool, I guess.”

“Because I don’t think it’s the right word,” Michael continued. “I have tons of friends. I eat lunch with them and I send them pictures on Snapchat and I hang out with people I don’t want to hang out with. You’re more than a friend.” He clenched his fist, and he didn’t know why it was so hard to say. “You’re my co-star.”

She lifted her head, eyes wide. “Is that like being best friends,” she breathed.

“No, it’s like we’re the only two real people in a musical!”

“So what you’re saying is that we’re musical best friends.” She was grinning ear to ear now, and Michael felt a little embarrassed that he had never bothered making her happy before. “Fictional best friends are best friends for life!”

“I already have a best friend,” Michael said stiffly. “His name is Jeremy and he’s holding hands with an evil robot right now. You’re a co-star. A conspirator.”

Her eyes practically fucking sparkled. “We can make this a three player game.”

“Those don’t fucking exist.”

“If we bring in Rich it can be a four player game. Like Legend of Zelda: Four Swords!”

“I don’t want Rich fucking knowing where I live!”

“What about Brooke? She already knows where you live!”

“Fine!” Michael cried, surprising himself. “We’ll all be besties and - and care about each other like only fictional people do! Power of friendship! Whatever! Get out of my house!”

She got out of his house, but she was much happier than when she knocked on his door. She had probably never had a best friend before, with all of her friends fictional characters who she deeply understood and who understood her. Michael could sympathize. There was nothing about real people that was possible to understand.

Real friendships weren’t like fake ones. They were messy and weird and you bugged each other a lot, and there was always drama and you weren’t always there for each other. Real best friends didn’t go through such ridiculous lengths to save your best friend from robots.

Real best friends didn’t have goofy friendship songs.

Michael locked the door behind her, whistling ‘Two Player Game’ as he descended his basement steps to try and draft a decent workout schedule.

The next day Michael skulked into school with prescription Wayfarer sunglasses, embarrassed to be taking on the world.
Brooke clapped appreciatively when she saw him, looking up from where she was copying Christine’s math homework, which was mostly a concise repetition of the twelve times tables. Christine was reading a large, generically thick library book next to her. The text was almost too tiny to read, but she appeared very invested anyway.

“I think the biker gang kids hang out behind the dumpsters before school.” She snickered. “If you run you’ll have time for a joint before class.”

“Smoking makes me paranoid,” Michael said flatly. He pulled out his regular chair, dropping his backpack on the floor with a harsh echo that rang across the exhausted library. They tended to spend time before school in the library, playing paper football and discussing battle logistics over copying homework. “I’m not happy about them either.”

“You aren’t happy about anything,” Christine pointed out. She squinted closer at the book. “I think this is the actual content of the book.” She wrinkled her nose. “Why are you so racist?”

Rich didn’t move from where he was napping in his chair, forehead pressed against the grimy table and completely still save for his shallow breaths.

“Can brown people be racist?” Brooke asked, with the voyeuristic fascination of the white teenage girl confronted with race relations. “Isn’t that, like, systematic?”

“Not in this book he isn’t,” Christine said darkly. She shut it, sticking it inside her bag. “This is forbidden knowledge. Forget you saw anything.”

Well, when Christine told him to forget something for his own sanity she was usually right. Michael shrugged and promptly did so.

Brooke’s phone pinged. She rolled her eyes and flicked the screen on - a puppy, predictably - before seeing who the text was from and resolutely shoving the phone away from her. She folded her hands in front of her, lifting her chin as her phone pinged again.

And again. And again. Michael and Christine, accustomed to what had quickly become an Olympic sport, avidly watched Brooke flex all of her willpower in ignoring Chloe’s texts.

“She’s dedicated,” Christine admitted. Chloe’s new texts appeared to be entirely expressive emojis. “It takes a lot of self confidence to pull off the deca-text maneuver.”

“Don’t you dare answer it,” Michael warned. “Remember your vows.”

The phone pinged again and Brooke’s hand twitched. Somebody sent her a Snapchat. Brooke blinked hard.

“Be strong,” Christine urged, “Strong like our bisexual hero Wonder Woman!”

Apparently Wonder Woman still existed here. Christine and Brooke had indulged in a girl’s night sleepover 70s Wonder Woman marathon, christening her coming out with bisexual super ladies and rainbow cake. Instilling Brooke with positive queer role models was working wonders.

“I’m putting my foot down,” Brooke recited to herself. “I’m putting my foot down. She can come back when she respects me. I deserve respect.”

“And gosh darn it, people like you!” Michael pushed the sunglasses up, squinting at the whiteboard on the other end of the room. The titles of the new arrivals were written in large, blocky text. “Does that say Goldbury Newer books?”
The girls shot him bizarre looks, and Michael knew that he shouldn’t have asked. He slipped the glasses down over his nose again - Newbery Award Winners - and he had to fight not to grind his teeth. The last thing he needed was a defective mouth too.

Brooke leaned forward in her chair, ignoring the buzzing phone for favor of snatching his sunglasses. Michael squawked as she slipped them onto her own face, pulling them off much better than he did. She looked around, the dark rims complimenting her soft blonde hair nicely. “I totally thought you were just wearing these because you were, like, high? But your vision is totally terrible?” She lowered them, shooting him an accusatory look over the rims. “You don’t wear contacts. Since when does your vision suck?”

“Good question,” Michael said woodenly.

Truth be told, he had been having problems with his vision for a while. It turns out that when you randomly stop wearing your glasses your parents notice, and after Christine left his mother had dragged him to a surprise optometrist appointment.

He freaked out his mother and the doctor by doing far better than his usual. He freaked himself out by doing badly at all. Now he was stuck with new glasses, which he blatantly refused to wear, prescription sunglasses, which made him look like an asshole indoors but matched his jacket, and an unsettled churn in his stomach.

The new horn rimmed glasses were in his backpack. His mother had sworn up and down that she’d get him contacts soon, so he just had to hold out until them. This was the hill he was going to die on.

“This is bad,” Christine said unnecessarily. She chewed at a fingernail. “Am I going to get ADD? That sounds really inconvenient.”

“Why did I ditch my real friends for three weirdos?” Brooke wondered out loud. She squinted down at her paper. “Wait, why is my math homework just the twelve times tables?”

Rich shot upright, eyes heavily bagged and red rimmed, and had just reached forward to snatch her paper from her when the library doors opened to the sound of a very familiar fanfare. It tingled the edges of Michael’s temporal lobes, a kind of pop princess remix of the Squid theme, and it left Michael with a thoroughly unpleasant twist in his stomach whenever he heard it.

The popular kids of this teenage high school drama strode into the library as if they were the popular kids in a teenage high school drama. Chloe’s outfit was practically spandex wrapped in costume jewelry, Jake was literally spinning a basketball on his finger, and Jeremy was hovering close to Chloe’s right as they sparkled their way into the library. Chloe tapped furiously at her phone, making a show of looking around for Brooke.

The popular kids always lingered outside of the library, posing for the passerby and making themselves visible to prove how much more fun they were having than everyone else. None of them were especially literate, and when Michael’s group had started hanging out inside the library it became easy enough for Brooke and Rich to quietly slip in. Chloe had always been too busy looking out to see Brooke disappearing behind her.

She was looking now. Jake waved happily to Rich, who visibly struggled to paste on a matching vapid expression and wiggle his fingers back. Brooke bent back over her times tables, hair falling in a curtain around her face.

Jenna tapped Chloe on the shoulder and whispered something in her ear, pointing at Michael’s
table. He and Christine scowled at them as Brooke bent down further over her paper.

“Brooke? Why are you hiding in here?” She shook her phone. “Why are you ignoring all of my texts?”

Christ, what an attention whore. Princess complexes were less entertaining once you realized that your world had a literal center of attention, and it wasn’t you.

The literal center of attention was decked out in his usual Vineyard Vines ensemble, smiling vapidly as Jenna chatted his ear off. Michael scanned the crowd for the Squid. It wasn’t always following him around, pretending that it had other things to do with its runtime, but it usually popped into existence whenever it saw Michael. Mostly for the express purpose of fucking with him or loudly describing to Jeremy how supple his biceps were. Michael had almost considered fishing out those dorky headphones from under his bed so he could blast indie rock and pretend that the Squid wasn’t perpetually talking about him to Jeremy, but it would have been cowardly. Michael Mell was only sometimes a coward.

But it wasn’t there. Michael absentmindedly stole his sunglasses back from Brooke, who was too busy humming the Wonder Woman theme song to herself in order to escape Chloe’s shrill shrieking to care, and he pushed them on again as if the new prescription would magically make it pop up from behind a bookshelf.

It didn’t pop up from behind a bookshelf. It didn’t even materialize. Like pulling back Oz’s curtain a lean, electric blue figure sparked into visibility behind Jeremy.

It was the Squid, tinged with bright blue and pixelated at the edges. Its hands were clasped behind its back, uninterestedly surveying the scene, occasionally twitching a few of its fingers and letting sparks jump off and disappear into bits and bytes. Blue veins stretched across its face like a circuit board, and its eyes were shining a pure bright blue. It was a gaming laptop with a Tron skin.

When Michael pushed his sunglasses up the Squid disappeared again, and there was nothing but empty space behind a coolly affable Jeremy.

He pushed his glasses back down. The whites of the Squid’s eyes were bright blue, and as the rest of the world took on a vaguely amber tint the Squid stood in stark relief.

He pushed them up again. No Squid. He pushed them down again. Creepy Squid.

“Whoah,” Michael breathed. “My sunglasses can see cyberspace.”

Jeremy noticed him staring, and hastily stapled on a cool and rugged expression. He jerked his chin at Michael, subtly posing. “‘Sup.”

Michael rolled his eyes. Charming as usual.

Then Jeremy’s face began to fall and oh, shit - “Is that a new shirt?” Michael couldn’t believe that this was his life now. “You look good!”

Of course it was a new shirt. All of his shirts were new shirts. But he perked up and beamed anyway, and Michael masterfully fought down another eye roll for favor of smiling supportively.

“Have you thought about where you wanted to go yet?” Michael asked supportively. Or as supportive as Michael ever got, anyway. “I’m still up for bowling.”

Jeremy, of course, sneered. “And look like a clown? No thanks.”
Christine let her face fall. “But I love clowns.”

“What are you people on?” Chloe shrieked quietly. Jake, from where he was standing behind her, was passively nodding and appreciating the situation as it was, while Jeremy had stopped reacting the moment the others started heckling him. “Michael and Christine, like, whatever, but you two?” She jabbed an accusing finger at Brooke and Rich, neither of which seemed impressed. “I expected better of you two!”

Silence stretched on awkwardly between them, and now some of the other kids in the surrounding tables were shifting anxiously. Brooke’s fists were clenched, and she was staring down at her little times table homework. Michael wondered what she was seeing, what she was remembering. He abruptly felt like a bit of a home wrecker.

Then she stood up, and with a jittering hand she swept her books and binder into her backpack. Christine hastily did the same, and Michael followed her. Rich, who had no possessions, casually slipped out of the chair from the side, landing on the balls of his feet.

“Then I’m sorry to disappoint.” Brooke shrugged on her backpack, refusing to meet Chloe’s eyes. “But that’s nothing new, is it.”

She flounced out the door, her sidekicks scrambling after her, and Michael couldn’t help but look behind him at a poker faced Jeremy. Because he knew it would be a bad idea, because he knew that he wouldn’t want to see, he slipped his sunglasses on.

The Squid was standing behind Jeremy, and to nobody’s surprise It was standing far, far too close. It was whispering in Jeremy’s ear, and his eyes were growing wider and wider. It was speaking too soft for Michael to hear - but, of course, his imagination would do just fine.

He and his spiteful little squad hung out in an abandoned classroom until school started, and he couldn’t help but give Brooke a supportive high five as Christine hugged her and babbled on about bravery in the face of difficult interpersonal relationships that were, of course, completely solvable and may even end in romance. Rich pretended to go back to sleep.

The rest of the school day was wound up tight in droning teachers, in doodling students and in Michael falling asleep at his desk yet again. He felt so thoroughly himself that in math class the teacher was repeating the word triangle in a mysterious baritone over again, but in Spanish class it took him a solid ten minutes to decide whether the teacher was speaking gibberish or if she was just speaking Spanish. About halfway through the class Michael remembered that he was part Ecuadorian and, in fact, could speak Spanish just fine.

In English class, where the teacher was clutching a book to his chest and heaving empty sobs, Rich stared at the floor a few feet in front of them with empty, half lidded eyes. Michael, who had taken the habit of sitting at the desk next to him but who never had felt quite comfortable with it, tried not to anxiously glance at him out of the corner of his eye every five minutes and failed every time.

His eye was twitching, his hand jerking, and Michael knew that he was talking to his boss. Or his
girlfriend. Or his mom. Whatever the hell they were to each other.

Yes sir, no sir, three bags full. It made Michael sick.

Michael leaned over, poking Rich in the side with a pencil and grimacing when he jumped almost a foot in the air.

“Dude,” Michael stage-whispered. Ha, ha. “Are you okay?”

Rich aggressively twitched in his direction, slouching at his seat. None of your business.

Tough nuts, Rich. It became his business when he signed the love interest contract. “Is she giving you a hard time?”

Rich bit his tongue hard, and his knee suddenly jerked up and banged the desk. Michael hissed in sympathy pain and leaned back, the harsh sound echoing through the room. Some of the kids around them startled, swiveling their heads to look at Rich and quickly look back away in case he noticed that they noticed him.

“Fuck off, Mell.” Rich kept staring straight ahead, teeth gritted.

“Is that a yes?” It must have been. Rich was hunching in his seat, turning as far away from Michael as possible, and Michael fought down the urge to flick his new sunglasses on. He wasn’t sure if there would be anything there. Christine hadn’t mentioned if anybody knew what Rich’s Squid actually looked like. “Say one douchey thing for yes, say one slightly disturbing thing for no.”

“If you say one more word I’m going to stuff your urethra down your throat.”

Michael leaned back and quietly bent over his paper, pretending that the teacher wasn’t just waxing rhapsodic about overdue library cards.

Something both douchey and disturbing was probably a check mark in the column of ‘you really don’t want to know’, which was fair.

His glasses were folded in his bag. If he just put them on, then he would really see what monkey had stapled itself to Rich’s back. The thought was oddly voyeuristic, as if the invisible connection between a boy and his Squid was intimate and personal. Michael’s sunglasses might as well have been binoculars poking out from the garden hedges.

Well, stick him in an unmarked van and call him the NSA.

Michael bent over to the side, rifling through his backpack for the sunglasses. No, that was gum -

A chair clattered next to him, and Michael had barely enough time to clasp his hand around his sunglasses and jerk upright before he saw Rich stalk out of the classroom, slamming the door behind him. If Michael didn’t know any better he would say that Rich had ran out.

Of course, that would imply that he was afraid of something. Which was ridiculous. It was Rich.

Michael slipped the sunglasses back into his backpack. His time would come.

The rest of the classroom looked around at each other, shifting uncomfortably before going back to falling asleep at their desks. Spare a few seconds out of your day to wonder about what a freak Rich was, then go back to your everyday scripted life.

The internal conflict about whether to chase after him or stay far, far away from the blast zone was
interrupted by the end of class bell deciding for him. Michael scrambled out of his seat, shoving his crap in his backpack and running halfway down the hallway before he realized that he had no idea where Rich’s next class was. If he was even going to go to class. If it was really even any of Michael’s business.

He slipped on the glasses anyway, hoping the electric tangle that followed Jeremy and Rich around would point him out in a crowd. They were pretty normal sunglasses otherwise, softening the overlit school hallways into a gentler amber glow.

He combed the school, wandering up and down hallways until the crowds began to thin, and Michael began to accept that he wasn’t going to find Rich with this ridiculous method. He was just about to tear them off when he turned the crowd and caught a strain of blue sparking over the head of a brown haired girl in cork pumps.

Michael ripped his glasses off, gaping as he found Chloe Valentine standing outside a boy’s bathroom clutching a toiletries bag and scowling. She was tapping her foot, glancing at the bathroom door every few seconds as if trying to work up the courage to go. But it was unmistakable - Chloe carried the faint traces of her own Squid.

Or maybe Chloe was, just a little bit, a Squid too. He wouldn’t put it past her.

The tardy bell rang, and when Chloe guilty checked the hallway for passerby again she did a double take when she saw Michael. He didn’t know why she was so surprised - she was the one hanging around outside a bathroom like a creeper.

“Mell!” She snapped her fingers at him, like he was some sort of cocktail waitress. “Come here, I need your help.”

Michael stuck his hands in his jean pockets and kept walking.

“Mell!” Chloe snapped her fingers at him again, as if he didn’t notice her the first time. He kept walking, forcing her to turn around and try and wave her hands in his face. “Didn’t you hear me the first time?” She huffed. “You just get your rocks off pretending I don’t exist, don’t you?”

“Brooke’s a bad influence on me.” He was rewarded with a flinch, for a given value of reward. “Good talk.”

But she just bit her lip, and Michael saw for the first time that she genuinely looked a little distressed. He slowed down a little, forcing Chloe to run up and shove the toiletries bag in his hands.

It was pink, plush, and floral. He looked down at it, confused at the way his life was turning out. “Look, I’m not that flamboyant.”

“It’s not for you,” Chloe said waspishly, as if she hadn’t just dumped her makeup bag in his hands. “It’s for Rich.”

“Whoever told you he was bisexual was lying,” Michael said reflexively. “Straight as an arrow, that one.”

According to Christine nobody in this play was straight as an arrow, but that was beside the point. Chloe just rolled her eyes. “God, you wish.” Ew! Ew! Oh god, gross! “Look, you’re a guy, right?” She looked him up a down, lip curled. “Basically?”

“You do know that I’d have to be insane to want to bang Rich, right?” Michael asked urgently.
“You do know that, right?”

“Whatever, Jesus!” She grabbed him by the elbow and tugged him in, and Michael let her pull him in front of the bathroom door. She pressed her ear to it, and Michael cautiously followed suit. “Shut up and listen.”

Michael listened. He heard the stomp and shuffle of feet down the hallway, the faint groan of the pipes, somebody retching, the creaky air conditioner.

A toilet flushed, although Michael didn’t hear anybody else in the bathroom. There was the distinct gag of retching again.

Chloe pressed the toiletries bag in his hands, crossing her arms and looking away. She was biting her lip again. “He just yells at me whenever I try. There’s a travel toothbrush and toothpaste, some mouthwash, and some baby wipes and Altoids and stuff. You’re a guy, and it’s the guys bathroom, so make yourself useful for once.”

The toiletries bag was Vera Bradley. Michael was confused. “Do you always walk around with a throw-up kit?”

“In middle school Brooke and I - oh, never mind.” Chloe batted away the memory with what was quickly becoming practiced ease. “I didn’t until I met Rich. Sometimes he, like, lets me help? But most of the time he doesn’t. Sometimes is enough to keep carrying it around, though.” She shrugged uncomfortably. “But no way I’m stepping inside that nasty-ass boy’s bathroom, so you can give it to him. Pretend that it was yours or something.”

“I’m supposed to be pretend I carry around a Vera Bradley toiletries bag?”

“You’re gay, aren’t you?” Chloe said snidely. “I bet you’re everyone’s GBF or whatever. I bet everyone talks to you about their problems. Go give him baby wipes and a hug.”

Why was she like this? Did she know that she didn’t have to be like this? Or was she just like everyone else, aching for a change inside even as her life was locked inside a script and a musical number. She could care enough about her friend to help him, but couldn’t admit it enough to actually give it to him herself. Because she just had to be Chloe Valentine, and she was too much of a coward to be anyone else.

Michael sucked up his pride. “Thanks,” he said sincerely. “You’re a good friend. I’ll give it to him.”

“Can’t be that good if you keep stealing all of my friends.” Chloe scowled, but her heart wasn’t in it. “I don’t know what you freaking did, making that hottie transfer kid slobber all over you all day and making Brooke totally hate me. I’ve tried apologizing, but she’s just being a bitch because you told her to ditch me.”

“She doesn’t want an apology,” Michael said. “She wants a change. She misses you, you know.”

“I don’t know how to change,” Chloe whispered, and Michael was thrown off track by the sudden flash of vulnerability. “Everyone I know is changing and being friends with you or being really popular but a little unsettling and it’s just different. Bad different or good different...I don’t know, Michael. Which is really fucking dumb, because I’m a straight A student. I, like, know everything.”

“Can I tell you something, man to woman, dick to dick?” Michael smiled weakly, accepting Chloe’s arched eyebrow. “Some people are worth changing for.”
The conversation was too bizarre, and the sounds of retching had quieted in the bathroom. Michael nodded silently at her, and she took the dismissal for what it was and pulled out her phone, leaning against the wall and pretending that she was ruining a sophomore’s self-esteem instead of watching Michael tuck the purse under his arm and slip inside the bathroom.

It was grimy, with a flickering overhead light and graffiti sprawled on the walls, and there was nothing generic about it. Michael quickly scanned underneath the doors and found that the bathroom was empty except for one guy squatting in front of a toilet.

Michael knocked on the door.

“Fuck off!”

“I have a toothbrush,” Michael volunteered. “And baby wipes. Can you let me in?”

No response.

“I don’t really feel like smelling your gross vomit breath all day, dude.”

Nope.

Michael sighed, and bent down on his hands and knees to crawl underneath the door into the stall. The stench was even worse with his nose barely three inches from the floor. The sacrifices he made for the sake of reality.

When he finally wriggled fully into the stall the giant black vans scrambled to the side, and when Michael straightened he was treated to a panting, sweaty, and very unamused Rich.

He didn’t look so good. Of course, he never really did. But there was something intrinsically pathetic about a sixteen year old boy bent over a high school toilet bowl, and Rich barely had time to bare his teeth at Michael before he was throwing up again.

It was just dry heaves. Rich choked over the bowl, gasping and biting down on a half-scream, and Michael silently smoothed his hair back so it didn’t get in the way. Rich let him, but maybe he was just too busy to buck him off.

He fell back, still gasping, and Michael dug around in the bag to offer him a baby wipe. He took it, eyes glazed over and defeated, and wiped his face clean.

“Fuck off.”

“Sorry, a mega bitch made me come in. A promise to her highness is binding.” Michael trailed off awkwardly, not knowing how to address this. There was nothing around to be mad at. His glasses were in his backpack, and it would look pretty sketchy if he were to put them on now. It wouldn’t do any good, anyway. His vision was fuzzier, and the only thing he could really see in HD clarity was Rich and the beads of sweat dripping down on his forehead. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. Fuck off.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“Get the fuck out!” Rich lashed out a fist and banged the stall door, and Michael refused to flinch back as the heavy thump rang through the bathroom. “Go!”

“Was it hurting you again?”
“What do you fucking think?” Rich screamed, strangled and raw, even as the last word collapsed into a gasp. “Fuck….”

Michael thought about the last time he had been in pain, the kind that wrung the soul out like a dish towel and left it crumpled and cold, and how his family and community been too wrapped up in their own grief and discomfort to notice him crying alone. He had acted out a lot back then too.

He dug around in the pack again, and to his surprise he found one of those instant cold compresses. He was forced to wonder again exactly what Chloe knew. He snapped it, letting the gel pack prickle into iciness, and put a hand on Rich’s back.

“Can you move my hand to where it hurts?”

“Where doesn’t it fucking hurt,” Rich groaned. But he shoved Michael’s hand up towards the base of his neck anyway, and Michael let him hold it there as he stood up and unlocked the door to grab some paper towels and clean the remaining mess up.

“I’m taking care of this,” Michael said quietly. “I promise. Christine and I have a plan. We’re going to save you and Jeremy and you’re going to hug all the puppies you want.”

“Yeah, because I’m the fucking one who gets saved.” Rich spat into the toilet again, grimacing as he flushed it again. “Because I’m the adorable nerdy ass motherfucker who gets rescued and saves the day. Newsflash, Mell. I beat up that dork for a year straight. Guy’s terrified of me.”

“Jeremy’s terrified of everyone?”

Rich punched the stall again, and Michael could practically hear his knuckles crack. Rich faced him for the first time, baring his teeth in a snarl but olive eyes rimmed with bags. “I’m the bully, Michael! I’m the school bully, I’m your fucking token evil teammate. Nobody gives a rat’s ass about me.” Rich coughed, sniffing his shirt and grimacing. Michael found a Tide Pen in the toiletries bag. Chloe was thorough. “I’m not the one this story’s about, so go back to pining over Jeremy and let me solve my own problems.”

Michael was silent, only handing over the Tide Pen so Rich could snap it out of his hands and quietly start brushing it over a stain in his tie-dye tank top. His hands were shaking.

“Do they do this to Jeremy too?”

Rich stopped rubbing his shirt. His hands were shaking too hard.

“No,” he said quietly, almost ashamed, “what they do to Jeremy is worse.”

They cleaned up in silence after that, Michael struggling for something magic to say that would solve all of their problems. He couldn’t think of anything so he just helped Rich instead, passing him the toothbrush and helping him clean up the toilet. Rich was pouring the faucet water over his head, shaking his hair out like a dog, and with a crushing sense of disappointment Michael realized that he had to save Rich too.

He had always been distantly aware of it. Save Jeremy, have True Love’s Kiss or True Love’s Mountain Dew Red or something, win the play and save the day. That would help Rich too, and Jenna, and every one of the extras who had to put on glitter tin foil outfits at the end of the play.

Michael seriously didn’t have the emotional capability to worry about two different people. Jeremy in and of himself was a full time job. Michael knew how to save the play, but he didn’t know how to save people. Especially when that person was Rich.
Dude was even more unlikable than he was. That took serious effort.

“Everybody deserves to be safe,” Michael said finally, “it’s not something you have to earn.”

“Please.” Rich gargled the mouthwash and spat. He winced in the recoil, clutching onto his stomach with one hand. “There’s no going back from some of the shit I’ve pulled. Pulling Jeremy into this mess is not the worst thing I’ve ever done, which is fucking sad considering what’s happening to him.”

“Then you’ll get a fresh start,” Michael said firmly. “I’ll guarantee it. I’ll save you, Rich.”

Rich looked at himself in the mirror, fists clenched on the sink rims and searching his reflection for something Michael couldn’t see. Michael, from where he was standing right behind Rich, made a strange and backwards eye contact.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Well, now he was just going to do it out of spite.

Before Michael could open his mouth and accidentally insult Rich the bathroom door banged open, making both boys jump. It shouldn’t have been much of a surprise, considering the fact that this was technically a public bathroom, but Michael’s breath caught at the sight of a panting Jeremy anyway.

For the first time since he had known him Jeremy completely ignored Michael, running over to Rich and grabbing his arm, frantically looking him up and down as if he was going to keel over any second.

“Are you okay? It said that you got in trouble!” He sniffed the air, catching sight of Chloe’s open toiletries bag on the sink. More specifically, the Tide pen and the mouthwash. His face fell, and Michael knew that this wasn’t the first time that Jeremy had to see this. “Rich?”

“I’m fine,” Rich said gruffly, shrugging Jeremy’s hand off. “He barely touched me.”

“He wouldn’t hit you so much if you just -” Jeremy strangled himself off, registering a frozen Michael for the first time. His eyes widened and Michael slowly reached down to pick up his backpack.

“I brought toiletries,” he said inanely. “Chloe -”

“Get the fuck out of here!” Jeremy snarled, and Michael stumbled back in shock. He had never seen Jeremy’s expression twisted like that before. He brandished a finger at the door, moving to step in front of Rich as if he could hide him. “Go!”

“But -”

“Now!” Jeremy cried, and Michael went.

He practically fled the bathroom, throwing the door open only to find a wide eyed Chloe lingering by the edges. She had obviously been listening in, at least since Jeremy crashed in, and her purse was drawn up tight to her chest.

“Michael, what’s going on? Jeremy looked like his cat was just hit by a car.”

He was too tired for this. Michael just shook his head, and before he could think better of it he
clapped Chloe on the shoulder. She stiffened, but he didn’t care anymore. “It’s private. They’d just get in more trouble if someone found out.”

Chloe’s eyes widened. “Is someone doing something to them? Are Jeremy and Rich in trouble?”

“What would you do if I said yes?” Michael dug in his backpack for his sunglasses, tipping them on top of his head. He was never going anywhere without these babies again. At least until he got contacts. “If they actually needed your help, and if you actually couldn’t do anything to help them. If you were completely powerless - what would you do about it?”

She fell silent, clearly trying to stretch her brain to imagine something that she had no control over. Joke’s on you, lady. You’re a puppet at the hands of fate and somebody named Icon and Track or something. You’re completely powerless at every second of the day. The only difference between Chloe and Michael was that she was blissful in ignorance about how completely powerless she was. The difference was that she could still win back her best friend. Michael was beginning to lose hope.

Finally, Chloe said, “You’re eating lunch with us tomorrow.”

Michael’s brain skidded to a confused stop. “What? How does that help -”

“You know something,” Chloe said, jabbing a finger at him. “I’m a pawn in the Lord’s celestial game? Whatever. You know what’s wrong with Rich and Jeremy better than I do, so you’re sitting with us at lunch tomorrow and whatever’s going on can be your problem. Got it?”

Damnit. Christine was going to be so smug. “I think this counts as a change,” Michael said finally, checking off another box on their rapidly shrinking list. “A good one.”

“Oh, please. A GBF is worth his weight in social capital gold.” She sniffed, picking apart his outfit with her demon eyes. “At least you finally grew a fashion sense. I may not be embarrassed to be seen with you in public. I bet that’s all Brooke’s fault.”

“She’s a good friend.”

“I know,” Chloe said, depressed. “That’s the problem.”

Yeah, tell him about it.

They would have stood around waiting for Jeremy some more but an surprisingly disciplinarian teacher caught them and made them go back to class. Michael wanted to stay, but he knew that whatever was going on between Rich and Jeremy just wasn’t his scene. He wanted to help, but he didn’t know when helping became hurting instead. He had already hurt Jeremy too many times to count just because he thought he was helping.

When he got back to math class he found that the teacher actually had a PowerPoint up and were reading out real words from real slides, so he sighed and withdrew a barely used notebook. The feeling of actually sitting down and taking notes was strange. It made him nostalgic for reality, which wasn’t a sentence he ever should have to say.

Still, he made no effort to try and hide his texting.

George Salazar: Chloe asked me to sit with her at lunch today. Progress y/n?

Lauren Marcus: hshit why
George Salazar: she’s worried about team robot. I think its time to give her a chance

After a few minutes of no answer he put the phone down and returned to his work. They were talking about radians today. Circles were a big step up from triangles. He was proud of the teacher.

When it vibrated again he snatched it up at lightning speed.

Lauren Marcus: ok

It vibrated again.

Lauren Marcus: im worried about team robot too

George Salazar: then we need all the help we can get

He slid the phone away from him, wondering absentmindedly if Team Squid was okay. The answer probably wasn’t yes. It probably hasn’t been yes for a while.

He meticulously typed out another text.

George Salazar: Have a nice day at school!

The replay was instantaneous.

William Connolly: u2!

Michael tucked the phone into his backpack, fighting a silly smile. Maybe things would be 10% okay. Maybe even 15%.

A guy can dream, right?

In that way Michael became a popular kid, and from that moment on he was gifted with unimaginable social power and status. Most of the time this was important to him in the same sense that being the Hero of Time was important to him, but some of the time being a reigning member in an unrealistic social dictatorship was really fucking cool.

When Michael crossed the halls to his first period he no longer walked - he strode. He stood in formation behind Chloe and Jeremy, walking in perfect dramatic sync, and the newest club hit song began to play as Michael slid his sunglasses on and Christine held her nose high in the air, desperately trying not to giggle. They parted the seas of teenagers in front of them, their subjects either averting their eyes from the majesty or stopping to bask in the glory, and it was exactly like one of those teen dramas holy shit how awesome was this.

This was the part where the edgy outcast girl would say to the new girl, ‘There they go - the popular kids’. The Gods of the School. The Mighty. Look upon ye works and despair, for anime
club denizen and fervent slash shipper Christine and track star with delusions of grandeur Michael were now the reviled among the humble.

Those bitches were just jealous.

The only ones who stepped out of sync were Brooke, always glancing away from the corner of her eye and marching along slightly off beat, and Rich, who had begun sulking instead of striding. If there was a beat they no longer heard it, half a step behind as they marched to its memory.

Eating lunch was amazing. There was a special table right in the middle of the cafeteria that all of the other tables were arranged around, and it practically had a spotlight shining down on it. They breezed their way through the lunchtime crowds, turning heads and ruining self-esteem, and the second tier jocks and cheerleaders sitting at the tables next to them scampered for their lives. Chloe carried her Vera Bradley lunch bag high and dry as she swept into her special spot, roosting in her sparkles.

The effect was ruined somewhat when she looked hopefully at at Brooke, but when Brooke just smiled and sat down next to her the sheer joy on her face was more of a surprise than it should have been.

Michael, eager to assert dominance, sat down directly across from Chloe and let the hangers on reel as the new status quo was asserted. Girls immediately began gossiping behind their hands, and although Christine’s presence was a surprise Michael’s was a shock.

When Jeremy moved to sit down next to Michael, Cool Kid expression plastered all over his face, Michael rolled his eyes but scooched aside to make room for him too. Christine huddled next to Michael, overwhelmed at the attention and trying valiantly to hide it.

Chloe snapped her fingers just as Jake, Rich, and Jenna were sitting down. She cleared her throat, and Michael knew that all of the surrounding tables had fixed their full attention on her.

“This is Michael,” Chloe said loudly. “He’s gay.”

That was it. She leaned back, self-satisfied smirk on her face, and the crowd went wild.

Michael ignored the table full of teenagers going crazy for that homosexual representation, leaning over and whispering sotto voice to Jeremy, “They know you’re bisexual too, right?”

Jeremy squirmed uncomfortably. “I asked everyone to keep it on the down low.”

Fabulous. Michael pinched Jeremy’s ear, dragging his head down like his real Mom used to do and shaking it a little. “Listen to that crowd, Jeremiah Heere. Hear the words of the people. Are you hearing slurs?”

Jeremy squeaked, trying to tug Michael’s iron vice grip away from his ear. “No!”

“What are you hearing?”

The ripple had turned into the tide had turned into the roar of the sea: the appeal of a GBF could not be combatted. It was all consuming. Legendary.

He sighed, defeated. “The sweet sound of homosexual fetishization?”

“Exactly.” He released him, leaving Jeremy to rub at his earlobe and scowl. “It is the basis of your reality, Jeremy. Accept and bask in the uncomfortable implications disguised in cotton candy social
Lunchtime was spent brushing knees with Jeremy, pointedly ignoring the invasive questions flung his way and deflecting white teenage girls suddenly way too close in his personal space. Brooke had begun casually stabbing grabby girls with a spork every time they got close to Christine, who was clearly becoming more and more overwhelmed by the press of bodies around her. Surprisingly enough, it was Jake who gave her an out.

“Yo, dudes, you’re crowding her.” Jake swatted away some encroaching white girls, giggling over Christine’s romper and floral shirt. “You okay, Chris? You’re looking all sick.”

“It’s just loud.” She pasted on her best ‘Look at me, I’m a neurotypical!’ face. “It’s really great hanging out with you guys in a loud, public area. Whee!”

Jake made an intelligent, comprehensive noise of understanding. For Jake. “You’re a Rich person, aint’cha? It’s cool. Just say the word and I’ll scram those ditzes for you.”

“A Rich person?” Christine and Michael exchanged glances. Rich, for his part, was grinding some guy’s nose into his pudding cup and laughing. “Um, no offense, but how?”

“Dude freaks out if it’s too loud or if someone touches him. Like a little mouse with anger problems.” Jake nodded sagely. Rich was cackling as the guy choked on custard. “It’s adorable. By adorable I mean manly.”


Rich, chained by his mistakes and the oppressive thumb of an evil robot, had started Snapchatting the guy’s humiliation.

“Thanks,” Christine said, dredging up enthusiasm to paste over her confusion. “That’s...really sweet of you, Jake.”

“No problem! I get that things, like, didn’t work out with us, what with you being not into that whole scene and all, but you’re still chill.” He reached behind him and unzipped his backpack, pulling out a fistful of crumpled brochures. “Brooke gave me pamphlets!”

Sure enough, when Michael tugged the crumpled wad closer he saw that several of the pamphlets had titles like ‘What to do if your child is gay’ and ‘Understanding the AIDS Crisis’. The pamphlet on male bisexuality was torn at the edges, and Michael was beginning to have a bad feeling.

“Jake Dilinger,” Michael said solemnly, “where the A stands for ally. That’s super cool of you, dude.”

“Ever think about joining the GSA?” Christine encouraged. Judging from the way Jake’s draw dropped and eyes shone, he had not. “Consider it! Maybe Rich’ll want to come!”

There was a lot that Michael didn’t understand about Rich, up to and including his degree of perception about reality, but he would have never have guessed that Rich gave a rat's ass about queer issues. But Jake looked intrigued by the idea, and Christine was nodding along with empathetic support, and Michael really didn’t like where this was going.

He waited for Jake to get distracted and start engaging in increasingly intricate back clasps with his football buddies before he leaned over and whispered in Christine’s ear. Jeremy, from where he sat on Michael’s other side, pretended that he wasn’t trying to listen in.
“Do we even need to fix him?”

“I don’t think so,” Christine said slowly. “Maybe he’s getting fixed by osmosis. He is a pretty go with the flow kind of guy.” That was either good or terrible. When the zeitgeist was controlled by a pair of douchey evil robots, the scale tended to fall on the end of terrible. “Michael, you said that Chloe invited us to sit with her because she was worried about Rich. She was looking out for him, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” It rankled to say anything nice about Chloe, but she at least was proving entertaining. “That’s good, right?”

Christine set her mouth firmly, watching as Chloe laughed at one of Brooke’s jokes and flipped her hair. So much hair flipping. “She leads a five minute dance number exclusively based on enthusiastically telling everybody in the school about how Rich was hospitalized. She wasn’t exactly broken up about it.”

That’s right - Rich set a fire and burned the house down, whoah-oh or something. The image was hard to reconcile with the boy sitting with them now, the same boy laughing and yelling and throwing up in bathrooms. It felt a little weird to know the future. It was like his brain didn’t want to keep the knowledge, like oil and water. It was knowledge man wasn’t meant to know. He didn’t even want to know it.

But if Chloe could change, and if Brooke could be thoroughly disturbing, then maybe they could tackle Rich next time he finds a lighter. All he had to do was change the personalities of this entire cast.

Great. Since when had Michael started taking responsibility for boosting his friends up a ladder rung on Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development?

“And the…” He gestured towards the wadded up pamphlets.

Christine looked grimly self-satisfied. It was a disturbingly regular expression. “Jake/Rich ship forever. They’re in love.”

Of course they were. Michael kneaded his forehead. “So now we’re trying to get the all star kid and the homophobic, cruel asshole together? I think this is one of those ships just for the sake of more gay. As if Jeremy and I weren’t enough for those people.”

“No, Rich is canon.” Christine shrugged at Michael’s jaw dropping. “Legitimately. He said so at the end of the play. You can’t tell me that you’re surprised.”

Traumatic flashbacks to Rich’s imprompteus musical number flashed through his mind.

“I guess not,” Michael said slowly. “But I want it on record that resent every second of this.”

“That’s fair.”

Stop whining. Rich is fine, isn’t he?

Michael and Christine jerked, and they subtly glanced Jeremy’s way. He was bent over his hummus, half-heartedly stirring a pretzel stick into the roasted red pepper flakes as the Squid stood behind him, arms crossed.

Look at him. He’s relaunched his bully programs already. You’re treating this like such a big deal.
Jeremy propped his chin on his hand, blinking sleepily.

*You know that this is best for him in the long run. You have to look at the bigger picture.*

Over the sound of Chloe’s loud yapping Michael heard Jeremy sniffle, rubbing at his eyes.

*Good god, get a grip.*

Best friends didn’t let best friends cry. At the very least they didn’t let them cry alone. Michael leaned over and gently gripped Jeremy’s arm, smiling supportively as Jeremy hurriedly wiped his eyes.

“Let’s get out of here.”

He took Jeremy by the hand and led him out the front doors of the school, ignoring how his heart was thumping in hurried gasps. His palm was a little sweaty, but Jeremy’s lean pianist fingers tangled perfectly with his own newly pudgy ones. Jeremy was silent.

It wasn’t until they were both sitting in Michael’s car, Jeremy hunched in his seat and Michael stretched out as best he could, that Jeremy let his expression crumple. He hunched in tighter on himself as the Squid spread itself out on the back seat, feet propped against the window as it inspected its pristine holographic fingernails. Its eyebrow was twitching. Michael had the distinct sense that Jeremy was driving it absolutely crazy.

Michael wasn’t great with crying people, much less crying guys. He hadn’t cried in years. None of his friends ever cried in front of him, or admitted to crying. His chick friends cried all the time, but they were girls and they never expected Michael to do anything about it. His straight friends bemoaned having to deal with their girlfriends crying over swans or something all the time, but Michael engaged in only strictly professional homosexual relationships. His relationships were the platonic ideal of love, where both parties pretended that they never felt negative emotions and never relied on the other person for emotional support. It was the idea model of relationships and clear evidence that Michael was a very well adjusted person.

“I’m not even sad,” Jeremy whispered, who had mad and frantic feelings about almost everything. Michael had no idea how he did it. It had to be so exhausting, caring about everything when freaking out was his okay. It was probably what put them in this stupid situation in the first place. “I just feel numb. I know what happened was for his own good, but…” He sniffled, wiping at his eyes. “Why don’t I feel anything?”

*Your emotions are exhausting, so I turned them off.* Jeremy and Michael turned around as one to glare at it. It just shrugged.

*Kidding! Can’t you two take a joke?*

“Your jokes are mean,” Jeremy muttered rebelliously. He didn’t seem to notice that Michael could see the Squid too. Then again, he never did.

*Oh boo-hoo.* The Squid rolled its eyes as Jeremy turned back around again, resting his forehead on the glass miserably and breathing even, shallow breaths. It raised an eyebrow at Michael. *You see what I put up with everyday? It’s like dealing with a squalling infant. I don’t even know why he’s upset.*

“Human sympathy subroutines are activated when someone’s buddy is tazed,” Michael said dryly, somewhat in disbelief that he was emotionally capable of saying this dryly. “Are you seriously telling me you’re in his brain and you can’t figure him out?”

The Squid sniffed. *I have better things to do all day than worry about his little feelings.*
“You really don’t.”

*You’re awfully pedantic,* said the brain robot. It kicked Jeremy’s seat a few times, just to be obnoxious. *Cheer him up, why don’t you? Every time I try to make him stop moping he just mopes harder. Brainwashing teenagers is a lot harder than it looks.*

Great, now he was co-parenting his best friend slash love interest with his pet robot. Michael rolled his eyes and twisted his key in the engine, making Jeremy perk up and rub at his eyes. The entire time he hadn’t actually started crying. Maybe the Squid had subroutines for that. Maybe Jeremy just wasn’t capable anymore, as if by cracking his perfect image he would break.

“How’s lunch coming?” Jeremy pointed out. He took a deep breath and scrubbed at his face. “I’m okay. We can go back inside.”

“And deal with Chloe’s screeching? No thanks.” Michael backed out of the parking space. He would have felt like more of a criminal if he didn’t skip half of his classes. “I don’t know about you but I need a break. This PT Cruiser is hitting the open road.”

“I’m not allowed to skip class,” Jeremy protested. He shot a nervous glance backwards at the Squid, who was practically hanging upside down in the car seat.

*Just once won’t hurt,* it said magmaiously. *I told you I would make the teachers think you’re great.*

“Oh.” A smile crept its way onto Jeremy’s face, and it was almost embarrassing how it lightened Michael’s heart. “Cool. What are we going to do?”

*What, no thank you?*

“Thanks,” Jeremy said hurriedly. “Thank you so much, this is great.”

Yeah, because it had so much to do with this process. Michael pretended he couldn’t hear it, glancing over at Jeremy with a smile he hoped was cocky and cool. “Let’s go on a date.”

“Really?” Jeremy smiled back, and Michael’s heart fluttered. Ugh. “I thought we were just going to go to 7-Eleven and eat bad sushi.”

“Bitch, you heard me.”

It wasn’t easy to constantly subvert an evil, slightly flamboyant robot’s attempts to control his and Jeremy’s romantic life, but Michael was nothing if not a problem solver.

Apparently they had a favorite 7-Eleven, just down the road from where the school was. He drove them there almost by muscle memory, Jeremy humming slightly and pawing at the radio until the Squid kicked his seat and his hands flew back into his lap. At least it wasn’t hijacking the stations and playing *La Bamba* or something.

When Michael parked his car and walked inside the convenience store with Jeremy on his heels he realized that it was in fact a legitimate convenience store. There was nothing sketchy or vaguely musical about it. He didn’t know how to feel about this. Jeremy, at least, was comfortable enough to make an immediate bee-line for the snacks, picking up Almond Joys and Twizzlers and juggling them with convenience store sushi. This guy.

*Junk food is the dust in the computer case fan of our bodies,* Jeremy. Jeremy guiltily put a Twizzler back, reaching his hand hesitantly over a roast beef sandwich. *That’s the cockroach in the computer case fan of our bodies,* Jeremy.
Michael rolled his eyes, grabbing the pack of Twizzlers and shoving it under his armpit. Twizzlers were disgusting, but if that’s what Jeremy wanted that’s what Jeremy was going to get. He was a good best friend.

A memory flashed vividly through his mind - of Jeremy, sick from school one day, and Michael collecting his homework for him. Of always giving Jeremy the corner pieces in the brownies they would make. Of giving him his rocky road ice cream when Jeremy dropped his chocolate. Twelve years of memories, zooming by like a flipbook, creating one continuous image of a complete and overwhelming -

“Michael? Where have you been?”

The voice pierced something familiar in Michael’s brain, and he turned around to see the cashier girl at the 7-Eleven lean on the counter, eyebrow raised and chewing gum. Her frizzy dyed black hair was close cropped to her chin, her over the top winged eyeliner complimenting her incredulous look.


He really couldn’t, but that wasn’t the point. Dana could smell fear. Maintain direct eye contact with the cashier girl at the 7-Eleven, lest she give you a pour that was less than generous. She didn’t fall for his feint, digging into his fleshy underbelly. “You haven’t been in here in a month. I thought that disgusting sushi finally killed you.”

“God, if only.” He awkwardly sidled up to the counter, drumming his fingers on the glass counter and flashing his smoothest smile. Relatively speaking. “I have been having a wild ride of a month. There’s been twists, turns, ups and downs. I may or may not be on a date with Jeremy.” He made little jazz hands. “Can I get a slushie? Blue?”

She stared at him, blank, uncomprehending.

“You and Jeremy.” Jeremy, who was currently looking wistfully at a bottle of bleach as the Squid stood behind him and tried to convince him to drink it. “You.” She pointed at Michael. “And Jeremy.” She pointed at Jeremy.

“I finally told him how I felt and now we’re seeing where this relationship takes us,” Michael said seriously.

She wasn’t buying it. It was impossible to slip anything by her. The eyes that saw the ins and outs of 7-Eleven saw the ins and outs of the world.

Michael had gotten into the habit of getting his lunch at the 7-Eleven when the cafeteria had gotten into the habit of overwhelming him. Jeremy would always sulk at the corners, Michael would start twitching when he realized how many people were breathing his air, and he could have sworn that the lunch line creamed corn was glowing. Jeremy couldn’t be scraped off the edges of the cafeteria room with a spatula, too eager to sulk and hover hesitantly at the outskirts of school clubs, so most of the time Michael got his breath of fresh, air conditioned air alone and let himself relax in a convenience store where he could get his crappy sushi fix.

It was probably the only 7-Eleven in the world with the slushie machine behind the counter, making the surly cashier girl pour it for you, but once you extracted enough slushies out of the cashier girl she turned out to be pretty good company. Once they accidentally started trash talking the denizens of a convenience store together and Michael harangued her enough she had actually turned out to be kind of cool.
“I have listened to you pine over that boy until my ears bled for fucking months.” Cool and maybe a little adversarial. Granted, he usually deserved it. “Now you disappear for a month and you’re dating? What the fuck, Michael?”

He quickly shushed her, making a show of leaning on the counter and displaying avid interest in the gyrating counter top hot dogs so she could lean in and conspire with him. They had talking about other people behind their backs down to a science. Jeremy, who was making puppy dog eyes at the Squid over a package of gummy worms, was oblivious as usual.

“It’s been a weird fucking month,” Michael hissed, the understatement of the century. “We aren’t dating. This is our second date. We’re at a convenience store, Dana. I’m already fucking it up.”

“You actually told him how you felt about him?” Her lack of faith in him was insulting, but well founded. “You said outright that if she saw all of your pictures of him in a swimsuit on your phone you’d commit seppuku.”

He had swimsuit Jeremy pictures on his phone? Fucking score. “I didn’t tell him,” Michael said lamely. “He’s the one who asked me out.”

Jeremy was wiggling the package of gummy worms at the Squid, pathetically hopeful. It was massaging its brow. *If you have an ischemic stroke I die too.*

“He asked you out.” Dana’s kohl rimmed gaze was piercing. Probably piercing his liver, or whatever organ was in his lower left side. “He asked you out and you didn’t admit that you’ve been in love with him for four years.”

“It would have seemed a little desperate?” Michael smiled weakly. “Look, let’s just assume I know what I’m doing.”

“Strong assumption.”

‘ She had no idea. “Can you just roll with me on this one? I totally have people I eat lunch with now. You would seriously not believe the people I eat lunch with. I’m well adjusted now!” He made little jazz hands, fooling nobody. “Michael Mell, ordinary person casually dating the best friend he is not casually in love with.”

Dana leaned forward and smacked him on the back of the head, making him yelp. “I was worried, you dick! When people like you drop off the face of the planet it’s because they’re making dramatic Goodbye Cruel World posts on Tumblr, and you know I don’t do social media!”

It was more of a shock than the smack, although it really shouldn’t have been. She wasn’t always demonstrative about caring, but some people spoke the slushie language of love. It wasn’t the kind of affection that Michael would have realized that he had a month ago, but a month ago his only friend in the whole world had been Jeremy.

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Dana had been, what, vaguely referenced in his intro song? When had she begun to exist?

“I’m sorry,” Michael said sincerely. It wasn’t as hard as it used to be. “I promise I’m great. I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time. I’m social now!” He reached over and gave her a light punch on the arm. “But you’re still number one slushie girl of my heart.”

“Joy,” Dana drawled. “Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I can fix your date for you.”

“Oh, god, please?” Michael begged. “I’m trying to speed chess an evil robot out of something actually romantic, please help me have the worst date physically possible that still gets him in my
pants later.”

She snorted, straightening and fishing something out from under the counter. “Roll over Beethoven, romcom love guru is in town. I am the expert in ruining relationships.”

“Thanks for not questioning any of the weird shit I say,” Michael said sincerely. “You’re a wing woman.”

“Don’t think you’re getting out of an explanation later, buster.” She shoved something cold and grimy in his hand, and when Michael looked down he saw that it was a ring of keys. She thumped the counter, yelling across the store. “Stop fondling the merchandise, asshole! Are you buying something or not!”

Jeremy squeaked, clutching the gummy worms tight to his chest. He scampered over, ignoring the look of physical pain on the Squid’s face, and dumped his relatively healthy snacks on the counter as he fumbled for his wallet. Michael shook his head, holding up a hand as Dana swept them into a bag. He passed Dana his own card and waited for her to ring them up as Jeremy masterfully gave off the impression of wanting to wring his hands, but not doing so.

“Two slushies, Dana,” Michael said imperiously. “We’re celebrating our truancy from health class.”

“I can tell.” She passed Michael’s card and bag back to him, plucking two pleasantly generic plastic cups from next to the machine. With dainty elegance, like a ballerina posing en pointe, she gripped the handle of the slushie machine and span a finely woven silk thread of blue ice and syrup into the cup. She clapsed a lid on it, and she slid the cup and straw over the counter to Jeremy, who looked honored to even be noticed by her. “Sup, Jeremy.”

“Nice to see you again,” Jeremy said politely. At some point he had begun posing too, and somehow his grin was sparkling. Dana just rolled her eyes - the Squid coughed something about useless lesbians - and repeated her beautiful performance with Michael’s cup.

His time has come. He eagerly jammed the straw open on his thigh and stuck it inside. “It has been so fucking long. Come to papa, high fructose corn syrup. Come back to god.”

It wasn’t until he started drinking that he remembered his very first perfect musical slushie. Every inch of it was perfection, because it was a musical slushie and they never melted. They were just a prop, stable in the imagination of the viewer. He remembered the Auntie Anne’s slushie from the mall, good but not perfect, sweaty and melting -

He sucked hard at the slushie, watching Jeremy do the same, and he knew the slushie was perfect because it was a slushie his friend had made for him.

The crinkly plastic bag hit his thigh, and he knew without looking that Jeremy had picked up some Negimaki for him. He sipped at his straw a little, humming a vivid memory.

“Lunch is bangin’, got my sushi and my slushie and more.” He twirled the keys on his finger and smiled winningly at Dana, who rolled her eyes and hid her smile behind a brush of her hair. Hearing himself sing without any of the backing instruments was weird, but a little nice too. “The roll is Negimaki and I’m feelin’ kinda cocky, cuz the girl at Sev’ Elev’ gave me a generous pour.”

“Yeah, yeah, you stoner.” She pointed to a locked door next to the beer fridge, where a dingy sign hung that promised it was for employees only. “Two floors up. The spot behind the air conditioner doesn’t have any security cameras. You’re paying me in weed.”
“So that was why you missed me!” Michael grabbed Jeremy’s hand, ignoring the way his plastic bag banged against Jeremy’s wrist. “I knew you only liked me for my edibles.”

“You think I like you?”

But he was already jamming the greasy keys into the gummy lock, pulling Jeremy up behind him to the roof of the 7-Eleven.

This was New Jersey, so it was actually part of a small shopping complex that stretched up a few stories. They clattered up the dingy, weirdly musty stairwell up a floor, and skipped past that door up an increasingly rickety and creepy flight of stairs. Michael would have been weirdly frightened if he didn’t have complete and total faith in Dana, who he had technically only just met for the first time in the very technical sense. Jeremy, for his part, had a death grip on Michael’s hand. The Squid had disappeared and Michael could breathe again, no longer claustrophobic.

When they broke out into 7-Eleven rooftop Michael was dazzled and overwhelmed by the beauty of suburbia. Not. The rooftop was boring scuffed tan cement with grit crunching underneath his heel, wide and empty save for some ominous grates and random stacks of tires, and the two boys obediently ducked behind the ominously vibrating behemoth metal air conditioners. They were just gigantic tin boxes installed close to a grating, and they hid between the air conditioner and the wall.

“I thought you wanted to go on a date.” Jeremy pointedly looked between the air conditioner and the blank cement wall they were trapped between. “I just feel like a felon.”

Technically the Squid technology was probably illegal, but that was just details. Michael pasted on a cocky smile and swung his bag over to the top of the air conditioner. It was as high as his chest and this was probably a bad idea. “Adrenaline gets the heart rate up. Give me a boost, will ya?”

As it turns out, Jeremy was super ripped now. He obediently boosted Michael up so he could clamber onto the giant air conditioner, the vibrating of the tin grating setting his teeth humming, and easily swung himself onto it beside him. Michael settled down cross legged, digging through the bag for his sushi and opening it with his teeth.

Jeremy sucked in a gasp through his teeth as he looked past the edge of the roof through suburbia. “This is - weird.”

The view wasn’t beautiful, but on a strange level it was theirs.

It could never have been a set piece. It could never have been painted by sweaty and harried techs on a slab of plywood, could never have been miniatures set up so the claymation dolls of their limbs and faces could wander around in complete and painstaking three dimensions. Instead he saw the school down the street, a lumbering concrete giant with racetrack arms and football court legs. There were clothespin dolls of children there now, running a track, talking. There was a laundromat beside it, their burned orange laundromat with a flashing neon sign where Michael would surreptitiously clean his hoodie so it wasn’t constantly reeking of weed. Granted, not that often, but still. There was the other corner store where the kids hung out in, there was their old tire place, with a spinning sign and the Michelin Man smiling down upon his subjects. The air was October cold and crisp, with the promise of a frosty bite on the exhale, and the wind sent Michael’s skin prickling.

It was his heart dissected and laid flat upon a table, streets strewn like arties pumping cars and pavement in endless circulation from morning to night. Michael traced with one finger his life: turn the corner of Boston and Lafayette, watch out for the bikers there. The light was always long but
the next light was shorter, the light that would pause for worn women with baskets propped on
their hips. The bus stop squatted on the far corner, vagrants and children clinging to it like vines.

From beside him Jeremy was gnawing on a Twizzler, the skinny straw flapping out of the corner of
his mouth like a spindly cigar. Michael curled his legs up to his chest, propping his chin on his
knees and watching Jeremy through half-lidded eyes. He traced his life on Jeremy’s skin.

Juxtapose the clunky brown hiking boots his aunt had given him onto his Sperry’s. They were
worn at the edges, aglets curling off. Jeans frayed at the hem with a hole tucked against a seam -
his mother used to do the shopping for them, and when she left they stopped buying new clothing.
Striped shirt, white and blue and red, and a goofy and slightly effeminate soft blue cardigan thrown
over it. The shirt had been on sale at Old Navy’s, the cardigan hung up conveniently next to it.
Jeremy had picked it out but Michael had liked how he looked in it, and had liked how if he sat
close enough to his clean blue jeans their skin would touch through the hole tucked against the
seam, and a static jolt of electricity would zing through his fingers until they tingled. They had
been sleeping in the same bed since childhood but this was what got him.

It wasn’t what he was wearing now. The Squid had picked it all out for him, his newer cooler best
friend. They were both leaning back on the air conditioner, fingers brushing each other, and instead
of a static zing he felt a hot lick of flame flicker in his stomach.

He pulled his glasses on so he could see the view better, protecting his eyes from the sun. If he
 glanced at Jeremy he could see the Squid sitting next to him, whispering instructions in his ear.

Sure enough, Jeremy fixed his posture and grinned shyly at Michael. His coiffed golden brown hair
shined in the sunlight, tinted darker by the sunglasses. “I’m glad that I’m here with you, Michael.
This is really nice.”

But Michael just shook his head, drawing a finger up against his mouth in a shushing gesture.
Jeremy’s jaw clicked shut, eyes widening. “Just look, dude. What do you see?”

They sat in silence for a few seconds, Jeremy narrowing his eyes as he surveyed their suburb.
Finally, he said, “It’s just our neighborhood. We see it every day.”

“Not like this.” Michael crossed his arms on his kneecaps, shivering slightly in the October breeze.
“Sometimes everyday stuff can be special too. You just have to look at it from a different
perspective.”

“It hasn’t actually changed.” Jeremy grimaced minutely, but the Squid was silent. “Look, Michael,
I -”

do you actually feel? I feel like you never tell me anymore.”

Jeremy was Michael’s best friend, but sometimes it felt like he didn’t understand him. Or that there
wasn’t much to understand.

He made an aborted motion, as if to draw his legs against his chest too before thinking better of it.
“I’m just stressed, I guess,” he said mildly. “A lot’s been going on, you know?”

“You pig out on junk food and live in my basement when you’re stressed. This is more than
stress.” Jeremy subtly winced. Guess that was no longer on the laundry list of coping mechanisms.
“Come on, what’s wrong?”

He was pushing it, but the Squid wasn’t saying anything and that was as implicit an invitation as
any. Jeremy wilted, fighting to keep his omnipresent mask. “There’s a lot of my plate. I can handle it.”

“What’s on your plate?”

Jeremy twitched. He started counting out on his fingers. “Our new friends are fucking exhausting. I’m in clubs and I have nice clothing and I have a fake ID now, so there’s trying to deal with that. Rich is my friend but I’m always worrying about him, and I don’t know how to help and I feel so useless. Our relationship is - no offense, but our relationship is weird. I don’t know how to handle one of these things, much less everything. I have help, but sometimes the help just makes things worse.” He shivered. “Ignore that.”

“Sorry, what did you say there?” Michael asked blithely. “I zoned out.”

He was rewarded with a twitchy smile. “I’m scared,” Jeremy said softly. “I feel like a live wire. Things are good, a little, but they’re bad too. I’m getting confused.” He swallowed, fingers twitching with the memory of electricity. “I’m glad you’re here. If you weren’t I wouldn’t know what to do. I would have gone insane.”

“I know.” He put a hand on the roof between them, and Jeremy tangled their fingers together. “I wanna help you too, dude. You know you can talk to me.”


“Yeah.” Jeremy looked down at his fingers. “Great.”

They both shifted awkwardly at their seats.

But when Michael looked up he looked in the view all over again, and for just a minute he cut things away until they were simple. He squeezed Jeremy’s hand, and tried to forget all of the lies, if only for a second.

“Shush,” Michael said amicably. “I’m enjoying the view.”

They sat in silence for the next thirty minutes, letting their lives pass them by and munching quietly on snack food until it was time for sixth period, when they had a math test. It was about radians and sin waves, but all he could think about was the curve of Jeremy’s hips and the blue jeans with the hole in them, pulsing static electricity through Michael’s teeth and driving him crazy.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

I had a fuck of a time updating this one - I finally realized the problem was that I had the numerical symbol pi in the first paragraph and this made AO3 sad or something. Sorry if you got like five billion emails.

Three weeks later Jeremy knocked on his door, dressed in sporty blue flannel slung over a white shirt and black slacks. Michael, dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt and still holding a half-empty jar of peanut butter and a spoon, blinked lazily at him.

“Were we supposed to be going out today?” Michael rubbed his eyes behind his horn rimmed glasses. His memory generally didn’t suck when it came to stuff like this. “Because, uh, I really don’t feel like it.”

Jeremy beamed at him, white and perfect. He brandished Zombiepocalypse, and Michael’s jaw dropped. “Surprise date night? We can order pizza.”

“You’re immaculate and I love you,” Michael said feelingly, and he stepped aside so Jeremy could enter the house and wrap him in a tight hug. He breathed in, smelling Jeremy’s soft cologne, and he fought the urge to hold onto him forever. Ugh, he was so gay. “My parents aren’t home either, so perfect timing.”

“Wow,” Jeremy said cheerfully, “what a coincidence!”

In the last three weeks the following had happened, in no particular order:

Jeremy and Michael had gone on three (3) dates, they looked into each other’s eyes meaningfully 5 (five) times, hands had been held many $\sum (\text{date} 1 + \text{date} 2 + \text{date} 3)$ times, they have gotten gawking stares from boys and lustful yaoi sighs from girls ($\pi^4$) times, they have kissed $\sqrt{-1}$ times…

Michael had no room to complain. He and the Squid had specifically been orchestrating this. They couldn’t kiss before the ending. That was obviously how it worked. Michael was going to kiss Jeremy the second he fell in love with him, and they would beat the Squid just in time for the curtain to fall.

The Squid, for its part, had been helping by trying to help by turning Jeremy into some kind of Vineyard Vines Ken doll freak of nature by constantly convincing him that the newer, spiffier Michael with newer, spiffier friends would only like him if he looked like a Colgate commercial. Michael had been fighting against this as much as he was allowed to, but it wasn’t as if Michael was the only figure in Jeremy’s life. If you throw in the fact that it was also constantly threatening Jeremy then the past few weeks had been pretty stressful, and it hadn’t stopped escalating. Act Two was looming on the horizon, the Halloween Party only a week away, and they were all on crunch time.
Only in a musical could you have a timeline on falling in love with someone.

In the last three weeks the following had happened, in no particular order:

“How was your sleepover with Chloe and the girls?”

Michael groaned, ducking into the kitchen to put the peanut butter back and half-heartedly try to straighten his messed up hair. It wasn’t as if he actually cared what Jeremy thought about his looks, but the half of him that was still a track star was personally offended at the thought of showing up even for an informal date with bed head.

“Less pillow fights, more ruining lives. Shit was like the war room.”

Shit was also like them all nervously comparing notes on how fucking weird Jeremy and Rich were amid the unbelievable sexual tension between Brooke and Chloe, but the less the Squid and Jeremy knew about Michael showing Chloe all of Jeremy’s dorky elementary school yearbook pictures the better.

“And your basketball game with Rich and Jake?”

Michael snatched the sunglasses off the top of the bread bin, shoving them into his sweatpants pocket and ducking back into the living room to catch Jeremy grooming his hair into coiffed white boy perfection. They clearly were made for each other. “I am way too flabby to keep up with those walking six packs.”

“I have a six pack too,” Jeremy said modestly. “Wanna see?”

“I can shred cheese on your abs.” Michael leaned in and pecked him on the cheek, ignoring the way Jeremy flushed. “I’ll make the popcorn.”

Rich had won the basketball game, but that was mostly because Jake and Michael had spent most of the time huddled around a water cooler anxiously comparing notes on all of Rich’s trips to the nurse’s office.

Christine had built a hell of an information network. They could get through this. They would get through this. No almost-apocalypse necessary.

Why did the popular kids feel more like his friends than Jeremy did?

The bag of popcorn turned in its smooth gyrations as Jeremy happily made himself a roast beef and swiss sandwich. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, eagerly and nervously grinning at Michael as he made awkward small talk over the popping of the microwave. Granted, it was now almost two months into the play and the theme of his priorities had definitely changed, but in the privacy of Michael’s home he let himself burst into the highly detailed lore of Chex Quest and the long lineage of Doom knock-offs.

He was still chatting as they descended the stairs, arms stuffed full of popcorn and snacks, and they dragged out the old bean bags to throw in front of the TV. It had been a while since they had done this, and the return to novel familiarity sat warm and soft in his stomach. Just for kicks, he stood in front of the TV and held his arms out, craning his head up to look for spotlight rafters where only a cement ceiling rested.

“Michael? What are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. The usual.”
Jeremy was still humming to himself, pulling out the dusty SNES and rubbing the grime away. The snacks sat in a pile between the two bean bags, and Michael watched as a single gum wrapper floated down from the ceiling. It was Wrigley’s. Go figure.

“Can you run up and grab some paper towels from the kitchen?” Jeremy asked absently. “I don’t want to get the controllers sticky with popcorn butter.”

Fair. Michael ran up the stairs, rubbing the gum wrapper between his forefinger and thumb. He took longer than he should have, stopping in front of the small mirror stuck to his fridge to fix his hair again. No big deal. Just a fun surprise date with his best friend slash love interest. A very casual, unromantic date. Perfect.

The gum wrapper didn’t feel any different from a normal wrapper from the local 7-Eleven. It wasn’t any more or less real than anything else. He checked the expiration date, eyebrows climbing into his hairline. So that was what year it was! He had forgotten.

He grimaced, pulling his phone out from his pocket and pulling up his notes app.

**Reminders (order of importance):**

- Everything is fake
  - Yes, even you
- Squid evil, controlling Jeremy
  - Do not kiss the Jeremy
  - You’re not in love with him
- Video games are for nerds
  - Track is good
  - NES is bad
- Mountain Dew Red kills Squids!

That was even with Christine’s help. Things had gotten pretty bad. Tongue sticking out between his teeth, he carefully typed in:

- Real year is

He squinted at the wrapper again, as if he was trying to memorize a phone number.

- Real year is

He exhaled sharply, fist tightening around his phone until he heard the case crack.

*George Salazar*: i fucking hate having real fake dementia

*George Salazar*: theater alzheimer’s
George Salazar: sondheimer's

George Salazar: neurodegenerative drama disease

He stuck the phone back in his pocket and clattered down the basement steps, paper towels tucked underneath one arm. Maybe he should relax. There wasn’t anything wrong with slipping into his old routine with Jeremy, just so long as he actually remembered the important stuff.

Jeremy had been in his closet. He poked his head out, face lighting up when he saw Michael. His shoes and boxes were spread around on the ground.

“Dude, have you seen my He-Man figurine? I think I left it in here.”

He didn’t remember a He-Man figurine at all. That might have been around fourth grade. Fourth grade was shaky, but fifth grade was vivid. It was the year of the gay awakening. Hard to forget.

“No? Come on, let’s play.”

“Sure,” Jeremy said distantly, sliding the cardboard box back into the closet. “Can’t wait.”

Playing video games together with Jeremy was like breathing, and he couldn’t fight the awkward joy from jumping the last three steps of his staircase and sticking the landing. Jeremy obediently clapped, laughing as he poked through the food. He frowned.

“Aw, we forgot the Sprite. Can you run and grab it?”

“Sure,” Michael said distracted. “I call the good controller!”

“But you always get the good controller!”

“My house, my rules, Heere.” Michael turned around and ran up the stairs again. “Don’t start without me.”

“I would never,” Jeremy called. He opened a cabinet drawer. “Hey, see if you can nuke some of that leftover pizza.”

Sounds good. Michael didn’t mind ducking into the kitchen again. He waited patiently next to the microwave, listening to it hum and bouncing on the balls of his feet. This was going to be so great. The Squid practically never let Jeremy eat real junk food. They hadn’t sat down and played video games, real fake video games with shitty graphics and bad acne and endless whining about Christine’s converse hi-tops, in ages. Probably about two months, if you wanted to get specific. This was gonna be awesome.

His phone buzzed, and when Michael unlocked it he saw that Christine had texted him back.

Stephanie Hsu: D: bad brain day?

George Salazar: nahhh, on another date with jer bear

George Salazar: holy shit did I just say that

George Salazar: BAD BRAIN DAY BAD BRAIN DAY

Stephanie Hsu: REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE, MICHAEL

Great. He clicked the phone off, picking up the plate with his thumb and his forefingers and
blowing on it. Why did Christine get to be the repository of all real world knowledge? This totally wasn’t fair.

His hand hovered on the doorknob to the basement, Sprite tucked underneath one arm and balancing the reheated pizza against his hip. The gum wrapper was tucked in his back pocket, next to the sunglasses pressing against his thigh.

He silently put the food down next to him, and with excruciating slowness he cracked open the basement door. The thing used to creak like hell before his delinquent thirteen year old self greased it for easier access to midnight snacks.

Jeremy was still going through his things. Brusque and professional, he was pulling out cabinet drawers and rifling through them, checking inside the actual frame for any secret compartments. Only a Michael caught up on the memory of twelve years of basement video game jam sessions would have noticed exactly how much of his stuff Jeremy had disturbed. He was emptying out every corner of the room as quickly as he could.

He slowly pulled the sunglasses out from his pocket, trading them for his horn rims. The steaming cheese on the pizza popped and fizzled, but when the dark basement took on a shadowy amber tint his breath caught.

The Squid wasn’t there. It was Jeremy who was glowing instead, an unmistakable aura of crackling blue electricity. It sent weird spots dancing in Michael’s vision, the sparks so bright you could barely see Jeremy’s placid expression as he rifled through Michael’s closet. The Squid wasn’t there, but Jeremy was the one glowing with its quantum light.

Michael slowly exchanged the sunglasses for the horn rims before typing out another text to Christine.

George Salazar: is it homicide if it’s a computer

She responded immediately.

Stephanie Hsu: What did it do this time?

Shit, what hadn’t it done?

Michael flipped back to his notes app, squinting at his last point. Jeremy was still digging through his closet, whistling a jaunty chiptune.

George Salazar: nothing ill handle it

Stephanie Hsu: You don’t have to do everything on your own. You need to let us help you. Your brain is swiss CHEESE and JEREMY IS THE GRATER

George Salazar: would you believe you’re not the first person to tell me that today

Stephanie Hsu: YOUR FRIENDS ARE THE PASTA

Jesus christ.

It was almost a little satisfying how Jeremy jumped when Michael banged the door open, balancing the food as he jumped down the stairs. He straightened and smiled winningly at him, completely without shame.
“Thanks for getting the food,” said the Squid. “I could totally go for a byte.” It paused a beat. “Bite.”

Jesus fucking goddamn motherfucking robot piece of fucking shit.

Okay, if that’s how it wanted to play this game. Literally. If Zombiepocalypse was the game they were playing then they were going to play that game.

“Are you looking for the shoes you left?” Michael asked, faux-blithely. “I think they’re in my room.”

“Damn, should have guessed.” The Squid flashed a shiny white smile, subtly kicking a box back into the closet. “Can I go look for them in there?”

It was wearing his friend. It was wearing his friend!

“The pizza’s going to get cold. We can look for it later.” Michael aggressively threw himself onto the bean bag, trying to throttle the bite out of his voice. “Come on, let’s just play.”

The hard drive inserted in the meat casing of Jeremy Heere flashed a gleaming piano keyboard of white teeth at him. “It feels like ages since I’ve seen you. I love hanging out when it’s just you and me.”

“It makes me nostalgic for when it really was just you and me,” Michael said loftily, tossing the Squid the bad controller as it carefully wedged itself into the bean bag. Its posture was perfect, distinctly uncomfortable on the microbeads and moth holes. “The good old days, right?”

The Squid scoffed, bobbing its head along to the zippy theme of Zombiepocalypse. Unfortunate that it had chosen the narratively significant game. Michael was totally boss at Expert mode - it had been the only game he owned for two weeks, at which point the carton of identical SNES cartridges began to metamorphose into other, normal games. It left them weirdly sticky, as if they had sloughed off their old plastic skin and revealed their vintage belly, but Michael had decided a long time ago that disgust and panic weren’t productive.

The Squid was poking Jeremy’s tongue out between its teeth, leaning forward as it began mashing buttons to flip through the menu. Disgust and panic weren’t productive. Then again, neither were video games.

“Back when we were losers, yeah.” The Squid waited until their characters warped on screen before launching into a frenzied bloodbath of a battle. “Trust me, who we are now is so much better. We have friends now. How cool is that?”

“I liked it more when it was just us,” Michael admitted. He bit back a smile as he saw the Squid’s eye twitch. It wasn’t his line, but it wasn’t as if it could snap at him for it. “I never thought you were a loser, man. I don’t know why you kept on beating yourself up over it.”

It was something that he had never been allowed to tell Jeremy, and it wasn’t even true, but he was rewarded with another eyebrow tick. “I was a loser,” the Squid replied frostily. “Then I got the Upgrade and now I’m cool. Don’t you like not being embarrassed to be seen with me?”

“I was never embarrassed of you, dude.” Michael experimentally stopped pressing the buttons on his controller. Sure enough, his character kept blasting away anyway. “You know I think you’re cooler than a vintage cassette.”

“Please.” The Squid rolled its eyes. Jeremy’s eyes. “Compact cassettes were flimsy proto floppy
disks for the dinosaur microcomputers. The Transistor-Transistor computers could barely manage the most rudimentary if-then statements, let alone Basic. At least paperweights have accepted the uselessness of their sad, miserable low RAM runtime.”

Michael stared at him, unimpressed.

The Squid shifted uncomfortably on its beanbag. “I read it in a magazine?”

“Why would you bother reading anything without an LED display?” Michael asked flatly. “Doesn’t that give your circuits hives?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the Squid protested. “Look, it’s a zombie!”

“Do your quantum processors mean that you’re both possessing my best friend and not possessing him at the same time? Are you Schodinger’s dick?”

“I’m fairly certain Schodinger identified as a man,” the Squid said stiffly. “Can’t we just go back to the game?”

“Sure, Jeremy,” Michael said viciously, jamming the A button so hard it hurt his thumb. “Let’s just go back to preventing the zombie apocalypse instead of trying to start it!”

“Great, Mr. Best Friend,” the Squid snapped, “then you can go back to trying to drag me down to your eukaryotic level!”

“You wouldn’t know a eukaryote if it bit you in your AGP!”

“I know a thing or two about losers,” the Squid sneered, “and I know that I have no intention of wallowing in the mud of my self-pity any longer.” It made a show of looking around the room, at his upturned closet and scattered pizza boxes. “Or in my own filth. Pity you let the magnet of your inadequacies wipe your favorite little cassette tapes of memory. Your hippocampus is almost as shredded as my abs.”

“Shove it up your HDMI port!” Michael yelled, louder than he meant to. But the Squid wouldn’t stop sneering, and it wouldn’t stop wearing Jeremy, and this was so much worse than its weird groping earlier. It was inside him and it wouldn’t stop making stupid robot jokes! That was the worst part! “Give me my best friend back, you motherboard-fucker!”

“I’ll let him go once you tell me where you hid the Mountain Dew.” The Squid twisted Jeremy’s sweet little face into a scowl. “I know you have it, Dickweed.”

Michael opened his mouth to ask ‘or what?’, but he knew exactly what. It was going to steal Jeremy’s body again, it was going to taze him, it was going to make Jeremy do everything he didn’t want to do and whisper in his ear until he thought that it had been his idea all along.

There was nothing Michael could do. There had never been anything Michael could do. This was the part where Michael retreated, where he licked his wounds and forgot about everything that was difficult or hurt. Maybe if he was braver he would remember more.

“I’m not telling you where it is,” Michael said quietly. “No matter what.”

The Squid pulled a mock sympathetic face. “I’ll remind Rich to bring some ice packs and painkillers to school tomorrow. The newer, cooler version of you is great at cleaning up your messes.”
Michael couldn’t do anything, so he tackled him.

It wasn’t very good tackling. It wasn’t even that effective tackling. But it sent him pushing off of his bean bag to body check the Squid anyway, sending them both crashing onto the floor. The Squid choked off a very un-computer like yelp, and Michael reared a hand back and punched him in the face.

It wasn’t a very polite thing to do to your best friend, but Michael had anger problems and a Squid to be very angry at. The Squid kicked out, jamming a knee and an iron spike of pain straight into Michael’s stomach. He punched the Squid in the face again, making it lash out a hand, hitting nothing and leaving itself open for Michael to force down its hands. He sat on the Squid’s legs, pinning both its hands behind its back and leaving it to ineffectually try to twist out of its grip.

It was way, way more shredded than Michael was, and probably had a ninjutsu extension programmed, but it was also trying to jerk around a teenager’s body using exclusively spinal nerve stimulation and that didn’t leave for coordinated movement. Besides, Michael was a righteous good guy and maybe, at least in this way, the good guys won.

“Let fucking go of me!”

“Say uncle!”

“Fuck you!”

The Squid jerked again, and Michael called on a decade of practice to pin him down. Michael used to always win in their play fights, but once puberty hit and Jeremy shot up like a weed he had started giving him a run for his money.

“Say uncle!” Michael yelled, kneeing him in the back again. “Yield, asshole!”

“I’ll yield to you in hell!”

Jesus christ. “Fine. Have fun being sat on, asshole.” Just to prove his point, Michael swung his legs around and straight up sat on him, cross legged and full of spite. The Squid’s chin was poking hard onto the cement floors, and this was usually the point where Michael won the rights to the good controller. “Are you ready to actually talk now?”

“Please. Let’s re-open dialogue on where you hid the vintage soda.” Michael couldn’t see its face, but it sounded thoroughly disgruntled. Good. It pitched its voice up. “Michael! Stop hitting me!”

“I’m not hitting you!”

“Help! Michael’s being an asshole!”

Sure enough, Michael immediately heard the distinct sound of his mother’s footsteps echo towards the basement door. She loudly knocked.

“Are you boys okay down there?”

“We’re fine!” Michael called. “No worries!”

“Michael’s trying to beat me up!”

“Shut it, asshole!”

“That’s nice, sweetie.” His mom knocked on the door again. “Jeremy, are you staying for dinner?”
“He’s not invited for dinner, Mom!”

The Squid tried to take advantage of his maternal distraction by twisting around in his grip again, but Michael jammed another knee into his elbow. The Squid hissed.

“I’m not hungry, Mrs. Mell!” The Squid called, voice slightly muffled from where Michael was pressing his head into the ground. “Thanks, though!”

They waited with bated breath for his mom’s footsteps to recede. Then Michael kneed him in the back again.

“Oh, sure, bring my mother into it -”

“You do know you’re only beating up your boyfriend, right?"

Okay, that was fucking it. Forget that the Squid technically, kinda sorta had a point. Michael exhaled in a sharp huff, trying to find his zen. If it wasn’t for the fact that he was actively fighting all of the stereotypical Michael Mell avoidance tactics he would pick up smoking again. “Let’s talk about this,” Michael said, slightly strangled. “Okay? Like reasonable people?”

“You wouldn’t be able to find reason if I shoved a GPS up your ass.”

“Look.” Michael would have pinched the bridge of his nose if he wasn’t using all available limbs to keep the Squid’s face ground into the floor. “I think we should renegotiate the terms of our contract. I know you hate me. Plot twist: I hate you too! But we don’t have to throw Jeremy under the bus the whole time just because we’re both petty assholes.”

The Squid was silent.

Finally, it said, “Are you going to let me up now?”

Michael set his jaw stubbornly. “Say uncle first.”

“Under no circumstances -” Michael grabbed the back of Jeremy’s head and ground his nose into the carpet. “Ugh! Uncle!”

Thank god. Michael was beginning to get pretty guilty about all of this. He rolled off the Squid, and it took a few seconds to groan before pushing itself up. Its nose was red and its perfect hair and outfit were thoroughly messed up. Well, good.

“You do know you’re a sociopath, right? I’m programmed with the full battery of DSM V screening tools. I’m running them now. Evidence based practice points towards the unarguable conclusion that you are an abusive psychopath who beats up his boyfriend on the regular. You’re a monster.”

“And you’re a drama queen,” Michael said flippantly. “Sticks and stones, dude. I think we seriously have bigger problems than your petty agendas.”

“Please. Words are the greatest power any sentient organism can have. Sticks and stones can’t give freshmen girls anorexia.” The Squid tenderly rubbed its nose. “Congratulations. You’ve broken your boyfriend’s nose. I’m embellishing the story of how you beat him.”

“It’s not broken, you baby.” Michael had seen a broken nose before, and that was far from it. Michael was far too flabby to break any noses these days. “Look, why are we bothering fighting now? It’s not going to change anything.”
It shot him an incredulous look. “I know your RAM is faulty, but your swiss cheesed little hard drive has to know that I’m the villain of this play. I’m programmed for villainy. It’s what I do.”

“Chloe’s programmed to be a bitch but she’s actually looking out for her friends,” Michael pointed out. “Jake’s programmed to be a self-centered all star moron, but he’s reading pamphlets and is ambiguously gay these days. Brooke’s programmed to be the sweet girl who’s the butt of the joke, not a tire chewing chick with a six pack. Rich’s...something.”

“Even we have no idea what’s wrong with Rich,” the Squid admitted.

“But that’s the thing! Are you seriously telling me that these teenagers with - uh, bad processing speeds or something are smarter than you? That they can do shit you can’t? What’s stopping you from moving beyond your play characterization of being mean and petty?”

“If you had to deal with Jeremy Heere all day you would be petty too,” the Squid said stiffly. Which, fair. “I am perfectly entitled to my hatred.”

“You’re more entitled than Brock Turner. You’re a raging asshole with a god complex with the attitude of one of those bitchy old kindergarten teachers who makes everyone sing the Pledge of Allegiance. You will not fucking shut up about robot puns.” Michael reached around and grabbed the bad controller, shoving it back in the Squid’s face. “Shut up and play video games with me. If you resent your role so much change it. Try doing something to improve your life instead of just complaining about it. You’re worse than Jeremy.”

The Squid squinted at the controller as if it was a live tarantula: uncertain as to why Michael was offering it, half-convinced it was disguised threat, and trying to decide whether or not it was brave enough to touch it.

It was probably the dig about it being worse than Jeremy that did it. It dedicated its entire runtime towards being as superior to Jeremy as physically possible, and for this particular robot maintaining that status quo was god. It carefully picked up the controller with two fingers, as if it really was a tarantula and friendship was its venom.

The Squid didn’t know how to rearrange Jeremy’s features. Michael could see the indecision - the oscillating eyebrow, arched or furrowed or flat, puckering its mouth as if it had tasted a lemon or pursing it as if it was Aunt Petunia. Jeremy’s face was scrambled, and the Squid didn’t know how to put it back together. “What you said earlier about me being lonely.”

That wasn’t how he had put it, but Michael was quiet.

But the Squid didn’t say anything else. Michael waited patiently before he realized that the Squid had no intention of volunteering any further information, but that was okay.

It was still joyriding in Jeremy’s body. It was still doing a gross and disgusting violation of his autonomy, of his spirit, of whatever privacy Jeremy had left. The Squid had walked through Michael’s door acting as evil as physically possible, and here he was playing video games with it.

Michael reached over and grabbed his controller, resuming the game from where they had paused it. Had to start somewhere.

“You do know I can connect to this console with Bluetooth and play it without this silly remote, right?” The Squid scowled down at the bad controller, shaking it a little. The bad controller had a sticky A button and gummy shoulders, and it had been the Helen of Troy for many a fight between him and Jeremy. The idea of buying another decent controller had never occurred to them.
“The SNES definitely doesn’t have Bluetooth,” Michael said distantly. He was well aware that it probably didn’t matter. “Hey, do you have wi-fi?”

“Yes, but I’m not telling you the password.” The Squid leaned forward, and there was a strange glint in its empty eyes. It unpaused the game, sending the background music tinkling again. “You just had to be the one who won the sweepstakes, didn’t you. I just had to be stuck with you.”

Sweepstakes? What Sweep -

Michael choked on his spit, so distracted from his game that he got zapped in the first five seconds. The Squid cackled and made its 8 bit avatar do a very familiar ‘itsy bitsy spider’ pantomime.

“That was you!” Michael respawned, and he just barely managed to dodge the next zombie. Like fuck he was going to let the Squid win. “I remember! Christine and I won those tickets in a dumb sweepstakes, didn’t we? Our fucking drama teacher entered our class, and we’re the ones who won the tickets!”

He had almost forgotten. The days before the play had always been a little hazy, but the fog was clearing now that the Squid reminded him. He had almost missed it for a meet, but it was raining and the meet had been cancelled at the last minute - if they hadn’t cancelled that fucking meet none of this would be happening!

But Chris would still be stuck here. She might even have been stuck here by herself. Michael made his character dodge a zombie and blast the next one in the back, ignoring the way the Squid ran around on its own randomly blowing up zombies and making no attempt to watch his back. Their teamwork was not great. No matter how hard this sucked, he wouldn’t want to make Christine shoulder this ridiculous burden by herself.

Maybe she would have been better off. No babysitting his Alzheimer's. She could work together with a Michael that was actually nice, that actually liked her and liked Jeremy. She would be lonely, but things would be easier for her.

“Christine’s chances of success by herself in this play would have been 40%. With your sorry ass involved I have calculated the chance of success of your do-gooder plan only 20%. Congratulations on making everything worse.” The Squid shrugged as Michael let another zombie take a bite out of its shoulder. “But that’s not really anything new, is it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Michael jammed the A button a little too hard, making the remote creak. Dammit, these were antiques.

In the dim basement lighting Jeremy’s eyes seemed bluer than usual, electric and biting instead of the color of a pale sky in the morning. “You don’t think that your memory loss is happening by accident, do you? It’s hilarious how you’re actively making your life more difficult, then turning and whining to me about it.” It paused a beat. “Did I say hilarious? I meant annoying.”

“I’m the one making my life more difficult? This stupid dementia is your fault!” Michael’s guts were twisting into knots. This one wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t going to let the stupid computer make him feel guilty. “I don’t care if it’s helping me channel Eau de Geek, my memory loss is getting so fucking creepy. It’s the LARP from fucking hell. I want to be myself again.”

“Could have fooled me.” The Squid grinned at him, a bright slasher smile that lit up Jeremy’s sweet face into a jagged gash. “I thought you liked forgetting.”

Something cold trickled down Michael’s back. “Forget what?”
“Oh, not much. You’re just like every other human, you know.” The Squid shrugged absently. “One little nasty thing happens to you four years ago and you break apart. It’s so pathetic!” It giggled, high and grating. The whirling eight bit graphics of the TV screen cast its face in surreal neon purple and blue shades. “Now you’re actively sabotaging your little scheme, your reality, and your psyche. You’re like a Rich in a china shop of your life.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Michael lied. “Look, I’m trying to be nice here. Either stop fucking with me and play the stupid game or get out of here and go back to rooting through garbage cans for discontinued soda.”

It pulled a mock wounded face, pressing a hand to its chest. “I’m offering to help you here. I can install antiviral programs for that nasty little sadness trojan.”

Michael slanted a skeptical glance at him. “You can stop my... subconscious from blocking my own memories?”

“If your problems were everyday traumatic repression than we wouldn’t even be sitting here. Think of your psychological and moral weakness more as giving those horrible tentacles of nerdom and Mountain Dew a little bit of a foothold.” That was a thoroughly disturbing mental image, but the Squid barrelled on. “I could just clean up a few bugs for you, smooth out those footholds. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“We aren’t friends.”

“We’re dating!”

“Barely.” Michael paused a beat, realizing what he just said. “Hey, no we aren’t, you fucking creep. All I want is to know who I am. I just want a picket fence between me and champion nerd Michael Mell. That’s not fucking unreasonable.”

“Of course it’s not,” the Squid soothed. “I’ll just widen the gap between you and Michael Mell. Easy as Pi.”

The idea was appealing, but that was probably the danger. It didn’t sound so bad. Michael didn’t have any problem with play acting Michael, but he didn’t want to literally be Michael Mell. He had a fucking life to live, a real life. A real life that he absolutely was not running from whatsoever.

The Squid must have read his mind, because it smoothly cut into his thoughts. “If you aren’t running from your real life then prove it. Come on! I’ll help you make sure that who you are has nothing to do with Michael Mell.”

It was wearing Jeremy’s face, wide eyed and earnest, and although Michael’s brain knew it was a lie his heart didn’t understand, because Jeremy was the one person he could always trust. Even when Michael couldn’t trust himself he could always count on Jeremy’s bad flirting or his horrible wardrobe or his goofy grin. It wasn’t him, and he knew that, but the overwhelming part of Michael that was gross, over emotional, and hopelessly in love fell to pieces.

“I guess…” Michael shifted uncomfortably. “I mean, I guess you can talk me through it if you really want. Do you have any quantum nanotechnology tips or something? Is that what you’re offering?”

The Squid’s grin widened. “I can do so much better than that.”

Then it leaned forward and fisted its hand on the back of Michael’s head, fingers tangling in his hair and sending a quick jolt of warmth rising in his stomach. Its grin was buoyant, overflowing
and unnatural.

“I’ve always wanted to lobotomize you!”

“Wait,” Michael said, “what?”

The Squid pulled him in closer, smashing their lips together as something white hot exploded in Michael’s temples, as his heart seized and leaped into his throat, as Michael’s mind melted in his hands like ice as a memory opened its jaws and swallowed him whole.

“Your cousin’s been in an accident.”

He clambered into the car. It was Abuelo’s car. Mom was sitting in the passenger seat, rapping out texts on her phone.

“Oh.” He dumped his backpack in the far seat. He hoped that Abuelo and Abuela weren’t staying at their place again. Abuelo smelled weird. “Mom, can I have money for buying soda tomorrow? José bought me one today and I need to pay him back.”

“Not today, kiddo.” She massaged her forehead. He couldn’t see her face. “Play on your Gameboy and let the grown-ups talk.”

Abuelo said something in Spanish.

“Manuel’s translating for Abuela at the hospital. Yes, just take a right on Main…”

The hospital?

“Mom? What kind of accident?”

“Not now, mijo.” She sounded tired. “Here, let me pull it up on my phone.”

“Mom?”

Michael, or whoever the fuck he was supposed to be, gasped -

Children’s hospital waiting rooms were really brightly colored.

He messed around with one of those wire and ball toys they always had on the ground. He was way too old for them but Mom wasn’t letting him play with her phone. He had math homework, but he needed his calculator for that and it was at home.

“I wanna play Minecraft,” he complained, before looking around to make sure that somebody was listening to him. “When can we go home?”

The waiting room had a lot of really stressed out parents in it. Most of them looked tired. A few were flipping through some magazines. An older women with deep wrinkles around her eyes was leaning back in her chair, snoring away. Lime green swepted in streaks across the wall, and the brisk looking nurses with tight mouths had lanyards with cartoon characters on them.
Tía Magdalena bounced the baby on her lap. She was the only one with him. Everyone else was still arguing and talking with doctors. Abuelo was talking to Papa, who was talking to the doctor, and Abuela was praying really, really loudly. He couldn’t find Tía Karina or Tío Diego, which was stupid, since they’re supposed to be María’s parents and they should be around to tell him what was going on.

A TV was playing in the distance. Cartoons again. María didn’t like cartoons. All she watched was Animal Planet. He had been into Youtubers lately. She still liked the unboxing videos.

“Honey, come sit down.” Tía Magdalena patted the chair next to her, and he reluctantly scrambled into it. The baby’s little eyes gawped into his, and he pulled a face to see if she would smile. She didn’t. “María was in a car accident.”

There was a brightly colored mural on the wall with a shining sun with a face on it and a little mountain and a tiger thing and the tiger thing was holding a thermometer and had a little lab coat and of all things that was what he remembered, and of all things he still saw the stupid little tiger with a gaping maw and matte black eyes in his dreams.

“Yeah, I know.” He looked around, eyes catching on the older woman with deep wrinkles around her eyes. She fit comfortably in the plush blue waiting room chair. He wondered how long she had been there. “When can I visit? Ron was in the hospital two weeks ago and he had a really cool cast. Is she going to get a cast?”

Baby Priscilla was smarter than he was, although and because she was only a few months old and didn’t know how to lie, because she began to wail only a few minutes before Tía Magdalena began to cry too.

Lost and confused, he reflexively began crying too, and did not stop.

Jeremy turned and smiled, awkward but real, ashamed but himself -

In his dreams the door was always closed.

He had been crying, pushing past Dad’s warm arms, and someone was telling him to stop crying and that he needed to go back with Mom to wait in the car.

He wasn’t a baby, he was twelve and he just wanted to say hi, but nobody let him in.

People woke up from comas all the time. He saw in a documentary that they could hear you. She was going to wake up and know that he hadn’t visited her and get that little scrunched up look on her face like when he ate the last PopTart right in front of her and grinned the whole time. If all of their relatives had been standing over him sounding angry and crying he wouldn’t want to wake up either. He could convince her.

“María!” He called, because he could wake her up, “María!”

They didn’t let him through. Maybe that was why she never did.
Michael broke for air.

Jeremy fell back, hand pressed over his mouth and shaking with laughter. Michael, who was still overwhelmed by the fact that Jeremy had just really and totally kissed him, just sat there like a moron blinking in shock.

“I win!”

The game chimed an eight bit humoresque as the coveted blocky ‘CONGRATULATIONS - YOU WIN!’ scrolled down Jeremy’s half of the screen. Michael’s half was marked by a sad little whirring beep and the sight of his avatar being vivisected by zombies.

“You cheated!” Michael gasped, outraged. “You used my love against me!”

“Is it cheating if it works?” Jeremy snickered into his hand again, lanky limbs turned lean folded up against his chest like an accordian. “My hidden talent was always my good looks.”

Please. Michael was madly in love with him, but a fool he was not. He just rolled his eyes, masterfully fighting past the fact that he was still beet red. “You resorted to dirty tactics, my man. You, sir, are rusty.” He shook his remote at Jeremy again, who was still laughing. His eyes were creased into a soft smile, and Michael couldn’t help but notice how fluffy his hair was today. 8/10 on the fluffiness scale. Very nice. “I’ve been logging in crazy hours into the pursuit of justice against the zombie army when you’re too busy making sandwiches for the homeless or something.”

“Only I may provide the homeless their carbohydrates,” Jeremy said seriously. “Respect my holy mission.”

“Dude, make sandwiches for me. I have a seperate stomach for Nutella.” Michael stuck out his tongue at Jeremy, who pretended to reach out and grab it. “Foul play, dick!”

“You’re the dick, dickweed.” Jeremy pointedly looked upwards, where they could hear the faint clashes and clangs as Michael’s mother threw together dinner with her usual meticulous abandon. Michael was pretty sure that they didn’t even own a measuring cup. “Can I stay for dinner? I don’t feel like cooking and it’s not as if Dad’s going to get off his ass.”

“Duh.” Michael stood up, and like a true gentleman he helped pull Jeremy up. Because they were dating now. Or something? “Hey, does it ever feel like our dating situation is kind of strange? We’re being so weird about this.” He knocked Jeremy gently on the chest, letting him sway and grin. “We haven’t done anything but go on weird dates yet. I…” He swallowed. It was hard to believe that he could just say this stuff now. That Jeremy wouldn’t hate him or think he was weird. “I like you too much to half-ass this.”

But Jeremy just softly smiled at him, and he tugged Michael in closer until their breaths echoed against each other. He was weirdly cold, but Michael was blinded by the sight of him. His best friend had really changed overnight - with his skin clear, biceps toned, and hair coiffed it was like he was a different person.

A hot person. A really hot different person. Not that Jeremy hadn’t always been utterly hot, but that
Michael…” Jeremy reached up and started running his fingers through Michael’s hair, making his breath catch. Something hot and warm was pooling in his stomach. “These past two months have been the best of my life. I got everything I ever wanted. It’s still so crazy to think about.”

“That everything includes me, right?” Michael felt the need to confirm this. “I’m on the list of ‘holy shit, I can’t believe this is happening’ things. Because believe me, you and this and everything in general is definitely on my list. Your list is probably pretty identical to mine, actually.” He was rambling, but Jeremy was so close against him and something strong was pulling at his gut. Jeremy slung his arms across Michael’s shoulders and something in him took off like a rocket. “Because my ‘I can’t believe this is happening’ list is mostly finding the Duke Nukem game on eBay, and actually finding a Collector’s Edition of the new Mario in GameStop because those are so freaking impossible to find in that godforsaken sell-out hellhole -”

“Michael? You’re a lot hotter when you aren’t talking.”

Michael clicked his jaw shut just in time for Jeremy to lean in and kiss him chastely and quickly on the lips.

It was simple and short. Something in Michael collapsed like a house of cards, leaving him raw and bare. Just when Michael surged up to meet his kiss Jeremy broke it off, wiping his lips and grinning like the cat that caught the canary.

“You remember that Willy Wonka movie?” Jeremy stepped away from him, keeping their hands clasped. “What happened to the boy who got everything he ever wanted?”

It wasn’t Jeremy’s favorite movie, but they had watched it when they were high one time. The riverboat scene made him cry. “He lived happily ever after?”

“Yeah.” Jeremy squeezed his hand, his eyes cold and glassy. “That one.”

They climbed the stairs for dinner, the familiar scene of eating dinner with his family and Jeremy punctuated by his tingling lips, and even when Jeremy spent way too long in the bathroom and came back looking frustrated nothing could ruin his mood.

He saw Jeremy off at his front porch, the dim yellow glow of the porch light casting Jeremy’s face in a strange light. His eyes looked glassy and cold. Frustrated where they should have been loving. Or, like, affectionate. Manly appreciation for their romance/bromance. Maybe a little loving. Why was their relationship so weird?

“See you tomorrow, I guess,” Michael said lamely, scratching the back of his head. Was Jeremy going to kiss him goodnight? That would be fucking awesome. Maybe Michael should go in for it. Yeah, he definitely should. Just wait for the right -

“Michael?” Jeremy leaned in and slowly fisted his hands in Michael’s shirt, making his heartbeat jump and his mind go sexy places. “I’m going to find where you hid the Mountain Dew Red. And I am going to dump it in the school toilet. If you want it so bad drink from the toilet bowl like a dog. That’s all you and Fangirl are good for.”

Then he leaned in and, too fast for Michael to even register, licked Michael fully across the face. Michael broke apart, spitting and grossed out, and Jeremy clutched his sides and started cackling. The cackling was high and tinny, like velcro rubbing against his ears.
“The look on your face! Catch you later, dickweed!” Jeremy was practically bent over giggling, and he pointed a finger at a flabbergasted and betrayed Michael. “Have fun carrying out your ridiculous plan with no memories, asshole!”

Jeremy jumped off the front porch, still wheezing with laughter, and strolled down the dark driveway where the sprinklers tugged at the hems of his jeans towards his home.

He was singing something, high and lilting under his breath that echoed under the whirring click of the cicadas. Something about Rich setting a fire and burning down the house (whoah-oh!). It sent a horrible tingle down Michael’s spine.

He left Michael behind, standing at his doorway silently rubbing his cheek, trying to conceptualize something that left him slipping further and further away.
WE'RE GETTING MULTIMEDIA UP IN THIS BITCH

(god guys im so sorry)

George Salazar: Is everyone awake? Sound off we have an emergency.

Katlyn Carlson: the fuck Michael?

George Salazar: Cool so Chloe’s up I’ll explain later it’s an EMERGENCY

Stephanie Hsu: Fuck

Jake Boyd: EYY PARTY ;)))

Jake Boyd: cool groupchat!!

Jake Boyd: are we getting sonic??

Jake Boyd: wait

Jake Boyd: where are rich and jeremy

Jake Boyd: are they not invited to the party? :O

Jake Boyd: is it a surprise party?? :OOO

Lauren Marcus: o boi

George Salazar: Thank god everyone’s awake. Listen, everyone meet me at the 7/11 on Broadway and Lafayette. It’s too long to explain over text plus you aren’t going to believe me over text but someone’s uh

George Salazar: planning arson on Jake’s house???

Stephanie Hsu: Michael call me

Lauren Marcus: Michael call me

Katlyn Carlson: JDALKFJASLKJDF

Jake Boyd: be there in 5
Dana was working that shift. She was dependable like that.

“If you can’t sleep I can hook you up with some whiskey.” She was sitting on several milk crates stacked on top of each other, head unabashedly pillowed on her arms as she slept at the counter. Her cheek was a little sticky. “Sushi this late at night’s gonna give you indigestion.”

The 7-Eleven was deserted, thank god. The blinding fluorescent lights cut out the shadows on the floor, giving an ethereal and two dimensional tint to the familiar scene. Everything in the light looked different in the dark, and even as the buzzing fluorescent 7-Eleven lights chased away the encroaching night it only made the contrast between the inside and the gas stations outside more stark. It washed the already pasty Dana out, highlighting her pancake makeup and generic costuming. The hot dogs roller churned in its eternal Sisyphean quest and the slushie machine hummed a quiet promise.

“Trust me, I have a holier mission than sushi.” Michael threw his backpack on the counter, not even waiting for Dana to unlock the counter gate and swinging onto the counter, hopping off behind the till and almost crashing into a very unamused cashier girl. “We’re borrowing the break room.”

“You’re here at nine pm because you wanted to smoke in the break room? The fuck, Michael?” Unfair, but fair. She crossed her arms, scowling up at him as he clutched his backpack to his chest and fumbled with the break room doorknob. “Michael! What do you mean by we?”

“I saw something and I’m saying something!” Michael quickly unhinged the counter gate, turning his best pleading puppy dog eyes at Dana, who was immune to his masculine wiles. “I’m meeting up with some friends!”

“In a convenience store break room?”

“Our houses aren’t secure,” Michael said seriously. They probably were, but his definitely wasn’t and he wasn’t about to invite himself into other people’s houses. That would be weird. “There’s no security cameras in the break room, right?”

“There’s no -” she gaped at him, heavy black eyeliner smudged with sleep and her foundation flaking. “You’re serious about this.”

“Jeremy’s in danger,” Michael said, and judging from the widening of her eyes Dana understood that this was as serious as it got. Michael played Frogger with his own life, but if he could spare Jeremy from the rest of the world he would wrap him up in bubble wrap.

Either that or completely ignore all of his emotional problems for favor of freaking out about your own life and be blindsided when he swallows a robot to solve his anxiety when you’re right there -

“You’re lucky we’re so ride or die.” Dana leaned over and flipped some mysterious switches under the counter, and Michael saw the security cameras slide away from them. “Nobody watches these things. Don’t commit any crimes and nobody’ll look.” She must have seen the expression on Michael’s face or the way his lip started wobbling, because she quickly grabbed him by the collar and shoved him into the break room. “Tell anybody about this and you die! No feelings!”

“I’m feelings wrapped in a hoodie and given a slushie!”

“I know, that’s why I hate your guts.”

The breakroom was grimy and small, with a ratty and stained couch pushed up against the wall and a large cork board splattered with notices and flyer set above a coffee table pushed against the wall.
There was a peeling formica table in the center, and Michael dumped his backpack on it and shook out his proof.

He compulsively went through the stack one more time, hoping it would be enough. Christine and Brooke were already on his side, but the popular kids were always stabbing each other in the back and Chloe was just as likely to think it was a conspiracy against her than believe that it was a legitimate conspiracy that was against everybody.

Nerves were rattling in his chest, and his face still felt a little sticky from where Jeremy had licked it. From where the Squid had licked it.

The Squid had kissed him. Michael felt dirty. He felt dirty and disgusting, and he couldn’t blame the Squid for everything anymore because now he had taken advantage of Jeremy too. He didn’t mean to, and he hadn’t known he was doing it, but now he was just another name on the list of people who were violating him.

But the memory of it warmed him, the feeling of Jeremy’s hands tangling in his hair, the press of their chests together. That made it worse.

He was antsy. He paced the room a little, feeling like a true hard boiled detective, before feeling like a moron instead and settled for sitting on the couch and tapping his foot on the ground, feeling useless. What about him wasn’t useless? Jesus, he was pathetic.

Out of lack of anything better to do he reached over and grabbed one of the battered and dog eared magazines on the side table, flipping through it aimlessly.

MAGAZINE WEEKLY - what a ridiculously generic name - had the usual picturesque army of celebrities wearing stylish hats studiously trying to avoid the camera. A portrait of a woman was nestled in the corner with a secretive, intimate smile, while the caption of a supposedly ordinary looking man divulged that he had a substance abuse problem. Go figure. The title advocated MAGAZINE WEEKLY’s ability to divulge the hidden secrets of the universe, along with ten hot hairstyle tips.

Well, if it said so. Michael flipped it open and let the pages fall to the centerfold, and he saw to his surprise that there were no pictures in it. It was just text, a magazine full of flimsy pages with plain black text on a white background. When he looked closer at the words he did a double take. It was a script.

He squinted closer.

SCENE TWO

(JEREMY follows CHLOE into an upstairs bedroom.)

CHLOE

Jake’s parents’ room. Don’t worry. They’re not using it.

JEREMY
You really know your way around.

CHLOE

Yeah, I’ve had sex in pretty much every room in this house. (off JEREMY’s shock) Because I dated Jake! God, what kind of slut do you think I am?

(CHLOE raises her baby bottle. And chugs from it.)

JEREMY

Where’s Brooke?

CHLOE

Oh my god you are too freaking adorable. (drunk whisper) Brooke’s not coming.

JEREMY

She’s not? Then why…

Ha, ha. What the fuck?

Michael flipped the magazine around, double checking the cover. Sultry, mysterious celebrities, weight loss tips, MAGAZINE WEEKLY. It was just a magazine. A magazine with a script inside about Chloe and Jeremy.

Something powerful pounded behind his temples and Michael groaned, screwing his eyes shut as the dim lighting of the break room began to hurt his head. Maybe he was just tired.

He made himself keep reading through the pain, quickly scanning down the page. This didn’t make sense.

CHLOE

You know she’s not that innocent. That wounded puppy routine? It’s how she gets all the guys. Acts all helpless so they want to protect her. Not that I care.

(Beat. It dawns on JEREMY...)
JEREMY

You’re jealous of Brooke!

CHLOE

Um. Obviously I’m not.

JEREMY

That’s insane! Why would you be jealous of anyone? You’re the hottest girl in school! (Beat.) Did I just say that out—

(Suddenly, CHLOE kisses him. Jeremy tries pulling away.)

JEREMY

Whoa, whoa! (to the SQUIP) Make it stop!

THE SQUIP

I don’t understand the request.

Michael stared at the page. Then he stared at the song lyrics. Then he flipped a little backwards, then a little forwards.

A doorbell echoed through the small room, making him guiltily start. He rolled up the magazine and quickly stuffed it in his back pocket. Rule number one in those Nancy Drew CD-ROM games: always pick up weird shit and stuff it into your pockets. He could ask Christine about it later.

There was a muffled sound of discourse up front, with a hauntingly familiar shrill, bitchy voice wafting through. Dana didn’t sound very amused, but the Chloes of the world were the natural enemies of the Danas. Two should never be placed in the same cage.

Michael whipped out his phone, feeling like the sixth grader who has to take the wolf, the goat, and the cabbage across the river. He quickly sent a text, hoping that the ping could be heard over the sound of Chloe’s grating, high pitched voice.

George Salazar: the password is swordfish

A few seconds later the discourse abruptly cut out and the unmistakable bang of the counter gate rising and dropping echoed through the room. When Michael stood up he saw, sure enough, that it
was a particularly unamused Chloe. A more amused Jake was trailing behind her, munching on some trail mix with a placid expression, accepting his fate.

“A password for a convenience store break room?” She drank in the dreary, dim breakroom. “Are you serious?”

“Someone’s planning on burning down my house?” Jake chimed in, eyebrows furrowed. “Are you serious?”

“As serious as Christine during play rehearsal,” Michael said grimly. He sat down on one of the rickety plastic chairs circling the table, steepling his hands and inviting them to do the same. Jake casually dropped down onto it while Chloe begrudgingly accepted the sticky seat. “Did you two arrive together?”

“I got here before her but I got distracted by the food,” Jake said plainly. “Did you know that you can just buy bleach at a convenience store?”

“The mysteries of the 7-Eleven are grandiose yet gothic,” Michael agreed solemnly.

Jake nodded, stuffing more peanuts into his mouth as a special bonding moment echoed between their hearts. “Wicked.”

Okay. Michael took a deep breath, summoning his courage. Chloe and Jake were his friends. Like, they were awful, but Chloe was a genuinely decent person if you gave her half the chance and Jake was a surprisingly empathetic, helpful person. There was no need to be scared of Chloe and Jake just because they were like his fourth and fifth friends ever and that he knew full well he was a socially awkward, useless nerd.

Michael used to like being who he was, or at least he didn’t mind it. So what if he was a hopeless, socially awkward loser who didn’t have any real friends besides an even more anxious and socially awkward loser who he was desperately in love with? He had been happy. Or at least not sad. He hadn’t been much at all, really.

But lately he had found himself wanting more. He wanted to be a normal guy now. Some part of him couldn’t help but want to be an athlete or a JSA guy or an artist, or just anyone who wasn’t always hiding behind his headphones. What changed? Why wasn’t he happy with who he was anymore?

When did he decide that he wanted something more?

“You guys are my friends, right?” Michael asked slowly, feeling like a complete moron. So not all that different from usual.

“You did not drag me out of my nightly skincare routine to assuage your insecurities.” Chloe crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “We’d be here all night.”

“I’m totally your friend,” Jake said, touched. “But what does this have to do with burning down my house?”

Well, the Squid mentioned it and it seemed important at the time. Michael took a deep breath and exhaled, dredging up whatever remained of his courage. He could do this. All he had to do was explain it slowly and meticulously, bring up some of his great evidence, drop the pictures of the eighth grade dance, bat his best puppy dog eyes at them, and overall just pretend that he was confident in their strange, ill-begotten friendship. Doable.
A distinct thump echoed outside the breakroom - not the sound of the counter gate opening and closing, but the sound of someone hopping the counter. Chloe and Jake started, and the three only had enough time to exchange a confused glance before the break room door slammed open, the doorknob ricocheting off the plaster wall as Brooke and Christine burst inside wielding a laptop, butcher paper, and grandiose entrances. Brooke struck a pose, high on righteousness.

“Jeremy and Rich are cyborgs and want to take over the world!”

Jesus Christ.

Michael collapsed back in his seat, rubbing his eyebrows and silently mourning the allegiance of the popular kids. Brooke had already dumped the laptop in the middle of the table, ignoring how Chloe and Jake’s jaws had dropped, and had reached into her sweater to withdraw what looked like a miniature projector. Christine was taping up the butcher paper on the popcorn wall, secure in her own righteousness. They were both wearing camo pants, a black turtleneck, and sunglasses indoors. They matched.

“Excuse me?” Chloe asked, voice dripping with her patented ‘I cannot believe you, a peasant, dare to step in front of me in those Levis’ voice. It was shrill and nasally. “You called us all the way here to tell me that our friends are robots?”

“Absolutely.” Brooke wasn’t even looking at them, caught in a flurry of bringing up what looked like a slideshow on her computer. “I know this is hard to believe, but it’s absolutely true. You know all of those articles on secret Japanaese technology I’ve been sending you two?”

The popular kids exchanged uneasy glances, both unwilling to admit that they don’t really bother reading the Facebook articles Brooke tagged them in. “I saw some articles about them in the New York Times,” Jake said hesitantly. “But they all made it sound like it was just neo Japanese methods of tidying your house or something.”

“Trust me,” Brooke said grimly. “These things absolutely tidy your house for you.”

With a dramatic swipe of her finger she called up a PowerPoint, projecting it on Christine’s butcher paper. Christine, who had procured a laser pointer, wiggled it onto the screen

“We will now explain everything,” Brooke boomed. “Get ready, ladies and gentlemen...for the truth!”
Michael buried his face in his hands.

Chloe’s jaw dropped. “Are you mcfucking kidding me?”

Jake scratched his jaw. “Why the quotation marks?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Christine gestured at Brooke, who advanced on the next slide. “Don’t worry. We have your proof right here. Behold, the ill begotten fruits of hacking into Michael’s dropbox account -” Hey! “Video footage of Jeremy and Michael’s eighth grade talent show.”

Oh god. Oh god. Michael slunk lower in his seat. They wouldn’t. Not even for the sake of the Cause, the Revolution, la Guerra. They would not -

The next slide was just a video. Michael hid his face in his hands. Chloe and Jake looked on, fascinated, as Brooke snickered behind her hand and Christine nodded in solmen acceptance that she had ruined Michael’s life forever.

“Is that a pogo stick?” Jake asked, morbidly fascinated.

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name…

“Okay, you get the picture!” Michael frantically gestured at the screen. “Moving on now!”

Christine just crossed her arms. “Can we all now agree that the Jeremy Heere we know and tolerate cannot possibly have evolved from this acne ridden, beautiful little nerd without robotic aid?”

“I can’t believe this is happening to me,” Chloe said, morbidly fascinated. “I can’t believe robots are the only explanation for this.” She chewed her lip, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms, watching the horrible video that scarred Michael’s eyeballs for life. He couldn’t believe he had actually done all those things. It didn’t...sound like him? “Brooke, are you really sure about this?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Brooke said seriously. She flashed a weak smile. “I mean, I would lie to
you about a lot of things, like how your butt looks in that skirt or if Rachel deserved that snippy comment you made. But I wouldn’t lie about this. You can trust me. And Christine.”

“Hey, I’m involved in this too!” Michael raised his hand. “I was the one who encouraged him to swallow the tic tac in the first place!”

“So this is your fault?” Chloe asked.

“Not really what I wanted you to take away from that.”

“Michael was integral in this process,” Christine soothed. “He’s romancing Jeremy for the sake of the cause. Here, I made a slide to get us all up to speed.”

Brooke clicked forward on the slide.

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**Robot Drug Use and You**

- Jeremy was a gross nerd.
  - He is no longer a nerd.
- Rich is also a Cyborg.
  - Kermit?
- Rich gave Jeremy a robot pill and now some creep who is also a robot is in his brain.
  - Keanu Reeves but grepier.
  - Likes to electrocute people.
  - Also wants to rule the world and transcend its mortal flesh prison.
  - Also mean to Rich.
    - :D:
    - Sorry Jake

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“Keanu Reeves?” Jake asked, fascinated. “Like in Bill and Ted?”

“Think more Matrix,” Michael volunteered. “Somewhere between Matrix and John Wick.”

But Jake was just shaking his head, as if he was a cow trying to dislodge a fly. “Rich’s been drugged too? He sold Jeremy this thing? I can’t believe it. Rich wouldn’t…” he trailed off. Everyone sat silently and awkwardly, because Rich totally would. “Shit.”

“You can say that again.” Michael propped his chin in his hands. “Rich is a weird fucking dude but he’s not evil. He’s been trying to help us. Jake, you’re his best friend. Didn’t he always seem kind of...I don’t know, sad? Sad enough to vore a robot?”

Jake was silent, and Michael knew that whatever he and Rich had was private. He gestured at Brooke, who obligingly moved to the next slide.
“This is the final agenda,” Brooke said grimly. “The Squids are a hive mind designed to exploit a teenager’s insecurities, take over their minds, and use that poor sucker to spread their virus to the world. The fate of the world is literally at stake here.”

“Holy shit,” Chloe said faintly. “They’re going to use Mister Vineyard Vines and Mister Freakazoid to take over the world? That’s so...stupid.”

“It’s ridiculous,” Brooke agreed. “But sometimes the most evil plans are the stupidest.”

She flipped to a new slide to emphasize her point.

“Those PowerPoints feel a little irreverent to the situation,” Michael pointed out.
“Christine made them.”

“That’ll do it.”

“So what can we do about it?” Chloe leaned forward in her chair, big brown eyes sparking. “Say this is all totally true and not some of my three closest friends going off the deep end without me.”

Three closest friends? Really? Michael was touched. “Like, just because you guys are jumping off a bridge, does that mean that I should?”

“The bridge is on fire and also a robot,” Brooke said flatly. “Chloe, we’re the leaders of a revolution here. Think about it: everyone in this room knows something that nobody else in the school knows. Chloe, we are literally the only ones who can save the world.”

The blatant appeal to her exceptionalism and need for leadership worked. Chloe smirked a little, straightening in her chair. “I seriously get to save the world?”

“We get to save the world,” Michael added. “It’s a team effort.”

“Christine and I have been doing most of the work but Michael is definitely doing his part,” Brooke said indulgently. “He’s been the one keeping an eye on Jeremy and fighting the Squids through the power of love.”

That was a ridiculous way to put it, but if Michael thought about it that really was what he was doing. He had no idea how any of them had even gotten to this point. There was something missing here, but that really shouldn’t be a surprise. It wasn’t as if their little friend group knew everything that was going on. Really, there was no reason that they should even know as much as they did.

Come to think of it, the past few months were a little fuzzy. He felt like he remembered most of what technically happened, but he felt like there were some gaps too. Why had he made that deal with the Squid? He had a good reason, right?

Jake was slouched in his chair, jaw clenched. When he spoke it was half to himself. “Rich…”

“He’s in trouble,” Christine said gently. “But we’re going to save him, no matter what.”

“I made a promise.” Rich in the bathroom flashed through Michael’s mind, and he couldn’t have forgotten the puffy purple bags under his red rimmed eyes even if he wanted to. “I made a promise to him and Jeremy, and I take that really fucking seriously. Jeremy’s my best friend, but lately Rich has become my friend too. And I don’t ditch my friends.” Something hard panged in his heart, because he knew it wasn’t true. Maybe once upon a time he would have been able to say that, but he had done some really shitty things in the name of helping the Squid help him. Even if he wasn’t really sure why. “Not again.”

But Jake was silent, working his jaw. If he hadn’t been a guy Michael would have thought that he was about to cry.

It must be a hard thing to hear about your best friend. It had been hard for Michael. Brooke and Christine looked away awkwardly, but Chloe just leaned over and squeezed his hand. She smiled reassuringly at him.

“We’ll kick robot ass,” Chloe said. “And when you finish playing Prince Charming you can finally ask him out.”

Everyone choked on their spit, but Jake didn’t even look embarrassed. “My Prince Charming act never worked on you,” he joked weakly, shooting a significant glance towards a suddenly beet red
Brooke. “I guess you’d rather be the knight too, huh?”

When Chloe flushed red too he laughed, knocking her gently on the head as she scowled and batted his hand away. They hadn’t really seemed like amicable exes before, but Michael knew from experience that when you suddenly found yourself with more important problems human pettiness and insecurity didn’t seem as important.

At the end of the day, when you’re scared and against the wall you want someone watching your back. Michael knew the importance of that better than anybody.

“What do we gotta do?” Jake asked, sitting upright. “Hit me with your best shot, bro.”

“We did a lot of detective work in order to find out the Squid’s agenda,” Christine said vaguely. Michael was left wondering what detective work exactly she was doing without him. “And we think they’re going to strike at Jake’s party tomorrow. We are all in severe danger, guys. This is the shatterpoint. This party is where three songs and a thousand fates are going to be launched. Brooke and I have been brainstorming like mad to see how we can fix this.”

Michael raised his hand. “That’s...really fucking specific, guys. How did it get so specific?”

Christine did a double take, but she quickly recovered. “I did a lot of internet research. You would not believe how much.”

“I didn’t understand it either,” Brooke professed. “But it’s really important that we fix this. My costume is going to be fucking awesome and ain’t nobody going to be dissing me.”

Something about the slide was rubbing Michael the wrong way. Chloe and Jake were nodding along fastidiously, but Michael couldn’t help but lean forward and rub at his stubble. “It’s trying to get Jeremy laid? With...me? Why?” That had been so against everything they had been doing so far. They had both been keeping the dates as PG as possible so the Squid could try and convince
Jeremy that the only way to get Michael to fall in love with him was to Squid the school. Michael had been trying to keep it as PG as possible so their first kiss could be super dramatic because...well, he didn’t remember, but he must have a good reason. Besides, he wasn’t sure if he even wanted to sleep with Jeremy. That just seemed so...

What? They had only gone on a few dates. He wasn’t ready yet. For some reason.

The magazine in his back pocket was pressing uncomfortably up against his thigh, and he slowly drew it out.

“I kinda like my house, man,” Jake said weakly. “I don’t know why the Squids want to burn it down, but I’m all for stopping it.”

Christine was silent, anxiously rubbing her laser pointer.

“Well?” Chloe asked. “Why did the Squids get Rich to burn down Jake’s house?”

“Yeah,” Michael asked. “What was the point?”

It was Michael’s addition that did it. Christine flinched, but she quickly pasted on a bright smile and a wiggle of the laser pointer around the picture of the burning Elmo. “I don’t know! The inner programs of the quantum nanotechnology mechanisms is mysterious and incomprehensible to our .07 volts per neuron! All I know is that Rich tries to set some stuff on fire and that we absolutely, positively, cannot let him. Sounds good?” She shined the laser pointer at Brooke’s face, who hissed. “Let’s describe how!”

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**GAME PLAN**

1. **A TEAM (Brooke, Christine, Jake)**
   a. Kidnap Rich
   b. Shove Mountain Dew down his throat
   c. Stop the house from burning down
2. **B TEAM (Chloe, Michael)**
   a. KEEP SOBER
   b. Make Sure Jeremy is safe

**THEN SUCCESS!!!**

Jake and Brooke nodded professionally as Michael and Chloe exchanged wounded glances.

“Why don’t I have a real job?” Michael complained. “What am I, chopped liver?”

“I can totally keep sober!” Chloe protested. “My therapist said I wasn’t an alcoholic!”

What a suspiciously specific denial. But Christine’s expression just tightened, and she rapped the paper for emphasis. “I’m not fucking around on this one, guys.” The room gasped softly at Christine’s cursing, making her roll her eyes. “Michael and Chloe have the most important job.
Neither of them are allowed to drink. If you drink then it means that you can’t keep Jeremy safe! Jake, Brooke and I are keeping Rich safe. Safe from himself. You two make sure Jeremy’s safe. They’re vulnerable parties, guys. We can’t take advantage of them.” She shot Chloe and Michael a pointed look, making both of them shift uncomfortably in their sheets. “Taking advantage of them would be bad.”

Did this have anything to do with getting Jeremy laid in a bad way?

Michael shook his head. No, of course not. Chloe would never do that. She was a hard drinker and kind of a jerk, and she could get hilariously jealous of Brooke, but she would never do that. She was secretly, mysteriously, kind of a good person. She was proving that today. Chloe would never.

The script poked his thigh, and Michael quietly withdrew it from his pocket and went back to flipping through it. The others were talking loudly and quickly about the best methods for kidnapping Rich and shoving Mountain Dew Red down his throat - convincing Chloe and Jake that discontinued soda was the only way to stop the Squids was a hard sell, but once they put it in terms of the Stoplight game it was much easier - but Michael tuned them out as he carefully flipped through the paper thin pages. He found where he had left off.

**DO YOU WANNA GET**
**DO YOU WANNA GET**
**DO YOU WANNA GET INSIDE MY DIAPER, BOY?**

(She hands him the bottle.)
It’s not actually milk.

**JEREMY**
Oh...I’m not really a big— (The SQUIP forces JEREMY to drink.) Drinker!

(The SQUIP makes JEREMY kiss CHLOE. Suddenly, there’s a knock on the door.)

**BROOKE (OS)**
Jeremy? Are you in there? (CHLOE gestures: Shh.) Jenna Rolan said she saw you go upstairs. Jeremy?

(Pause. Finally BROOKE goes away. JEREMY exhales.)

**JEREMY**
If Jenna Rolan saw us...

**CHLOE**
Jenna Rolan should mind her own business.

**JEREMY**
Brooke’s going to find out. Don’t you care?
Michael’s blood went cold.

He looked up at the slide, then back down at the script. He read further, then he flipped back to the beginning and read through it again.

“Can you go back to the previous slide, please?” Michael asked distantly, and Brooke flipped back to the Elmo one before launching back into her conversation with Jake about where to buy roofies. Jake had a hookup.

It was just like it said in this weird-ass script. Everything that Christine put up on the slide was detailed word for word in the script. Some of it made no sense - were Jeremy and Brooke dating or something? Weren’t he and Jeremy the ones dating? - but some of it felt way too true.

Chloe making out with Jeremy to make Brooke jealous...she would never do that.

He looked back at his friend, who was jabbing a well manicured finger on the sticky Formica impassionately arguing for just tackling Jeremy and shoving the Mountain Dew Red down his throat too.

“His Squid’s the head honcho,” Christine was explaining, for a given value of explain. “It’s way more powerful than Rich’s. We have to wait until it syncs up with the network before downing it. That way we can wipe the entire system.”

“Wouldn’t giving Rich the loser nerd soda shut down the network too?” Chloe pointed out.

Christine shrugged, looking sketchy. “I was thinking maybe it’s not synced up?”

Where did she even get that information?

An ice cube was crawling down Michael’s spine, and he knew that he wasn’t necessary anymore. Christine and Brooke had the situation well in hand. They knew more than he did. They had a plan of attack and a method of fighting this thing. Michael had been distracted by his weird ass romance with his best friend and his attendant evil robot, and Christine had powered through without him.

It was as if Michael wasn’t even the one on the front lines of this fight. He was the one dealing with the Squid every day. Everybody knew that turning Jeremy to the side of good would turn the tide in this war.

But...why?

“Why didn’t we shove the Mountain Dew down Jeremy’s throat ages ago?” Michael asked quietly, and Christine froze. He looked up, fighting the revulsion in his stomach from the mysterious script. “How did we even know that the Mountain Dew would fight the Squids?”

“Uh,” Christine said intelligently, “Internet?”

But Michael couldn’t help but shake his head, ignoring the pounding headache thrumming behind his temples. “Christine, can I talk to you alone?”

“Of course,” she said quickly, and dived forward to grab Michael’s wrist and tow him out the door.
Michael quickly stuffed the script in his back pocket. “Let’s go! Brooke, you update the others on the plan. Consider a checklist. Come on, Michael!”

He let himself be dragged out the door, through the counter gate with an obviously eavesdropping Dana and past a churning slushie machine. Michael, lost and confused, made pathetic grasping motions for the slushie machine, but Christine relentlessly tugged him forward.

They broke into the chilly October air, ignoring the chime of the doorbell and the soft thump of the glass door. Cigarette smoke assailed their noses and coated the backs of their throats, and Michael and Christine coughed lightly as they avoided the homeless men kicking their heels against the side of the curb.

They turned the corner against the side where the tire and air pumps stood tall and proud along a soft coating of litter and leaves, and Christine coughed resentfully. Something about her expression changed - where she once was soft and bouncy now she seemed only tired and frustrated, thick bags under her eyes beling her late night Squid googling sessions.

“Cigarette smoke. I remember when everything always smelled like dust and paint. Now we’re stuck with homeless people and cigarette smoke all the time. Nothing about this makes sense.”

“You can say that again,” Michael said irritably. He shook his hand out of Christine’s grip, sneezing as the wind coated his throat with cigarette smoke. “Christine, what the hell? This is supposed to be an information lecture, not a seminar on how to lie to our friends.”

“Michael, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we are the worst compulsive liars in this musical.” She crossed her arms, leaning against the wall. In the shadows of the alley behind the convenience store she almost looked a little sinister. They probably both did. Hoodlum brown teenager selling drugs behind a 7-Eleven in the dead of night. Or, you know, doing the exact opposite. “I’m doing what I have to, okay? I’m under a lot of stress right now and you aren’t exactly helping.”

“Maybe I could help more if you actually tell me what’s going on!” Michael protested. Musical? “There’s no way you found out all of that stuff from a Google search. How did we really find out all of this stuff?”

It had been a serious question, and a very good one, but she just slanted an unimpressed look at him. She sighed, and reached up to gently clasp Michael’s cheeks, as if she was his maiden aunt and was about to pinch them.

“We’re all in a musical and all of our friends are fictional characters except for you and me,” Christine said gently. “You’re a jock and I’m a weaboo. You have theater Alzheimer’s and are being a little frustrating.”

Michael stared at her. She waited patiently.

But he just kept staring, and she slowly dropped her hands. A disturbed expression crossed her face, and Michael knew that she had been waiting for something and hadn’t gotten it. “Michael?”

The noxious scent of cigarette smoke hit Michael’s nose again and he coughed, rubbing his nose. “Christine, what the hell? This is supposed to be an informational lecture, not a seminar on how to lie to our friends.”

“For fucks sake!” She reached forward and pinched his hand, making him yelp and clutch it to his chest. “Our friends are fictional characters, Michael! I know you’re stressed out but this isn’t the time for games!”
“What are you on about?” Michael asked, exasperated. “If this is a joke it’s seriously tactless.”

“Would I joke about this!” Christine exhaled sharply, visibly fighting for calm. “I don’t get it. Normally me saying something snaps you back to normal. It’s all a musical, Michael. I know that you’re having a hard time remembering that, but I seriously need you on my side. If we’re going to prevent Pitiful Children then Halloween is where it all starts. I’m thinking we completely skip past Smartphone Hour, definitely fucking avoid Do You Wanna Hang, and use Pitiful Children as your chance to convince Jeremy not to Squid the school. It might be too early, and we might have to wait for The Play, but I think this is time to take action.” She smacked her fist on her palm, eyes alight with confusing justice. “If we can convince Jeremy that we don’t need Squids to be happy through the power of love I think we can force an ending before the Squid can do anything about it. All we need is for you to-

“What the fuck are you on about?”

Christine froze.

Michael stepped backwards, shaking his head. It was light and fuzzy. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about. This is - this is just like you. You never tell me anything. We’re supposed to be a team, but you’re leaving me behind.”

“I wouldn’t have to leave you behind if you would just remember why we’re fighting in the first place!” Christine cried. “We have to keep the fabric of reality intact and we have to manipulate Jeremy through the power of love! You’re the love interest, remember? It’ll be easy!”

Something cold and hard shot through Michael’s heart, and he shrank in. He wrapped his arms around himself, jutting his teeth against the wind. “Am I dating Jeremy or the Squid?”

Christine froze, jaw dropping. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Michael spat. “All I’ve been doing is manipulating Jeremy. The Squid’s the one making Jeremy like me. The Squid’s the one I’ve been hanging out with and playing video games with and kissing. Everything he says the Squid either let him say or is telling him to say. I’m not dating my best friend, I’m dancing around pretending I’m manipulating the Squid when all it’s doing is manipulating me.” His lips tingled, and Michael slowly raised his hand to rub his thumb over them, lost in thought. “It tricked me into kissing Jeremy.”

“What,” Christine said slowly, “the fuck.”

It almost physically hurt him to explain what happened earlier that night, but Michael did his best. He couldn’t fight the shame curling in his chest. He had been duped. He had honestly, genuinely been trying, and it betrayed and used him. It was stupid to even complain. It would never have happened if Michael hadn’t been so fucking stupid.

“I think it did something to my head,” Michael finished lamely. Christine’s hands were pressed to her mouth, eyes wide. “I just have this constant really dumb headache and suddenly a lot of things about my stupid life doesn’t even make sense.” He winced. “You aren’t helping there, by the way.”

Christine exhaled shakily, kneading her forehead. There was a defeated slump in her posture, sending a pang through Michael’s heart. It was his fault. Everything was his stupid fault, and he didn’t even know what he was supposed to be at blame for. “So that’s it,” she said quietly. “I’m alone.”
“What are you talking about?” Michael tried to squeeze her shoulder, but she just batted him away. She looked miserable. “I’m not useless. Brooke and Chloe and Jake all believe you. You have to stop acting like the sole crusader of justice.”

“That’s pretty rich, coming from you,” Christine muttered, and Michael tried not to be offended. He didn’t exactly succeed. “Whatever. Fucking whatever. I’ll just put you on the to-save list. I can handle this. I’m not totally overwhelmed or anything.”

“Excuse me?” Michael asked, somewhat insulted. “What do you need to save me from?”

“Michael, I don’t know if I can even get you back,” Christine whispered, and Michael knew she was lost. He didn’t even know why. “I knew this was going to happen. Michael, I have to take care of Jeremy and Rich and - and I don’t know if you’re somebody I can save.”

“I don’t need saving!” Didn’t he? “Would it kill you to tell me what the fuck’s going on?”

“I just did! You couldn’t listen!” She shook her head. “Look, Michael, just focus on Jeremy. Let me worry about everything else.”

Great.

Something tumbled in Michael’s stomach, and he knew he was being sidelined. It tasted sour. It tasted like the Squid licking him and hammering home how powerless he was, and it tasted like Jeremy’s perfect smile and how he looked through him instead of at him.

It tasted of how he was never enough for Christine.

“What makes you feel so special?” Michael asked frostily, crossing his arms, and she winced. “What makes you so much more qualified to handle the crappy situation than me?”


But she didn’t wait for him to answer, just shaking her head. “Who cares. The entire stupid grade knew. You know something about autistic people, Michael? I have an amazing memory. It takes me no time flat to memorize my scripts, I can recite when the run times of Hamilton on Broadway for the last three weeks, and I’m pretty fucking great at card games. But nobody cares about how my brain is awesome and unique. All anybody wants to hear about is how it makes me a weird loser.”

He didn’t know what to say, and couldn’t offer anything more than vague platitudes.

“Christine, you know nobody thinks that way about you.”

She snorted. “Yeah, Michael. Nobody thinks that way about Christine. Everybody thought it about me. So sure, I suck at remembering how I felt last week. I can’t read how people feel that well. My semantic memory - what I had for breakfast, all of the Squid’s lines - rocks, but my episodic memory means that I can’t actually remember how I felt about what I had for breakfast. I remember everything, Michael.” Her eyes glinted, and Michael knew that she had been holding this in for a while. A weird thing to do for an expressive, open, loud and happy girl, but he was beginning to suspect that there was something truly weird about Christine. “I remember that we started high school on August 25th. I remember that the girls who sat in front of me in English are named Valerie, Kate, and Zina. Our English teacher’s name is Ms. Porter. You run track. You won the high jump two weeks before we woke up here, because I heard about it on the announcements
and I heard you bragging about it when I was trying to do my Chinese homework. I remember everything.”

“Christine, I -”

“I know what you keep pretending, but you are a ball of emotions. You are seriously one of the most emotional people I’ve ever met. That’s why you forget and I remember, because I’m just a stupid retard girl who doesn’t care about anything that normal people care about, like boys and grades and Snapchat. That’s why I remember. You’re getting sucked into the musical deeper and deeper every day, and I keep on watching you lose yourself and I can’t do anything about it no matter how hard I try. So yeah, Michael, this is my job. This is why I can’t trust you anymore.” She exhaled sharply, and he saw that her hands were shaking. “And you aren’t going to remember any of that, are you?”

Michael was silent.

“Sorry,” he said finally, “did you say something?”

She screamed into her hands. “Fuck it! Fuck this!” She shook her head, pushing off from the wall and clutching her head. She breathed deeply, in and out, and Michael awkwardly hovered over her, inconveniently useless. “Do your job, Michael. Don’t drink during the party. Keep Jeremy away from Chloe and keep an eye on the Squid. Let me take care of everything.” Her mouth twisted unhappily. “As usual.”

When they slid over the counter again and entered the breakroom they found the popular kids deep into a discussion about how best to kidnap Rich. Michael spitefully zoned out. Apparently it wasn’t his problem. All he had to do was to not do something.

Apparently alcohol short circuited the Squids. Apparently there was a good reason Michael hadn’t tried spiking Jeremy’s drink before this, but he didn’t know it. Maybe because it would have tipped the scales on their delicate stalemate, and the Squid had far more ammunition on them then they did on it. If they needed to wait for the Squid to sync up with the network before they short circuited it…

If Christine wasn’t lying…

Michael hid the script on his lap, writing in careful, neat block letters on the backside of the final page.

*Christine has Autism*

*Valerie, Kate, Zina*

*Porter for English*

Nine words that made very little sense, but that he knew were important. He stared at them, head bent over his desk and content to be ignored, as he traced his thumb over the smudged graphite as if it would answer a question that he wasn’t sure he was even supposed to be asking.

He should tell Christine about the script. She might know what was the deal with it.

Of course, she might know what was the deal with it, take it from him, and refuse to tell him anything about it.

Christine was loud, peppy, razor sharp and intense. She never took anything seriously but even the
little things were dead serious. They were supposed to be friends.

Great. This was why he never bothered making friends in the first place. All they did was disappoint you. He’d spent his entire life being just another antisocial headphones kid, and even if it had been boring as fuck spending all the time pining after his best friend at least Jeremy never tried to keep stuff from him. At least Michael wasn’t always a disappointment to him. At least Michael could help him.

Except, of course, for when he couldn’t.

“Don’t worry, dude!” When Michael looked up he saw Jake smiling encouragingly at him, a benevolent father encouraging his kid who didn’t make the basketball team. “Thanks for looking after Rich, but we totally got this covered from now on. I can’t wait until I can punch those robots straight in their dumb little mouths.” He cracked his knuckles. “They won’t know what hit them. But it’ll be me. I’ll be the one hitting them.”

“You do know that would just be punching Rich and Jeremy, right?”

“They’ll get over it.” Chloe flipped her hair, sending her starburst earrings sparkling in the fluorescent light. “Don’t worry, Mell. Your boyfriend is going to be totally thankful that you saved his life. In a sexy way.”

The others nodded wisely. Christine kneaded her temples.

“Thanks,” Michael said weakly. “Nice to know I’m useful as always.”

Brooke clamored on top of the table, ignoring the way it creaked under her and sent the leg wobbling dangerously. She thrust a fist into the air, a people’s hero. “We are the popular kids and we are mighty!”

Jake and Chloe cheered and clapped. Christine buried her face in her hands.

“We are the prettiest, the best, and we have the most killer clothing!”

Stupidly enough, Michael found himself clapping too. The sheer moronic energy was revitalizing him.

“We are going to throw the most rocking party ever and Jake’s house is absolutely not going to get set on fire!”

“Preach!” Jake slapped the table.

“We are going to fuck over evil robots, save our friends, and have them thank us in a sexy way!”

“Totally!” Jake and Chloe were clapping along, roused into action.

“When I yell Squids you yell fight! Squids!”

“Fight!”

“Squids!”

“Fight!”

“Michael?” Brooke reached down a hand, and Michael realized that he had been curling up, script clenched in his fists. “You aren’t chanting.”
“Yeah,” Michael said, stuffing the script back into his pocket. “About that, I’m not much of a chanter -”

But Brooke wasn’t having it. She grabbed his hand and yanked it up, holding him upright by pumping his fist in the air like Rocky. “When I say Squid you yell fight! Squid!”

Aw, fuck it. Michael coughed weakly. “Fight?”

“Squid!”

“We’re doomed,” Christine said flatly.

“Fight!”

“Fight!”

Michael cleared his throat and found his voice. “Fight!”

“Squid!”

“Fight!”

“Fight!”

“Fight!”

Jesus Christ,” Christine said.

By the time that Michael shimmied out of his sticky clothing, threw on a pair of pyjama pants and ran some toothpaste over his teeth, it was closing in on one in the morning. He had school tomorrow. It wasn’t a big deal - he could just chug some coffee, stick his head underneath a running faucet, the usual. He used to stay up until three am gaming with Jeremy all the time.

Michael snuggled under his covers, the chants and cheers of his friends echoing in his mind. They had believed him. They wanted to help him. Maybe they could win this.

He flicked on his phone flashlight, hiding under the covers with his phone propped up against his chin as he read through the entire script. The wispy thin pages stamped with black ink transported him into another world, one where Michael danced a jig on a stage and bean bags fell from the ceiling. A clearer world, one demarcated with lines of dialogue and scant stage directions pointing them hither and yon.

Some of it was strange, just weird enough to be off putting. Brooke wasn’t some cow eyed girl dating Jeremy, and Christine would never even hold hands with Jake. He tried months ago, but she had shot him down pretty quickly. Hadn’t she?

The ending was the weirdest of all. There was no way Michael would refuse to save the world until Jeremy apologized to him. He was petty, but not that petty. Jeremy was a complete pawn in all of this, and Michael knew that this whole situation was the furthest thing from Jeremy’s fault. Sure, he had been colossally stupid, but this punishment was disproportionate to the crime.

The breakroom cheer echoed through his mind. Those hollering teenagers were the furthest thing from the petty, bitter kids depicted here. Everything was wrong, but something in the script was so right too. It was like one of those time travel stories, where everybody changed because somebody
stepped on a nail or something.

The ghost of the Squid’s kiss lingered on his lips. Michael sighed, awkwardly juggling the phone until he sent off a quick text message.

**George Salazar:** hey, you awake?

Michael squinted at his contact name, then at the Will Connoley contact name. All of his contact names were like that, actually. Wondering why was another headache he didn’t need.

A new text message pinged him, but it wasn’t from Jeremy. Michael opened up the new message, the first message from a contact he didn’t remember putting into his phone.

**The SQUIP:** J-Boy has a 10 o clock bed time!!! Don’t go ruining his sleep schedule now!! He’s a growing boy!! ■(・○・)■♡*$■

**George Salazar:** FUCK OFF I HATE YOU ASSHOLE

**George Salazar:** WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY HEAD!!!

**George Salazar:** YOU MISSPELLED YOUR OWN NAME JACKASS

The answer was disturbingly instantaneous. Of course it was.

**Squid:** if you say so, lol bb \( (^\\omega^) \)>

**Squid:** soooo

**Squid:** what are you wearing?

**Squid:** (∟ω…) 

Well. At least Jeremy wasn’t trapped in his own body. Small favors.

That said, Michael was going to kill this thing and then himself. He looked down at himself anyway.

**George Salazar:** jlfalksdjflaksjdfklasdjflksdjflsdjfl

**George Salazar:** I’m wearing pyjama pants and my weed socks but how are you even texting???

Are you making Jeremy text? Can you hook up to a cell phone? Are you an app???

**Squid:** i have Bluetooth silly lol

**Squid:** so no shirt huh? \( (>\\omega\cdot) \)

**George Salazar:** Shut up

**Squid:** OwO what’s this?

**George Salazar:** SHUTUPSHUTUPSHUTUP

**Squid:** *glomp tackles you* X3 so meaan

**George Salazar:** BLOCKED
Michael’s eye twitched. He shoving so much Mountain Dew Red down Jeremy’s throat. So, so much discontinued soda.

**Squid:** lol take a JOKE Michael you’re no funnnn

**George Salazar:** That shit you pulled today was really fucking inappropriate. Don’t use Jeremy like that ever again or I’ll fucking kill you

**Squid:** haha okay grumpy cat

Jesus fucking Christ.

**Squid:** hey it u

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**George Salazar:** JEREMY JOYRIDING IS NOT HARMLESS

**George Salazar:** WHY ARE WE EVEN CALLING IT THAT THAT’S SO DEMEANING

**Squid:** touchy!!! Look i found u again the interwebz is such a magical place

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**Squid:**
Squid: kill urself (◕‿◕✿)

He couldn’t help it - he laughed.

This entire stupid day. His stupid fake impromptu date, his stupid fake kiss, Christine and scripts and lolcats. His life had gotten so surreal. Flipping through the script of your sort-of life as your boyfriend’s brain robot spammed you with lolcats was ridiculous, horrible, and kind of hilarious. His life had gotten so fucking weird it was either laugh or cry, and Michael refused to cry.

George Salazar: but I just thought of something I want to do to you tonight ;)

Squid: tell me more :o

George Salazar: OH WE’RE KEEPING TRACK OF THAT NOW

Squid: but now im all sticky (ゝω・)ﾉ

George Salazar: stop

Squid: *slowly takes off weed socks*

Okay, that’s it. Michael turned his phone off and slammed it on his nightstand, as far away from himself as possible, feeling dirty. Creepy asshole robot. It was just doing this to make him uncomfortable.

Seymour didn’t have to put up with this.

The thought settled strangely in Michael’s mind, but he was exhausted and was going to have to look Jeremy in the eyes tomorrow. He burrowed deeper into his comforter, trying desperately to quiet the rushing voices in his head for just a little while, if only so he could go to sleep without fear or worry.

When the phone chimed again Michael tried to ignore it, but he only lasted twenty seconds before snapping it back up.

Squid: check ur notes app
Squid: Goodnight, Michael.

Squid: (´▽`)ﾉ

George Salazar: night

Although Michael didn’t want to, although he didn’t know if the Squid could hack his phone and dump in weird shit into his notes apps, although it was almost two am and he had just had a semi civil conversation with the Squid, he opened the notes app and read the only entry.

**Reminders (order of importance):**

- Everything is fake
  - Yes, even you
- Squid evil, controlling Jeremy
  - Do not kiss the Jeremy
  - You’re not in love with him
- Video games are for nerds
  - Track is good
  - NES is bad
- Mountain Dew Red kills Squids!

Michael read it over once, then over again. Christine’s words from earlier that day echoed in his mind - his track win, 100 meters, and how he had bragged. It hadn’t made any sense at the time, but…

He used the phone flashlight to quickly grab a pen rolling around in his nightstand drawer and scribble the new information onto the script, right below where he had made his first notes. On a hunch he pulled up his text message history with a Stephanie Hsu.

Michael read, and read, and read...

He dreamt that he was opening the door to the hospital room.

He saw his hand reaching out in front of him and marvelled at how much smaller it was, marked up by sharpie and smudged graphite from art class. He saw it open the door, saw the door gently creak open to find her inside.

She was lying in bed, curled up on her side like she used to do when they were all at Abuelo’s house, their backs pressed up against each other and snoring softly. There were no machines, no IVs or mysteriously tan implements that beeped or buzzed, and her hair was fanned out on her pillow in its perfect and flowing rich dark brown. Her bangs swept just a little onto her eyes, and on the left wall there was a giant mural of a cartoon tiger wearing a lab coat. The room had a nice big window and sent sparkles of light dusting through her hair. She was only asleep.
He almost collapsed in relief. She was okay. The only reason that they hadn’t let him go inside was because they wanted her to be a surprise. She was okay now and they were all going to go home and he was going to go to her quinceañera that was three years away but that she had already been planning. Her dress was going to be so stupid and he was going to make fun of her about it forever. He was going to believe in God again and he could introduce her to Jeremy.

He stumbled closer, almost tripping over his feet, and carefully toed off his shoes at the base of her bed. He awkwardly clamored over the guard rails and slipped onto the bed next to her, on the left side when she was curled up on the right. The sheets were stiff and cotton, the light from the window dappling the creamy white ceiling into gentle gold and white, and Michael curled up next to her, two twin parentheses.

He watched her breathe, listened to her little snuffling sounds as her little chest breathed in and out in gentle harmony. There were no braces, no wires or tapes. The hospital room was silent, and the world was quiet outside. He felt at peace.

He slowly reached out a hand, and carefully took the hand that was curled in front of her chest. Her hand was small but his was small too, and they fit together. But he was a boy and he was growing bigger, and someday he would be so much larger than her.

It was warm, smooth and creamy brown, and he held it loosely in his own as he tried to see his name on her lips.

The room was warm and if he only listened closely enough he would be able to hear his name on her lips, hear her laugh or cry or sneeze or stick out her tongue. When she woke up he would be able to tell her all about the shy girl with the biggest feelings around, about the lanky boy with a twitchy grin and dreamy eyes, about the aggressive blonde who liked to stand her ground or the tiny douchebag with steel eyes or the Barbie and Ken duo that bared their teeth and called him their friend.

She would like them, because she liked everybody and she always wanted to impress his friends. He liked them too.

But she wasn’t whispering the secret of his stolen name in his ear, and Michael realized too late that it was because she wasn’t breathing at all.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I forgot to add a bit of the chapter last week, so please make sure that you read the final small section on the previous chapter. The party scene went on for so goddamn long (three songs!) I ended up having to chop it awkwardly in half, so have fun with a cliffhanger. Let's FINALLY get around to Act 2!

Warning for canon typical sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Masquerade mask obtained!
Slick black turtleneck with black skinny jeans scored!
Boyfriend picked up!
Attendant evil robot ignored!
Script detailing what may or may not be the contents of the future hidden in the inside pocket of his freaking sweet yet slightly evil black leather jacket!
Sunglasses that can see cyberspace cunningly affixed to the inside of his mask!
Nervousness - it’s over nine thousand!

They were standing in the front porch of Jake’s gigantic, disgusting McMansion. It was all slightly dirty white walls and glass roofs sloping at weird ends, and it was pretty offensive to Michael’s good architectural sensibilities. The porch light flickered ominously and Jeremy was anxiously adjusting his large cyberpunk mask every five seconds, shifting from foot to foot.

The mask was admittedly really freaking awesome. It covered the lower half of his face instead of the upper, and it was made out of dark and shiny leather. Two broad metal circles on either side evoked a bastardized gask mask, as if a post apocalyptic survivor broke down a gask mask and sewed it on leather. Michael had been begrudgingly impressed, considering the fact that the Squid had almost certainly picked it out for him. Michael had refused to be creative and had picked out a simple small black masquerade mask.

There was already distinct thumps and bass lines of music, the clear sign of thirty drunk white teenagers ready to get down and boogie with it. Jeremy did not look ready to get down and boogie with it. Jeremy looked like he was five steps and a left turn away from panicking.

Michael sighed, threading his hand together with Jeremy’s and squeezing it. “We can still go home, you know.”

Under no circumstances were they going home. Jeremy, who would have been massacred by the Squid if he backed out now, gulped and straightened. With his free hand he straightened his hair
and his outfit, identical to Michael’s save having swapped the jacket for a trenchcoat that he somehow managed to pull off. He pasted on a smile and a swagger - probably, he was pretty covered by the mask - and in a bare few seconds popular and cool Jeremy emerged from its cocoon.

“I can do this.” Jeremy took a deep breath, willing his teeth to sparkle. “This is our chance. This is what we’ve been waiting for.”

What they’ve been waiting for? What exactly was that supposed to be? Michael readjusted his mask, looking for the Squid. At this point in the script it was supposed to be hanging around giving similar advice to Jeremy. Jeremy, who would have been walking about in a cyborg suit instead of a freaking cool mask. Dodged that bullet.

Doing a masquerade ball was Christine’s best idea yet. She had insisted that any costumes Chloe and Brooke might, hypothetically, be considering - such as, hypothetically, a sexy dog and a fucking sexy baby - would be impractical for suplexing Rich and that nobody would take them seriously if they tried to kidnap a teenage boy in a fake tail and a diaper. Michael empathetically agreed with her, and thus a bullet was dodged. He really didn’t feel like burning his retinas so early in the night.

But he was out of luck. The Squid popped into existence in front of them, standing in front of the door with a smarmy grin. Jeremy immediately straightened and gulped as Michael shot the thing his most unimpressed glare before doing a double take. It was wearing its own halloween costume, a thoroughly weird bathrobe, pyjama kind of thing.

Michael squinted closer. “Is that a samue?”

Tonight’s the night, the Squid said cheerfully, ignoring him. It had been ignoring him all week, not that he was complaining. Remember, Jeremy. I don’t need to tell you what’ll happen if you fuck this one up.

Jeremy straightened even more, chin thrust forward. “Yeah! I won’t let you down!”

The Squid snorted, ignoring the way Jeremy looked crushed.

Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

“You know that you look like a moron in that getup, right?” Michael said eagerly. “You do know that, right?”

Michael thinks you look like a moron in that getup! It said cheerfully. Jeremy tried and failed to control the way his face fell. It’s written all over his face. Let’s try to outperform your father on this one, Jeremy. He’ll ditch you the second he gets the chance. You have to make sure he stays.

“I will,” Jeremy said quietly. He cleared his throat, injecting a false veneer of confidence into his voice. “I will!”

Close enough. It stepped backwards and opened the double doors for them with a large flourish. The music in the house roared into life, thumping and jumping and shimmying to the sound, and it washed over the two boys in a turgid wave. Have fun, you two. Remember: a halloween party’s a rad excuse for me to put your body through mad abuse!

They pulled each other through the doors, and when the door shut with an ominous click it was hard not to feel locked inside.

His first thought was that Jake had strange taste in music. The chic, depressingly mod entryway with a plush ornamental runner and side table laden with dangerously fragile glass ornaments
echoed strangely with clear fragments of an electronica scare chord. It probably originated from the
living room, but it sounded a little like it was coming from the ceiling too. Michael and Jeremy
exchanged nervous glances.

“Is that a theremin?” Michael readjusted his mask. Jake was about as likely to play theremin music
at a party as he was about to put on a Benedictine monk CD.

“I don’t really know,” Jeremy professed. “I hear it following me around a lot, though. Mostly
whenever - uh, never mind.”

Michael wasn’t sure if a scare chord was really appropriate for a Halloween party, but as they
neared the living room it transitioned into a much friendlier sick guitar riff. Cool, so it was just one
a weird experimental dance song. They should Shazam it.

Jake’s house was just as mod inside as it was outside, to the extent that Michael was pretty sure that
he had one of those rich people interior decorators. The living room was black and white
minimalist, boasting uncomfortable looking low white couches surrounding a glass coffee table
piled high with magazines of elephants, which were currently double tasking as drink coasters and
wet rags for spilled beer. A flat screen TV showing a football game hung ignored over a fireplace,
and everywhere Michael looked the walls were hung with abstract, geometric paintings and fancy
vases on pedestals. The living room, kitchen, and kitchen table with chairs were all part of an open
floor plan, so the house resembled more an open dance floor with appliances and furniture
scattered around than a real house. The club effect was ruined by the fact that it was dripping with
teenagers trying to get as drunk as quickly as physically possible, enthusiastically throwing around
vases to assert their dominance over the bougies.

They had arrived barely twenty minutes after the party started and the house already stank of booze
and sweat. The stainless steel kitchen island sagged under the weight of discarded beer cans
worshipping a momma kegger and Michael’s feet were sticking to the floor on spilled beer. Jeremy
was practically vibrating with tension beside him, and the sick guitar riff grew louder and louder as
the party swung in rhythm to the beat..

In the universal experience of teenagers everywhere Michael quickly and desperately scanned the
teeming crowd for his friends. His real friends - these days he was technically popular and
everybody in the room was his friend, down to the squad of jocks who insisted on back slapping
him whenever Jake and Rich were in the room to the cheerleaders who giggled whenever they saw
him and interrogated him on if houndstooth scarves were fashionable (Yes, but only on
Wednesdays).

It didn’t take long to find them.

Brooke was standing on the kitchen table, flaunting her way too short black dress, combat boots,
and feathery baby blue mask. She was sans sweater but plus thigh high boots, giving an overall
Moulin Rouge impression that was undercut by the fact that Michael knew for a fact those boots
were steel toed. If she asked him to dance he was turning her down cold.

The music ramped up and up.

“Picked out a costume for tonight, made sure to get a size that was a lot too tight!” She sang, in her
signature high and slightly nasally falsetto. She gave the crowd an adorable shimmy, kicking her
heels and making the boys whoop. “You can kinda see my business but I’ll act like I don’t know!”

Jake’s distinctive singing voice burst out in tune with the guitar riff as he swam through the crowd
towards her. He was wearing a bedazzled bright pink mask, and it made him look very masculine.
“I got a condom!”

Ew, Jake, keep it to yourself. Michael and Jeremy pushed and fought their way to their friends as Chloe jumped on the table with Brooke, making it wobble. She was wearing a gigantic peacock feather fanned mask in rainbow colors, and her dress was impossibly even shorter than Brooke’s. “And a flask!”

Rich, who had been sitting on the kitchen island kicking people who got too close, stood up and fucking backflipped off the table, sticking the landing. “I stole my older brother’s Jason mask!” he sang, and Michael saw that he had either accidentally or purposefully misunderstood the concept of a masquerade dance. Not that kind of mask, Rich. “I don’t have a machete but a loaf of bread will do!”

The girls were giggling and waving their flasks around, and Michael pushed through the crowd as best he could until the girls caught sight of him. They whistled at him, laughing and waving him over as Jake enthusiastically bear hugged Jeremy.

“It’s so good to see you here, Jer!” Brooke giggled, batting her eyes through the mask at Jeremy. He flushed, arranging himself in a cool position as best he could. “Don’t you like the masquerade ball? I was thinking, everybody always has dances with slutty costumes, right? But you never see a dance with slutty masks.”

“Your mask is beautiful,” Jeremy cut in quickly, completely confused but trying his damndest to hide it. “Very - uh, unique.”

Brooke nodded firmly. “You need a drink.” She snapped her fingers at a passing girl in a tacky Day of the Dead skeleton mask. “You! Margarita, now.”

Decline.

“Oh, I really shouldn’t,” Jeremy said quickly. The Squid, from where it was sitting in the corner on top of a pedestal tossing a vase up and down, gave him a thumbs up. Brooke’s gaze flickered towards it, but it was hidden by the mask. “Margaritas give you acne.”

“Topical, dude!” Jake slapped his back again, making him choke. Rich was crushing a beer can against his head in the background, and Jake casually reached out and reeled him in by the collar. “R-Dawg, you wanna do Jello shots off of Yolanda’s back?”

“Sorry, man, I’m vegan until six am tomorrow, like fucking Cinderella.” Rich wriggled out of his grip. He was unsettling at the best of times, and dressing himself up like a serial killer didn’t really help. A Rich you couldn’t read was a Rich you couldn’t predict. “I’m gonna get blackmail pictures of everyone. Later!”

“I can help,” Jake added quickly. “We can split a Heineken and talk shit about Democrats.”

But Rich just brushed him off, ignoring the way Jake’s face fell, and grabbed Jeremy’s wrist instead. “I’m gonna get Jeremy to help stage the pictures. Don’t worry, I’ll give you a cut of the proceeds.”

Before Jake could protest again he had fucked off into the night, disappearing into the crowd with a stammering Jeremy in tow. Michael lost sight of him quickly, the dimly lit living room only illuminating strangers in passing flashes of light. Teenagers orbited each other, crystallizing on the eaves of corners and doorways, and everyone threw themselves as deeply into pretending to have fun as possible, because this was a hot or not teenage party and if you weren’t hot with your dress
hiked up you were thoroughly, resoundly not.

The most popular guy in school fought to keep his face from falling, as the two most popular girls in school quickly awkwardly squatted down. Chloe dropped her empty flask on the ground, letting it clink happily against the sticky tile.

“Mission hype everyone up for the party is a-go,” Chloe said. She didn’t have to lower her voice to keep from being heard from the crowd, the incessant background drum riff drowning out the voices. “Pretending to be drunk is way less fun than being drunk.”

“Are you kidding? I’m living for this adrenaline rush.” Brooke stomped the table for emphasis, swaying as it creaked ominously. “First time I’ve been at a party for more than five seconds and haven’t gotten smashed. I’m kind of rocking it, not gonna lie.”

“Keep hyping the crowd up to sow confusion,” Michael said urgently. “I’ll keep an eye on Jeremy and make sure he doesn’t get roofied or something.”

“Nobody gets roofied until we roofie them,” Chloe promised. She straightened up and held out a hand, helping Michael stand on top of the table with her. Brooke was pulling Jake up, and Michael grimaced as the table creaked a warning. “Everybody remember your jobs.”

“Everybody remember your lines,” Michael added. His photocopied notes from the script were tucked squarely in his cargo pants pockets. So that was what those lines in the script were for. It was just singing! What a relief.

“Save the douches, save the world.” Brooke adjusted her mask, pumping a fist into the air. “Get everybody and the stuff together. Three, two, one...let’s jam!”

Jake, for his part, cupped his hands over his mouth and screamed. “Who’s ready for a Halloween party?”

The crowd screamed back and the background chords exploded into a full guitar riff, and Michael jumped in tune with the rest of the house as everybody danced in perfect sync to the guitar riff that thumped from an invisible stereo.

“Everybody’s got a red solo cup, fill it up, fill it up!” Jake clapped his hands as everyone jumped in rhythm. “Hear the beer spill on the ground!”

Brooke jumped in, striking a supermodel pose as her admirers below her swooned. “Everybody’s all like ’sup!”

“Yo man, sup!” Michael high fived Jake, who whooped.

“Let’s catch up, let’s smoke up!”

Chloe waved around a full beer can, chucking it into the clamoring crowd. “Look at how many drinks I’ve downed!”

“Every single song’s all like whup, they’re all whup!” Michael high fived Jake, who high fived Chloe. “As we stumble to the sound!”

Then chord swelled and Michael sang in perfect harmony with the popular kids, with his friends, with the crowd that was jumping and singing in tune to their concert. “Cuz a Halloween party’s a rad excuse to put your body through mad abuse! And I might pass out but it’s alright, cuz I’m Halloween partying hard tonight!”
The crowd cheered and Michael pumped his fist, singing out, “It’s Halloween!”

He was riding high on adrenaline and the sweet stink of beer, of the hot press of bodies all around him and the very visibly unimpressed Squid in the corner. Everything freaking rocked.

“It’s Halloween!”

Michael rocked!

“It’s Halloween!”

The music subsided.

The thrill of dancing on the table subsided as quickly as it came, and by silent consensus the crowd went back to their frantic dancing and the other popular kids quietly slipped off the table. They nodded professionally at each other, soldiers fighting in the trenches, and they dispersed into the crowd.

Michael melted into the impromptu mosh pit, banging his head and jumping up and down as he looked for Jeremy. If Rich stole him then there was a decent chance that they were shoving nerds in a toilet together, which was a waste of a perfectly good toilet.

Something in his heart caught and Michael stopped. That nerd being shoved in a toilet wasn’t him. It would never be him again. He was at the biggest party of the year and he was having a great time.

He broke away from the crowd, hugging the wall with the other wallflowers and yanking the script out of his pockets. He flipped through it, opening it to an earmarked page.

Yep, there it was. Michael in the Bathroom.

His fingers clenched on the script. Not today, bitch.

There was the rest of the Halloween song they were just singing - looking good, although apparently he accidentally sung Rich’s parts - and that awkward exchange between Jeremy and Brooke. He looked up, finding Brooke shoving a can of mace down the front of her dress. Glad to know that she was doing okay.

He flipped further through the script, cursing softly as he squinted through the mask. The sunglasses were awesome but thoroughly impractical in the dimly lit room. He quickly raised the mask so he could flip through Chloe’s part better. Yeah, yeah, like hell that was happening. Jake almost kills him, which was a pretty valid reaction, then he sits on the couch and has that unbearably awkward conversation with -

“Michael!”

Christine waded out of the crowd, holding a red solo cup over her head as she tripped over legs and collided against the wall. Her mask was Phantom of the Opera style, with a very pretty and very modest ruffled white ball gown styled after her namesake’s from the same musical. It was going to get ruined in about two seconds but he appreciated the subtle cosplay.

“You don’t look so good,” Michael said bluntly.

She really didn’t. She was breathing a little heavily and her face was slick with sweat, and there was a definite twitch in her eye, but she just shook her head. “I’m fine. I just - uh, I just really don’t
like crowds. And loud noises. And everybody touching me.”

“You can go home if you want.” Maybe he could have her job where she actually did something instead of sitting around.

She leaned in, fire sparking in her eyes, and roughly grabbed Michael’s wrist. “That’s not important. Michael, you knew that you were singing up there? Singing and dancing? Didn’t that seem weird to you?”

Michael blinked at her. “We’re at a party. People sing and dance at parties.”

Christine faltered a little. “I guess that logic makes sense...but you did hear that weird guitar riff coming from the ceiling, right?”

“I thought it was just a stereo?”

“You didn’t have the feeling of being forced to move? Like, you think of lines to the song and you have no idea where they came from but you’re magically compelled anyway?” Christine asked, increasingly desperate. “Nothing seemed sketchy about everyone singing in unison to a song you made up on the spot?”

Michael stared at her, mentally replaying the last few minutes.

He knew that he was currently in possession of a play script that read out some strange variant of their lives in the format of a screenplay by some snot nosed freshman in his first intro to playwriting class that thought he was top shit and that had a fetish for girls in diapers.

He knew that he had just jumped into very reasonable synchronized singing with this room full of children, singing something that wasn’t even a pop song. He knew that the script detailed the singing as easily as it did the dialogue.

Something cold trickled down the length of his neck, and Michael craned his head to look at the Squid in the corner, filing its nails and content to let Jeremy get pulled off hither and yon. Michael had the sense that it was keeping an eye on him. It was only visible in cyberspace, and the added electric blue veins and patterning around its eyes made it look like a malicious vulture, circling the room and searching for prey.

Whatever this information meant, he knew it was important to the Squid. Michael wasn’t in the mood to get stuck in a tug of war between himself and the Squid with his brain as the rope.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Michael lied. He could tell her when they had relative privacy. “Look, I saw Jeremy and Rich run off together earlier. I’m going to go find them and make sure that Rich doesn’t convince Jeremy to overthrow the bougies again.”

“Yeah,” Christine said faintly, and Michael fought to wrestle his guilt to the ground when he saw how worried she was. “This is - we can talk about this later. I need to find the others.” She patted a bulge in her dress. “I found the rope at Walmart, so we’re ready to roll.”

Jesus Christ.

If the first floor of Jake’s house was a dance party dripping sweat and teenage hormones, the second floor was the den of depravity. Michael climbed the wide, curling staircase, cursing when he almost slipped on some spilled beer, and deftly avoided a group standing obnoxiously on the staircase that jovially called his name. Straights were making out in the corners, sprawled across a couch in the den slugging away beer as fast as physically possible, as if it would save them from
themselves. Kids tried to press punch into his hand, but when Michael smelled it it smelled distinctly of vodka. Somebody had spiked the drinks. Classy.

The second floor was slightly more brightly lit, so Michael had a better time seeing it through his sunglasses. A vase was lying broken and sheepishly abandoned in the middle of the hallway, and Michael sighed as he carefully picked up the pieces and carefully piled them back on the side table.

He peeked his head in the den, wondering where the hell Jeremy was supposed to be. Now that Chloe was no longer an evil bitch he should really be perfectly safe, but Christine seemed to be freaking out anyway.

There was a crowd gathered around a long pool table behind a horse shoe of squishy looking couches. Michael recognized a lot of the guys from the football team, the one that they all hung out with and pretended they liked. Henry, Kyle, Ron, Zach, and Ben had put up the over over the pool table and were all setting up red solo cups in triangles on opposite sides and pouring cheap beer into every cup. At least, it was probably them. They all had those political caricature masks on, each one a different republican president, but Michael could recognize those deeply hot biceps anywhere. Rich was reclined on the sofa, Jason mask propped up on top of his head and kicking his dirty heels up on the coffee table, scattering empty cans of beer.

He ought to grab the others and tell them where Rich was. It wasn’t his job to take care of him. He had to keep looking for Jeremy, but Rich was literally right there and he was afraid that if he took his eyes off him then he would disappear. Besides, he was probably in good hands with Chloe. Hopefully not literally.

But the decision was taken out of his hands when Kyle spotted him. He waved, making Michael freeze up. “Mell! Are you digging the party?”

“Like an old man on the beach with a metal detector.” Michael reluctantly floated closer, craning his head to see what the athletes were doing. “Is that beer pong?”

“Yep,” Ron said proudly. Kyle and Henry high fived. He leaned in conspiratorially, and Michael wrinkled his nose as the stench of beer on his breath crowded his sinuses. “I keep seeing you hanging out with Chloe and Brooke, dude. Are they thirsty for a good guy these days?”

“I don’t think dating is on their list of priorities right now,” Michael said truthfully. He casually grabbed a beer from the table and lobbed it at Rich, who caught it. “Have a drink, Rich.”

“I just ate a barrel of Cheetos,” Rich said casually, and threw the can back at Michael, who caught it with dexterity that surprised him. “You should have it instead, loosen up.”

“I had one downstairs.” Michael tossed it back, and this time when Rich caught it his fist clenched into the aluminum. “Live a little.”

The jocks were standing around anxiously, unaccustomed towards anybody actually pushing back against Rich, and judging from the tick in Rich’s eyebrow he was too.

He stood up, rolling off the couch and ignoring the way the jocks backed up a little. Michael held his ground as Rich shook the can of beer in one hand and advanced on Michael until they were glaring at each other. Guitar riffs and a spooky theremin strummed from out behind the den door, and Michael couldn’t help the drop of sweat that rolled down his neck.

Rich pushed the beer against Michael’s chest, just barely remembering to paste on a sunny smile. It was peeling at the edges. “Drink it.”
“You first,” Michael said sweetly.

They stared at each other, locked in a stalemate.

Finally Henry coughed, gesturing weakly to the pool table. “You guys want to play beer pong with us? It’s fun as hell and you get so fucking wasted.”

“I’ll pass,” Michael said.

Rich blinked sleepily. “No.”

“Aw, c’mon,” Kyle wheedled. He was a broad shouldered boy with a sandy buzzcut, and overall gave a very fish-like impression, with a gaping jaw and watery blue eyes. “You gotta tell us about the girls, Michael. Do they, like, let you in the girl’s dressing room?”

“So do you or Jeremy Heere top?” Ben asked eagerly. A little too eagerly. “The rumors are true, right? That you and Jeremy Heere have a thing?”

Michael sputtered something out, ears red, and Rich lobbed a countertop snowglobe at Ben’s head, cracking the ornament and probably giving the guy another concussion.

Jocks, honestly. Everybody knew that playing sports makes you evil.

“I can neither confirm or deny that,” Michael said, ears red. Ben was rubbing his head and wincing. “Rich, I think the girls were looking for you. You should go find them.”

“I’m happy where I am,” Rich said blandly.

Shit. How the fuck were they going to get Rich drunk? They couldn’t exactly tackle him and shove alcohol down his throat.

Well, okay. Brooke might.

To add insult to injury Rich was trying to get him drunk, for reasons that were still obscure. Maybe if he got drunk then he would stop bothering Rich and the Squids?

“So…” Kyle looked around hopefully. “Beer pong?”

Something snapped into place. He rounded on the jocks, grinning maniacally. “I’ll play beer pong if Rich plays beer pong.”

Rich’s eyes widened.

For a second Michael thought that he wouldn’t go for it, that Rich wouldn’t gamble his own sobriety against Michael’s, but then his eyes narrowed and he stood up from the couch. “Done.”

The jocks, oblivious to the ringing tension between the two boys, whooped and high fived. “Let’s get down for Halloween, guys!”

Beer pong was, as it turns out, exactly what it sounded like.

This was Michael’s first house party. It really was his first party period. The only birthday parties he had been to were the kind when the whole class were invited, and even then the had been shuffled to the outskirts to drink soda in the kitchen where the moms were making the snacks. He and Jeremy had just never been into that whole socialization thing. They had better things to do, like play video games.
He didn’t drink a lot. He didn’t, in fact, drink at all.

But some part of him knew exactly how to play beer pong, and when he was set up on one side of the table with Rich at the other in a mexican standoff he didn’t need the rules explained to him. They kept wary eye contact on each other, afraid that if they gave the other a chance he would sabotage the game and wreak havoc on both of their sanities. This was a beer pong game with stakes. This was a beer pong game that could change the world.

“Beer pong! Beer pong! Beer pong!” The jock guys were chanting, slapping their hands on the wood and howling explosively as they chugged their own beer. “Cuz a Halloween party’s a rad excuse to put your body through mad abuse!”

“And we might pass out but it’s alright,” Henry sang, burping halfway through a chord. “Cuz we’re Halloween partying it up tonight!”

The first turn was Michael’s, and he dribbled the ping pong ball on the pool table cover, narrowing his eyes at Rich. “Let’s have a good game, dude. It’s always great to play friendly games of alcoholism against my friendly friends.”

He tossed the ball, and watched it sail past the red solo cups and bounce against Rich’s chest. Michael winced as Rich easily caught it. He inspected the ball, turning it around in his fingers as if he was inspecting for flaws.

“Pity you’re not my friend,” Rich said bluntly.

He tossed the ball lightly and effortlessly, and it sank in the dead center of his first cup. The jocks cheered as Michael winced, and when he fished the ball out and chugged the cup the cheap beer tasted like defeat.

“Defeat tastes like piss,” Michael said glumly. He glanced up at Rich, who would normally start cackling at a joke like that. But he was just staring at Michael, eyes flat and cold, fists clenched at his sides. “Dude? Are you okay?”

“Play the dumb game,” Rich said, so they did.

This time Michael sank it into the back row of Rich’s cups, eliciting a grimace and Rich quickly knocking back the beer. Rich retaliated just as quickly, so quickly that he almost missed it, but it bounced off the rim of his right most cup and rolled onto the floor.

Their game was rushed and slow, Michael’s heart thumping in his ears at every move and the sour taste of the Bud Lite coating the inside of his mouth. It felt like the beer was disappearing faster than he could drink it, entire empty solo cups swept off the table that he didn’t even remember drinking.

Ten cups of beer later - the guys had poured about a half can into every cup - Michael had begun stumbling. Throwing the balls became harder, and he wasted one turn throwing it in completely the wrong direction. It occured to Michael, distantly and fuzzy, that he was actually drunk.

Guilt crushed into his stomach when Rich sank another one into his cup and he was forced to drink it. He had literally one job. He had complained about the fact that he had one job for the past week, and he couldn’t even do it. He would concede defeat now and cut his losses if it wasn’t for the fact that, slowly but steadily, Rich was getting drunk too.

He sunk another ball into one of Rich’s cups, and Michael noticed how Rich had to swipe several times at the cup to pick it up and down it.
Michael got the next one too, and the one after that. Rich was really stumbling now, eyes half-lidded, and if Michael had been expecting a giggly and happy Rich then he was disappointed. As time went on he just got twitcher and twitchier.

Then Rich’s ball bounced off the rim of one of Michael’s cups and landed in an adjacent one, and this time when Michael tried to down it he spilled half of it down his shirt. He stumbled, drunkenly embarrassed as the jocks laughed at him.

Henry pressed a full beer into his hand, snicking and shaking him as Michael’s head lolled to and fro. “Penalty! Chug it, chug it!”

Somehow that didn’t seem like a great idea. Michael sniffed it, wrinkling his nose. Beer nasty. No drink.

“Chug it! Chug it!”

Ron knuckled Michael’s head, truly accepting him as the homosexual adjacent towards their hypermasculinity. “Chug, chug, chug!”

Their logic was impeccable. Michael chugged, and he chugged until he gagged, almost spitting up into his cup, but he downed the whole thing anyone in an exhausted gasp and dropped the can onto the ground. Nausea swirled in his stomach, vomit rising into his mouth, and Michael fought to keep it down as his head swam. He didn’t want to drink anymore.

But when he looked up Rich was leaning against the table, fists clenching the edges and breathing heavily, head dipping in to his chest and out again as he gasped, and Michael remembered that Rich had to get totally wasted too.

Michael heroically straightened, ineffectually attempting to fish the ball out of the cup and finally giving up and downing the rest of the spilled beer in the cup, dumping the ping pong ball into the palm of his hand. He swayed, flopping out a hand to point at Rich accusingly.

“You n’ your fucking robots...going down, Goranski!”

“Fuck off, faggot,” Rich snarled. The jocks ‘oooh’d and Rich burped, swaying. Michael, who was incredibly in tune with the beauty of his friend and the sublime nature of his feelings, nodded in acceptance. Rich was just stuck in self-hated. He should...probably drink more beer to handle that. That was why they were drinking, right? Something about that?

“If I’m so gay…” Michael hiccuped, and before he could think better of it he downed the last solo cup of beer he had for no reason at all. It went down weird, and Michael spat half of it back into his cup. “Could I do this?”

He threw out a hand until he found the ball, and with the beauty and unerring skill of a master discus champion he threw it into Rich’s last cup.

Rich snarled, and before the jocks could cheer him on he grabbed it and downed it in one large gulp. The jocks screamed, overcome with euphoria, and proceeded to fall over each other on the couch, laughing and elbowing each other drunkenly in the face. One of them screamed something about chicks and banging people against tables or something. Horrible thing to do to a perfectly nice table.

Michael stared down at his hands and the way that they were occupying three different dimensions. He looked up at Rich, who had abandoned the ruins of their conquest and was stumbling towards Michael. “I think I’m drunk. Dru - unk. Drunk.” Michael nodded sleepily.
“Drunk!”

When Rich stumbled up to him he had to catch Michael’s shoulder to keep from falling, and Michael enthusiastically slung a hand around his shoulders to keep him upright. Rich hiccuped, knocking his forehead gently against Michael’s shoulder blade. “’M sorry, man.”

“No apologies,” Michael whispered, petting Rich’s hair. “Only drunk.”

But Rich was just shaking his head, and Michael could feel his hitched gasps. “I’m sorry. They made me do it.”

“Do what?” Michael pushed Rich upwards, and he felt the world tilt an uncomfortable twenty degrees. “I’ll do whatever you want, man. So long as you’re not robot man purposes.”

“I miss you,” Rich said mournfully, like a withered old man nursing a beer during closing time at the bar. Michael couldn’t go home, but he couldn’t stay here. “You were a dick but I liked your dickbutt heart.”

“I love my dickbutt heart too,” Michael said gently, although he didn’t know what Rich was talking about. He looked around, and realized to his incredible pain that his hot boyfriend wasn’t there. “Let’s find our friends!”

Rich just grunted, but Michael grabbed him by the hand and towed him down the steps. It was like swimming in an aquarium tank. Michael clutched onto the banister for dear life, swimming down the curling steps until he had only run into no less than three people on the way down and was seriously considering just belly flopping into Jeremy’s arms and accepting the consequences as they happened.

He halted at the bottom, letting his new complete, total, and overwhelming best friend Rich gently bump into him, and despaired of ever finding Jeremy. He was having increasing problems telling any of the partygoers apart. All of the men were so overwhelmingly attractive he wanted to make out with every single one, but he knew his heart belonged only to Jeremy. Be strong, Michael. Be strong for mother.

But it wasn’t difficult to find Jeremy at all. For the first time that Michael had known him, which was incidentally their entire lives, just jot that down, Jeremy was the center of attention.

The crowd had separated around him and Jake, forming a circle around the two boys caught in a mexican standoff of a similar yet different flavor than his and Rich’s only an indeterminate but presumably short time earlier.

The sick guitar riff was back, thrumming away as the crowd screamed in tune with the lyrics. They were moving as one sick, sweaty mass, a teeming amoeba of individuals subsumed into the whole.

“Crank the bass, it’s Halloween!”

They were posing dramatically at each other. Jake pulled a classic 90s hip hop spin and sprayed his hands in a gangster insignia, making the suburban white children go wild.

“Break a vase, it’s Halloween!”

Jeremy nodded, and matched Jake in righteousness by grooving seductively towards an ethnic and tasty beat. Michael immediately stumbled upon the incredible urge to have sex with him.
His jaw dropped as the dance party rocked on. Jake and Jeremy orbited each other, at first trying to one up each other in increasingly complicated yet totally righteous moves like peacocks fanning their feathers, then moving into a paired dance where they moved in perfect sync, challenging yet accepting the other’s right to throw down the gauntlet.

“Jello shots! It’s Halloween!”

Jeremy executed a perfect two step twist maneuver, angling his hip for massive suggestive capability, and Jake matched in a textbook Angry Gorilla. Jeremy narrowed his eyes - a challenge! - and pulled a Praying Mantis, the natural enemy of the Gorilla. The crowd gasped softly. Jake, in a bold move, did a quick step, shadow boxing Knuckle Sandwich, and Jeremy reeled back with the intensity. The music ramped up in scale as Jeremy jerked his hips, as Jake pirouetted a spin, as Michael fell head over heels in love with the majesty of his boyfriend’s lines and curves.

His pale skin glistened with sweat, the stench of beer assailing Michael’s nostrils. Rich squeezed his hand and broke away, gasping slightly, and Michael knew that he was watching Jake too. They were partners in gay. They were in gay sync. They thrummed on the same gay chord.

“Liver spots from Halloween!”

The music swelled as Jeremy and Jake executed a perfect hoo-ah in sublime sync, and without further ado the song cut out. The majestic spell was broken as the crowd broke into applause, and Jake and Jeremy walked towards each other and shook hands in comradeship, friends. Then Jake pulled him in tight in one of those dude hugs, clapping his back, and they were more than friends. They were brothers.

Michael surged forward with the crowd, body filled with one overwhelming wish, and he stumbled when Rich caught the sleeve of his leather jacket. He didn’t look so good, even for a guy who was pretty much wasted. He was panting, skin sleek with a pale shine, and something in his eyes was crazier than usual.

“Please don’t,” Rich gasped. “Michael, please trust me. Stay here.”


“This isn’t what I wanted,” Rich gasped, and his eye twitched. Then his head twitched. Then his leg twitched, and Michael slowly backed up. Rich gurgled a hoarse shout. “Fuck. Fuck! I did it, I fucking did it! You can’t say I didn’t!”

Uh. Rich was a weird drunk. Michael stepped back, gently disentangling his hand. He patted Rich reassuringly on the head, who had now broken into full out dance to the strange beat. “Dance your heart out, little man. I will wingman Jake for you.”

But Rich just screamed, and Michael decided that Rich would be perfectly safe by himself. Besides, Jeremy was shouting happily at Jake, who was cunningly pretending to be trashed. Michael was one step above Jake on the undercover scale, e.g. he actually was trashed.

It took surprising effort to push through the crowd, and Jeremy had to reach in and physically grab Michael, towing him towards Jake. His hand was hot and sweaty, because the house was hot and sweaty, but it sent something electric riding through his body. Sex. Sex!!!

“I just love your dancing,” Michael slurred, and he fist a hand on Jeremy’s shirt. Jeremy squeaked. “It was so…” he burped. “Vivid.”

Jeremy was flushing deep red. “Thanks, Michael. Are...are you drunk?”
“I don’t even know what an alcohol is,” Michael said seriously. “Is it a plant? Fuck if I know.”

Then he giggled. Jake’s eyebrows were rising to his hairline. He gently grabbed Michael by the upper arm, disentangling him from Jeremy. He bent down and hissed in Michael’s ear.

“What the fuck, man? Why the fuck are you drunk? You had one job!”

“I’ve never filed a tax return,” Michael reminded him. He burped again. Gas, you know. Guess that happens when you play beer pong. He leaned up in his own conspiratorial whisper. Jake was a big, happy man. Like a golden retriever, if a golden retriever was wearing a basketball jersey at all times. Like Air Bud.

Jake… Air Bud? Must Investigate Further.

“I got Rich drunk,” Michael whispered, and Jake’s eyes went wide. He jerked his thumb at Rich, who was dancing up a storm. He was dancing so awesome some of the people around him looked worried. Live your best life, Rich! “I contributed. Grab him and shove our soda down his throat.”
He patted Jake on the back. “Don’t say I never did anything for ya.”

Jake didn’t waste any time. He peeled away from Michael and pulled out his phone, sending a message to the group chat as quick as lighting as he waded his way through the crowd for Rich.

Everything was good. Rich was in safe hands now. Michael’s holy obligation was fulfilled. Now he could do whatever he wanted.

He turned back to Jeremy and let himself slump against his chest, pressing hard up against him. Jeremy’s eyes went wide again. “Great party! I ate a beer.”

“Just one?” Jeremy teased gently. He straightened Michael up a little, holding him upright. “You weren’t playing any drinking games, were you? I hear that people always end up binge drinking during those.”

“I was absolutely binge drinking. For the cause.” Jeremy’s mask was still fixed firmly to his jaw, and his bright blue eyes shone in subtle contrast to the leather and gas mask. The Squid was barely noticeable in the background, only visible through the sunglasses in cyberspace with its veins outlined in bright blue. “This is the best part I’ve ever been to.”

“This is the first party we’ve ever been to.” Jeremy looked around, uncomfortable. “This is just so much people, man. I’m freaking out a little, real low key. I’d be halfway to a panic attack if it wasn’t for...uh, yeah.” Michael translated that as, ‘The Squid is pumping me full of calm down hormones so I’m not crying like a five year old lost in a department store’. “I’m surprised that you’re, uh, okay with it.”

“Oh, I’m stressed as fuck.” Michael patted Jeremy’s cheek. It was so warm and soft. “Beer. Beeeeeer.”

But Jeremy just shifted again, and Michael saw for the first time that he really was uncomfortable. “I’m having fun, but this isn’t like you. You’re, like, about to start singing Whitney Houston up in here. What’s with you?”

Aw, man, Whitney Houston. “Relax, little man.” Michael pulled Jeremy in for a hug, and his warm presence steadied him. Sex. Sex with Jeremy. It was high on the list of his priorities right now.

Concept: he was waiting to kiss Jeremy until it was the kiss of true love, right? To sway Jeremy back to the side of good, right?
Michael looked up at him, at his dark lashes and thin lips and complete lack of acne. At his lean muscles, as the worried tint to his brow, at his refreshing blue eyes that actually may have been brown once upon a time.

Yeah. This was a guy he was in love with.

Michael was a genius.

Jeremy squirmed in his grip. “Michael, I don’t think -”

The guitar exploded, and Michael was the one who cranked it up to eleven. He broke apart to start screaming the lyrics, and he saw the rest of the party jump in tune with him. He gestured expansively and they twisted with him, and when Michael pulled a sick spin they spun with him. The world was his backup dancer.

“Everybody’s got a red solo cup fill it up, fill it up, hear the beer spill on the ground!” Michael clapped and spun, leaving Jeremy wide eyed in shock. “Everybody’s all like, sup!”

The crowd called back, “Yo man, sup!”

“Let’s catch up!” Michael sang, bright and clear, “Let’s smoke up, look at how many drinks I’ve downed!”

The crowd was whupping, they were all yupping, they all stumbled to the sound.

He pulled Jeremy in, squeezing his hand tight, and the world was tilting and turning as Jeremy was the only thing truly steady in his life. He always had been. Jeremy, as always, was his only constant.

“Cuz a Halloween party’s a rad excuse,” Michael sang, trying to get Jeremy to understand how drunk and horny he was through song, “to put your body through rad abuse!”

“Uh,” Jeremy said.

“And I might pass out, but it’s alright,” Michael added as a disclaimer, “Cuz I’m Halloween partying hard tonight!”

The guitar wasn’t slowing down. It was ramping up louder and louder, but it was slowly transitioning into something else too. Something a bit...sultrier?

Score.

The party was reigning on in complete sync, and in the far side of the room Rich’s crazy moves were scattering more and more innocent partygoers. Only brave Jake, resplendent in his pink bejeweled mask, dove in to gently restrain Rich and whisper something urgently in his ear. Rich stilled, eyes widening, just in time for Brooke to break through, physically pick Rich up by the waist, and full body suplex him into the floor. The drunk partygoers all cheered, Michael included, as Jake scooped up his prone form and all three vanished into the depths of the house. Michael just barely saw Christine, lingering at the edges of the room with a turtle tote bag slung over her shoulder, disappear down the hallway to follow them.

Jeremy craned his head above Michael’s, looking distinctly distressed by a small four foot four girl in a sweater suplexing one of his best friends. “Was that supposed to happen?”

“You have bigger things to worry about,” Michael said. The bigger thing was getting bigger and
bigger. Michael grabbed his hand, ignoring how they were both sticky with spilled beer. “I’ll, uh, tell you upstairs. It’s a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

This kid. Michael rolled his eyes. “The kind where you don’t ask questions.”

Walking back up the stairs was a fucking adventure. Jeremy had to half-carry him up, supporting him as he tilted ear first into the wall and almost over the banister. Everything had grown fuzzy, badly rendered images stuck in T-poses against the wall as they clamored over teenagers making out and teenagers going a bit farther than that. They broke through chattering groups of friends, tried his best to ignore the porn that was now playing on the big flat screen TV, and pressed himself against a very fancy set of double doors with little stained glass windows in the center of them. He pressed against the ornate door knob and threw himself and Jeremy into the room.

Unless Jake had the interior decorating sense of a fifty year old woman this was definitely his parent’s bedroom. Tons of jewelry and stuff he would have totally stolen if that had been ethical, perfume and abstract art and a really gigantic bed. The bed was relevant to Michael’s interests.

“I’m pretty sure this is Jake’s parent’s room. Radical.” Michael pulled Jeremy in, giving him a hard little yank and kicking the door shut behind him. The piano was humming in his heart, growing just a little bit louder and louder, waiting for him to reach towards it with shaking hands and grasp the rhythm. This was a song Michael would gladly dance to. “Crazy party, huh?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said uncomfortably. “It’s been wild. Look, something is seriously wrong with Rich. He’s been acting weird all night. I’m worried about him.”

The piano called to Michael, and he followed its trace towards the doorknob. His hand lingered over it but the piano sang out a yes, and when he locked it the key snapped into place and the song picked up. Excellent.

“Brooke and the others are taking care of Rich,” Michael soothed. He stepped closer, watching the way Jeremy almost seemed to hold his breath. “It’s my job to take care of you.”

His mouth tasted like hops and yeast, and he saw Jeremy frantically look just over his head. Michael turned his head back to see the Squid standing behind him, pale blue hands behind its back with a placid, serene expression that, when paired with the samue, made him look more like a monk at his garden than a supercomputer pervig in on two teenage boys. It was such a yaoi fanboy.

Wow, if Michael took pictures of this he could totally pay for that new Witcher game. He would much rather have a video game than a Squid. Don’t tell anyone.

“SQUIP? What’s he doing?”

The fuck was a SQUIP? Michael’s rad mask let him see cyberspace, but it did not come with audio output. Whatever the robot said thoroughly freaked Jeremy out.

“What do you mean, imperative? Imperative for what?”

“M’ best friend, Jer”, Michael slurred, poking Jeremy’s chest to emphasize the point and swaying with the motion. “Always the dates...we never just be.” He waved his hand around demonstratively, trying to explain the inexplicable. “Be one. With each other. If you know what I mean.”
“Michael, I…” Jeremy backed up, doing Michael’s work for him. Michael stepped forward, stumbling a little but keeping upright. He briefly attempted walking in a straight line until he remembered that he was a flaming homosexual and could do nothing of the sort. “Yeah, I mean, I guess? We never really just hang out anymore. Let’s do that. Hang out!”

Excellent idea.

The piano rolled in slowly, a smooth sea lapping at Michael’s ankles. It felt like an incredible warmth, an uncontrollable urge, a steadfast surety that he wanted something and that he was about to get it. All he had to do was a little convincing and Jeremy was going to fold like a lawn chair. A lawn mower. That he was going to ride.

“Do you wanna ride, do you wanna ride?”

Wait, hold up. The music rolled softly around him, sucking him in as Michael splashed around. Yeah, he wanted to ride him. Wait.

Michael snapped his fingers. “Got them mixed up!”

“Michael?” Jeremy asked, like a dumbass. “Why did you bring me up here, again?”

“Do you wanna hang? Do you wanna hang?” Michael kicked the music back into high gear and fell forward into Jeremy’s arms, feeling with satisfaction that Jeremy’s breath had jumped straight up. He hooked his thumbs on Jeremy’s collar, pulling him down a little and smirking. “Do you wanna hang for a bit?”

Wow. His singing voice had totally become super sexy in the last five minutes. Thanks, mysterious piano music. You were such a wingman.

“Oh,” Jeremy said, finally catching on, “my god.”

“Just you and me,” Michael breathed, jerking his hips closer to Jeremy’s, “intimately talking about all of our feelings and shit?”

He bucked his hips, emphasizing his point, and Jeremy’s visible face went completely red. “Michael, you - you're really drunk, and, uh, I think -”

A twangy guitar chord chimed in, and the song picked up, thank god. Michael couldn’t go any slower. He was going to burst. Burst into song!

“Do you wanna get, do you wanna get really deep?”

“Michael, this is really unlike you -”

Michael ground hard against him and Jeremy made a truly entertaining noise. He reached up and tugged Jeremy’s goofy trenchcoat off, dropping it to the floor. He was going to peel this boy like an onion.

He pushed Jeremy onto the bed and Jeremy let him, sitting dumbly as Michael tried and failed to straddle him, only succeeding in falling on his ass. Jeremy’s eyebrows raised, but Michael held up a hand and flopped onto the bed. Sexily.

“So let’s reconnect-” Michael leaned in to bat his eyelashes and ended up nearly pitching into Jeremy’s shoulder.
“Okay, let’s get you back downstairs -”

“Fuck dude I’m wrecked,” Michael laughed, high on life and also beer. He waved a hand, leaning back to shoot fingerguns at Jeremy. Cupid’s fingerguns. “But we both know I’m your favwite dweeb.”

Jeremy laughed a little, but it wasn’t his laugh. It wasn’t their laugh. It was nervous, and almost appeasing. “Not that this isn’t great, but I think Rich is waiting for me downstairs and I don’t want to disappoint him. I really have to go.” He made weak motions at pushing himself up off the bed, but then he froze. His eyes widened, his breathing quickened, but Jeremy didn’t move a muscle.

Something electric prickled at the back of Michael’s neck, and he knew that the Squid was standing behind him. He wondered what Jeremy saw: Michael, everything Michael, outlined like a halo by blue, electric light? Was it sexy? Nothing about the Squid was sexy.

Well…

Nope, nothing.

Michael tried to turn his head, but before he could Jeremy’s hand shot out and he fisted his fingers in Michael’s hair. He groaned happily as Jeremy slid his mask off, letting it clatter to the floor, and the electric tingle at the nape of his neck was gone. Finally.

He watched Jeremy’s legs jerk apart, letting Michael swoop in and straddle his lap. Jeremy gasped again, trying to pull away but staying still anyway. Michael clumsily shifted his position on his lap. Maybe it was hurting him.

“I can’t move my legs,” Jeremy whispered.

Not after this he wouldn’t.

The music swelled, the guitar punctuating the piano and working Michael into a frenzy. He was on fire, he was sodden, he was drunk, he was high. The music rang throughout his sternum and screamed how right this was, that he and Jeremy were finally going to love each other and then the whole world would be saved. They were going to fuck and it was going to be because they loved each other and then the Squid would melt in misery and jealousy and they were all going to live happily ever after.

Finally, after all this time, finally somebody would fucking love him.

“So you wanna stop?” Michael belted, “do you wanna stop, do you wanna stop this charade?”

He pulled Jeremy’s mask off his face, throwing it to the side, and Jeremy grunted. He pushed Jeremy down onto the bed and Jeremy let him, and Michael’s swimming vision was filled with the sight of his face and the scent of his leather mask and the burning hot drumbeat in his body. It had been two fucking months.

He was going to do true love’s kiss one better.

Michael shucked his jacket, exhaling from the feeling of release from the stifling leather, and undid his pants button and zipper. He shimmied out of his shirt with considerable difficulty, but when he tried to reach for Jeremy’s shirt he batted Michael’s hands away. He was just about to retreat when Jeremy’s hands twitched and he started helping him instead, riding his own shirt up the best he could while pressed down on the bed and flashing his cheese grater six pack. Michael was going to go insane.
“Do you wanna get, wanna get under my masquerade?”

He leaned in, exhaling hot beer breath on Jeremy’s face, and he saw him wince.

“I’m secretly Michael.”

Jeremy’s pupils were blown wide, breathing heavily, and when he jerkily surged up and kissed him Michael exploded in celebration.

Then the music scratched out, and something in Michael that he didn’t know that he lost clicked back in place, and he understood for the first time that he had been singing ‘Do You Want Hang?’.

Michael threw himself off Jeremy, heart racing in horror, and the music screeched unholy static in his ears. Jeremy was gasping silent screams too, frantically pulling up at his legs and trying to stand up, desperately trying to hiss something out of a clenched jaw. He looked terrified. Michael was going to throw up. Nausea was rolling in his stomach and Michael was going to puke his guts out.

“Michael? Michael!”

It was Chloe, her voice echoing down the hallway, and Michael almost sobbed in relief and horror. A heavier pair of footsteps rang out behind hers - she had to be with Jake, looking for them.

“Help!” Jeremy screamed, finally finding his voice. “Help me!”

Fuck. Fuck!

“Jeremy?” Jake called. “Are you in my parent’s room?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Michael began hyperventilating too, almost matching Jeremy breath for breath in panic. What had almost just happened? Shit! “Fuck, Jeremy -”

The door rattled, and Michael heard Chloe banging on the door. “Michael, what the fuck are you doing? Open up!”

The world was pressing in on Michael, and with iron bands around his chest he couldn’t breathe. He sucked in shallower and shallower breaths until he was hyperventilating, and he knew Jeremy wasn’t doing much better.

The music had stopped but it ran circles through Michael’s mind. Do you wanna stop, do you wanna stop - Jeremy!

“Help me!” Jeremy screamed, and the glass window shattered. Michael and Jeremy screamed as glass went everywhere, and a thick arm brusquely reached in and unlocked the door from the inside.

Jake and Chloe ran in, both without masks. Jake had a large, mysterious bruise mottling one arm, and Chloe’s hair was a disaster zone. Michael saw her gaze jump from Jeremy’s prone position on the bed, frantically trying to sit upright, to the look of terror on his face with his shirt askew and half pulled up, and finally Michael’s bare chest and unzipped pants.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Chloe screeched, face beet red, and Michael winced. “Are you fucking me?”
But Michael could only shake his head, world swimming and shifting, arms trembling. He had almost just - there was a reason that he wasn’t supposed to get drunk!

“I didn’t know,” Michael stammered, “I - I’m sorry, I swear, I didn’t -”

“We were supposed to keep an eye on him for a fucking reason!” Chloe screamed, and Michael shivered up in shame. “The Squid wanted this to happen, asshole! You played right into its program!”

Fuck. Fuck. This was a disaster. Jake was sitting next to Jeremy, quietly talking to him as he picked up Jeremy’s trench coat and gave it back to him. Jeremy clutched onto it like a lifeline, eyes wide and lost.

“You always do this!” Chloe cried, and every inch of Michael was vibrating. He could barely hear her, too caught up in black font on a flimsy white page that spelled out their lives. “You keep on trying to do everything by yourself, like you’re the most important asshole in this whole world. Christine and Jake were going to drug Rich, you weren’t supposed to challenge him to a fucking drinking game! Christine told us the Squid was going to get at Jeremy and we had to stay sober to stop it, not start it! You had one job!”

Something hard in Michael snapped. “I couldn’t control it,” Michael gasped, “I just knew I needed to save us and he was so hot and everything was so fucking clear. I was so caught up trying to protect him from you -”

“From me?” Chloe asked, outraged. “I wasn’t the one who couldn’t keep it in his pants!”

“Michael,” Jeremy whispered, latched onto his jacket. Jake was hovering by his side, looking far more sympathetic to the both of them than Chloe did. “Michael, I…”

Fuck it. Fuck all of this. Michael dug in his cargo pocket, tugging out a very crumpled sheaf of paper, and before he could think too hard about it he shoved it at her. He bent down, almost stumbling, to pick up his discarded mask and shove it at her too.

Let her know. Let them all know. Let everyone in on the secret that their lives were just a game some ridiculous God was playing, and that Michael would always be the butt of the joke.

“Read it and weep,” Michael said, and he stumbled his way downstairs, leaving his three shell shocked friends behind.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter End Notes
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Michael in the BAAATHROOOMMMMM

The party hadn’t died down. It felt like it should have, that everybody should have packed up and gone home so Michael could stumble bereft through an empty mansion, but he had been gone barely ten minutes and it was still in full swing. He passed drunk girls twerking, completely unaware that somebody had almost gotten assaulted upstairs, still happy and oblivious.

He was stumbled through the house, unbelievably nauseous and trying his best to just find a bathroom to throw up in. He had drank way too much. He felt isolated from the kids around him, distant and unclean, even as they felt way too close and crowding him. He had to throw up. He saw a girl making out with her boyfriend on the corner of the couch and his heart lurched - could they both move? Was somebody singing something? Was it fucking consensual?

Everything was too loud. He couldn’t breathe, and it occurred to him that he was probably having a panic attack.

Someone passing by wolf-whistled at him, and when he looked down he realized that he never put his shirt and jacket back on. He quietly zipped up his pants and looked around for something to wear, some kind of discarded jacket or something that he could return later with apologies.

Sure enough, a sweatshirt lay discarded against the arm of a couch. It was even a little familiar. Michael picked it up and sniffed it a little, wrinkling his nose as the heavy stench of weed hit his nostrils against the omnipresent beer aura. He really had to smell like a champion today. It was one of his shirts, one of the kinds that Christine had stolen from him ‘for his own good’. He didn’t know what it was doing here and he didn’t really care. He slung it on, shivering as the stale air finally stopped assailing his bare chest and he cuddled up in the sweatshirt. His head was light and fuzzy, his breathing shallow and almost hyperventilating, and he needed to find a bathroom right now.

Something about a bathroom....but he couldn’t remember it. He couldn’t remember fucking anything. Everything was a horrible swirl in his head, all choking guilt and regret and anxiety pounding a hole through his ear, and he started randomly trying doors down the hallway until he finally found an unoccupied bathroom and slid in.

He collapsed on the floor next to the sink, curling up and taking deep breaths. Nothing bad had happened. It wasn’t Michael’s fault. The Squid had tricked him, just like it tricked him into kissing Jeremy the last time. Because apparently he was stupid enough to fall for it twice. He was becoming a fucking monk.

Somebody banged on the door and Michael started. He heard Jenna on the other side. “Hello! Other people have to pee!”

“I’m on my period!” Michael called out.

Unfortunately, the blatant lie was seen through. “Michael, I know it’s you!”
“Go away, extra!”

A very offended pair of steps retreated, and Michael sighed and hung his head.

The stupid singing made him do it.

The singing had seemed like such a good idea at the time. It had just made sense. Christine’s words from earlier that night hit him square on the head. Weird, compulsive singing from the script that he shouldn’t even have remembered all the way. Something was weird. That sexy music had started playing, like some kind of porno or something, and Michael just…

Something chafed uncomfortably and Michael looked down. Classy.

After a patented Very Cold Depression Shower, were you just sat in the tub for a little picking at grout while letting the water pellets fill your nose and sulking, Michael toweled off and tried to fix himself up in the mirror as he put his clothing back on. It felt like everybody could see what almost happened in his red rimmed eyes and heaving chest, and he scrutinized his sweatshirt unhappily.

Creeps. Well, you got that right.

The mirror was fogged, and Michael half-heartedly wiped it and tried to tame his hair. He felt different. He scrutinized himself, picking out his dark, puffy eyes and his coarse, curly hair. He didn’t recognize himself anymore. He searched desperately for his own features and found a stranger instead, a stranger who sung and danced and couldn’t save anyone, not even himself.

Somewhere along the way in these last two months Michael had changed. For some reason he had magically decided that it was a great idea to hang out with popular kids like Rich Goranksi and Brooke Lohst, that it made perfect sense to date his best friend who might not even feel the same way and to go to big high school drinking parties. Somewhere along the way Michael had lost himself, and his path had wound into freaking out in a bathroom.

He brushed a hand over his nose, which had always been embarrassingly big. It was big now, and a little weirdly shaped, but something about it reminded him of somebody. He squinted at himself in the mirror, and crossed his eyes a little, and in the reflection of his reflection he thought he saw a familiar face.

It was heart shaped and small, and couldn’t have been more than twelve or thirteen. He remembered it frowning, or smiling or sticking her tongue at at him. He remembered her wavy, thick dark hair pulled up into a ponytail with a butterfly hair tie or with pink hair clips. He remembered the awkwardly big nose that she had hated and the way that she always smeared beans all over her face when she ate.

There were two people in the mirror: Michael and the echoes of a ghost he did not remember. The memories were tinged with pain so wide and deep it was almost physical, a dull throbbing sensation in his heart, barely scuffed over with the accumulated dirt of over three years haphazardly kicked over it so nobody would see. It was a pain fifty miles behind him as he ran further and further away, but it was always breathing over his shoulder and lingering in the corners he could not bear to see.

Michael saw now, the same way that he knew how this scene ended. It ended with him a loser, crying on the bathroom floor, and he couldn’t help it any more than he could help this raw and unhealed grief.

A piano began playing, and Michael realized two very important things at the same time:
He was in a musical, and there was something very important that he was forgetting.

Beyond the fact that he was in a musical. That his world was a musical world.

Everything Christine has said ever flashed in his mind, in plain English and perfectly comprehensible now that the missing piece had been slotted in.

He was in a musical, but over the last two months he hadn’t been a musical character at all.

Holy fuck!

The piano aggressively continued aggressively plinking away at him, and Michael stepped away from the mirror. Everything felt like an airplane taking a nosedive, like the tile floor was being pulled out from under him. He started hyperventilating again.

Holy shit! Christine was from an alternate universe! He was from an alternate universe too, apparently!

Michael had forgotten the fact that he was from an alternate universe!

His vision was swimming and blurring out, and it felt like he was going to have a heart attack. His body had been stolen by some random schmuck from an alternate universe and that was why things had gotten so weird so quickly. Or maybe he had stolen the memories of some random schmuck who was from an alternate universe, because Michael remembered absolutely nothing about it except for the fact that someone he had loved was dead.

Michael was reeling from the shock, his world unhinged and laid bare on the operating table, and when the song crept up behind him he couldn’t help but open his mouth and sing too.

“I am hanging in the bathroom at the biggest party of the fall.” Despite how deeply he was hyperventilating he could sing just fine. Of course. “I could stay right here or disappear, and nobody’d even notice at all.”

Literally. Michael had literally disappeared - or he had made someone disappear - and he hadn’t even noticed. This was the weirdest existential crisis of all time. He had almost been tricked into raping his best friend by an evil robot and he was from an alternate reality.

Or at least he used to be.

“I’m a creeper in a bathroom,” Michael gasped, “’cause my buddy kinda left me alone. But I’d rather -”

The door banged open and Michael screamed like a little girl.

It was Christine, brandishing her Phantom of the Opera mask in one hand as she towed a clearly extremely drunk Rich along by the other. She was as disheveled as Jake and Chloe had been, with her hair sticking up at all ends and a mysteriously dripping cut slashed in a bright red line against one arm, blood staining her dress, and there was something wild and frantic in her eyes.

She lobbed the mask at him, hitting him squarely in the eye and making him yelp, clutching his eye and half-convinced that she had poked it out. “We don’t have any time for your theatrics, Michael!”

“What the fuck!” Michael screamed. “I was in here!”
Christine brandished her finger at him as dramatically as physically possible, the hypocrite. She pulled an action heroine pose, and Michael was dazzled down to his bones. “It was the Squid, not you! You were being incredibly dumb, but I know you’re a good person and you would have never done those things if you weren’t being manipulated by the rules of this fucked up universe!” Well, at least she was finally admitting it. “Don’t blame yourself!”

Michael wanted to cry. He had legitimately been about to sing Michael in the Bathroom, the one thing he had sworn to himself never to do. Also almost assault his best friend, which he had also sworn never to do. “Christine -”

Her expression softened, even as it lost none of its righteousness, and she dashed forward and hung him hard and tight around the waist. Michael choked, returning the hug as tight as he could through a vision blurred with tears. “I’m sorry,” Christine said. “I promised I’d take care of you, but I couldn’t stop it.”

“I’m more worried about Jeremy,” Michael said faintly. He really wanted to throw up. “I hope he - do you think he’ll forgive me?”

“That’s his call. He doesn’t have to do anything.” Christine separated and squeezed his hand, smiling gently. The effect was ruined by the fact that she was still dripping blood. “For what it’s worth, I forgive -”

Then Rich stepped forward and socked him in the face.

Michael, severely drunk with a weakness for tiny bodybuilders, went down like a sack of bricks. Rich snarled at him, bending down and grabbing him by the collar, shaking him until Michael saw stars. “You piece of shit!”

Then Michael realized that the reason Rich had been trying to get him drunk the entire time was exactly for this to happen.

“Fuck you, you hypocrite!” Michael screamed, and punched him in the face too.

Then they both went down, snarling at each other, and Christine screamed in frustration. She physically tried to wrest Rich away from Michael, who was doing his best tiny wolverine impression as he lashed out a foot and hit Michael in the shin again, and had to settle for dragging him away to give Michael enough room to stand up.

Then he promptly fell back down again, because he was still really fucking drunk and Rich clearly wasn’t any better off.

“Nobody was making you do shit!” Rich screamed, trying to kick him again. Michael scrambled away, hiding behind the sink. “You didn’t have a fucking robot in your head making you do it!”

“It was using me!” Michael fought the urge to punch Rich again. If he did he would probably vomit. “Just like it was using you, you dingus!”

“Don’t call me a dingus!”

“I wouldn’t have to call you a dingus if you weren’t a complete dingus!”

“Shut up,” Christine said quietly, and they both shut up.

She released Rich, making him scowl and readjust his shirt. He had lost his mask somewhere along the way, and he looked as messed up as the rest of them. Michael seriously had to wonder what had
happened between Brooke suplexing him to the floor and - no, wait, Brooke suplexing him explained a lot. He would have paid good money to see that cage match.

“I think we have all done some very crappy things to Jeremy and I think we should all apologize,” Christine said, strangled. Of course, Christine had never done anything bad to Jeremy, and Michael and Rich flushed and nodded awkwardly. “But that’s for later. Right now we have to get Rich out of this party and hook him up with the soda. This time both of you need to actually listen to me if we’re going to get anything done.”

“Why are you the boss of me?” Rich hiccuped resentfully. “You’re...tiny and shit.”

Christine gave him a stony glare and he winced. Then she looked away, clenching her fists and avoiding eye contact with Michael. He didn’t blame her. “He left me in charge,” she said quietly. “And he would have wanted me to take care of you. He’s...he’s gone, but I’m still here and I’m going to save the world if it fucking kills me.” She wrenched her eyes up to meet his, as if she was daring herself to even try. “Even if he never comes back, he wouldn’t have wanted you to sing Michael in the Bathroom! He fucking hated that song, despite it being the best song in the play and a heartrending rendition of your inner pain!”

Michael’s heart fell, and he felt the plinking piano and the smooth guitar rise up again.

When he sang it was soft, softer than he felt it should have been, and even though Christine looked like she was about to cry he couldn’t stop. “I am hiding in the bathroom, just ignoring all of our history.”

Christine shook her head, stepping back even as Michael stumbled forward. “No, I don’t care. Stop it.”

“Memories get erased,” Michael sang softly, and Christine flinched, “and I get replaced, with a newer, cooler version of me.” He paused, revising the sentence. “With a lamer, loser version of me.”

“Stop singing!” Christine stepped back again, bending down and covering her ears as if she could make him stop. “I know!”

He wasn’t the only one who had thought that he could handle everything by herself. It must have been exhausting. Michael really had left her alone.

“And I hear an old friend, sing along to musicals through the door. I wanna dance with her.” It wasn’t right, but what was? “And my feelings sink, cause it makes me think -”

“Now there’s no one to left to go home with anymore,” Christine sang quietly, defeated. “Now you’re just Michael in the bathroom…”

“Michael in the bathroom at a party,” Michael agreed.

Rich burped, thumping his chest. “Man, I regret those beers.”

Asshole. But Christine had screwed her eyes shut, singing along half to herself and changing the key. “And I can’t help but yearn for a different time…”

“But then I look in the mirror,” Michael sang gently, and she opened her eyes. They looked into the mirror together, drinking themselves in. Their coarse black hair, slightly pudgy builds, costumes shuffled around and mixed up until they didn’t know who was who anymore. It was Michael and Christine. It had only ever been them. “And the present is clearer, and I’ll stop denying, I’m just -”
He fell silent, unsure of the right thing to say, unsure that there even was a right thing to say.

“I wish I knew your name,” Christine said quietly.

Someone knocked on the door, loudly and impatiently, and all three dazed and slightly depressed bathroom choir children glanced at the door only to find Brooke knocking to respect their privacy, then asserting her authority and coming in anyway by kicking the door open.

“Are you guys seriously angsting in here?” She demanded, and all three flinched guiltily. She had a big bruise on her arm and had lost her mask, but she glared them down and pointed at the door. “Upstairs, now!”

“Upstairs?” Michael asked weakly. He wasn’t sure if he could make it up any more stairs. “Why upstairs?”

“Because everyone thinks you and Jeremy are totally doing it in Jake’s parent’s room and nobody’ll come in.” Brooke fished some pages torn out of the script out of her top, having somehow stashed it in there despite how ludicrously tight her dress was, and waved it around. “And I have an idea.”

Never a good thing to hear from Brooke.

Christine had to half carry Michael back up the stairs, and Brooke had given up and just slung Rich fireman style over her shoulder and carried him back up. They weaved through the throbbing masses, the party finally dying down as teenagers collapsed against couches and snoozed quietly in corners, snuggling vases. Climbing back up the stairs was an adventure, and he had strain to hear Brooke’s clipped and rapid explanation of what they had gotten up to while Michael dragged Jeremy upstairs. Apparently kidnapping Rich, holding him down in the basement as the Squid shorted out and trying to keep his screaming from alarming the entire party, and briefing him on their superhero plans had roughed everybody up pretty badly, even if it left Brooke glowing with a smug sense of satisfaction that she finally got to suplex someone. Meanwhile, Michael had been assaulting his best friend.

“I swear I can explain about that,” Michael said weakly.

“Don’t bother. If I thought that it was your fault you wouldn’t still have a penis.” Michael winced in sympathy as he stumbled up the stairs. “I’m not the one you have to apologize to, anyway.”

“I swear it was the Squid -”

“And you were stupid enough to fall for it. Stop while you’re behind.” They picked their way across the hallway littered with glass dust, and Michael fought the wave of panic rising in his throat as Brooke ushered them back inside Jake’s parent’s room.

There was far more glass inside the room than outside, obviously, and when they stepped inside they found Jake quietly sweeping it up as Chloe sat on the rumpled bed, legs crossed at the knee and flipping through the script like a housewife reading Cosmo as she got her hair done at the salon. Jeremy was nowhere to be seen.

Brooke immediately dumped Rich on the bed next to Chloe, leaving him to groan and hold his head as she moved to rummage through Jake’s parent’s closet.

A discarded trenchcoat, leather jacket, and mask still littered the floor. It made Michael sick to look at it. He bent down and picked up the mask, running his finger along the glossy black cardboard. The sunglasses inside were peeling off, and he quietly snapped them free of the cardboard and
“Chloe, is this really any time to be reading generic magazines?” Christine asked, exasperated. Her eyes were dry, and she was tearing strips off her dress to try and bandage the cut. She was surprisingly good at it.

Chloe pursed her lips as Jake silently stuffed the glass shards into a pillowcase. “You’ve never seen this before.”

“It’s a magazine,” Christine said, too busy for Chloe’s preppy eccentricities. “Who reads magazines anymore?”

“We do.” Jake gave the pillowcase full of glass a good shake. Michael was frightened. “Jeremy left. He was pretty freaked out.”

Michael’s gut twisted itself into knots. “Is he…”

“He’s fine,” Jake said, and Michael practically sagged with relief. “Arguing a ton with himself, but for Jeremy that’s pretty normal.”

“That’s good,” Michael said, dazed. He was still trying to figure out how much he had to blame himself. He just didn’t know. “Chloe, about the script -”

“What script?” Christine asked sharply, tightening her bandage.

Chloe barreled over her, jumping up and striding up to Michael, challenging him in her too-short black dress and strappy sandals. She brandished the script at him, and Michael contained his flinch.

“Did you write this? Did you, Christine, and Jeremy write this?”

“Write what?” Christine asked, exasperated.

Michael forced himself to meet Chloe’s eyes, to be unafraid of the consequences of one rash action. Chloe didn’t deserve any less. “I found it in the 7-Eleven breakroom. I didn’t tell Christine or Jeremy about it.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?” She rapped the script. “This nonsense? Barely any of this even happened.”

“Because Christine prevented it,” Michael pointed out. “You remember when she interrupted that ‘Do You Wanna Ride?’ song. Christine knew exactly what was going to happen tonight. You honestly think she got that information from the internet?”

Christine paled. “Michael…”

“If you two wrote it by yourselves, then I don’t know how you knew the exact lyrics when we were hyping the crowd up,” Jake pointed out. He gave the bag full of glass an experimental shake. Rich was still lying groaning on the bed. “It just doesn’t make any sense, my dudes.”

“I can explain,” Christine jumped in, waving her hands. “Really, guys, there’s a perfectly good explanation that…I have to think of…give me that script!”

But Chloe just lifted it above her head, sniffing as Christine tried to jump for it. Chloe was about a foot taller than Christine in her heels, and she wasn’t about to relinquish it so easily. “No way. No more lying, Christine. We know the truth.” She gestured at Michael. “Why he pulled that shit with Jeremy. How we can see the SQUIP now at all. The answer is obvious. Obviously fucked up, but
obvious.” She paused about. “If it’s not, like, drugs.”

“I vote that Christine can see the future,” Jake chimed in.

The closet snapped shut, and Brooke emerged from its ornate depths. She was shaking a bottle of Mountain Dew Red.

Rich bolted upright, eyes wide, almost panting. His hand was trembling, and Jake silently put down the bag of glass on the bed so he could sit next to Rich. He took his hand, squeezing it as Rich stared at the bottle like it was water in the desert.

“It was weird,” Brooke said, “because it was me and it wasn’t me. All of it was stuff I would do if I wasn’t...confident, I think. Maybe stuff I would have done if Michael wasn’t there, like playing myself up to score a hot guy. Things I would have done if Christine hadn’t been there to convince me that I deserved to be respected by Chloe.” She swallowed, avoiding Chloe’s eyes. “If Christine hadn’t pointed out the real reason why I stayed.”

“So we’re not going to lynch me?” Christine asked faintly. “I’m too young to die.”

They had overlooked Michael.

“That shit Michael pulled...if it wasn’t for Christine specifically trying to make sure that I didn’t drink, and if Michael wasn’t already dating Jeremy and Jeremy was dating Brooke instead...I could see it happening. I could honestly see me doing that awful shit.” Chloe shook her head in amazement. “Am I really that kind of person? Am I really that much of a bitch?”

“A little,” Brooke confessed.

“Yep,” Jake said.

“Guys,” Michael said faintly.

“Is Jeremy really going to brainwash the school?” Brooke asked. “Like, I knew he was stupid, but not that stupid.”

“He’s pretty stupid,” Rich said, almost as flat as his soda.

“He’s going through a lot,” Christine pointed out.

“Guys,” Michael said.

“I vote the Squid wrote it to fuck with us,” Jake said. “Like, it kept on misspelling its own name. How dumb is that?”

Actually, Michael had been wondering about that too, but Brooke just shook her head. “If the Squid wrote it then Jeremy would have had to write it, and there’s no way Jeremy knew what was going to happen tonight.”

“Maybe God wrote it?”

“God is dead and we have killed him,” Rich said.

“That’s fair,” Brooke admitted.

“Christine’s from an alternate universe!” Michael cried, and the room fell silent. “And -”
“I knew it!” Chloe cried, without missing a beat. “I told you the answer was obvious!”

Was it? Was it really?

It barely even made any sense to Michael. But the others were nodding, as if this was the answer they had been working towards the entire time, even if Christine’s hand was pressed to her mouth in shock. Rich’s head was buried in his hands, breathing deeply, and Jake was rubbing comforting circles on his back.

“Alternate universe,” Christine whispered. “I guess….” she trailed off. Everybody turned to look at her in perfect choreography. “I mean, it’s...an explanation.” She was clearly reconsidering her entire life. Get in line, Christine. Get in fucking line. “What about the singing? You guys don’t think all of the singing and choreographed dance numbers are suspicious at all?”

Why would they be? Everyone looked around at each other. “I never really thought twice about it,” Jake said hesitantly. “It just always kind of seemed like the thing to do, you know?”

Michael shrugged. “Do you think about gravity every time you walk? Think about radio waves every time you turn on your television? Lots of things don’t make sense.”

“I still don’t understand how cameras work,” Brooke volunteered.

“Exactly!” Michael snapped his fingers, warming to the idea. “But it’s not just us all deciding to sing for no reason. I never even noticed it until you pointed it out. And when I think about it...it’s kind of weird!”

“It’s just like in musicals,” Chloe realized, eyes widening. “Where characters start singing and dancing for no reason. Except we have great reason.”

“It is as if we can see every color in the infrared spectrum now. Like dogs.” Jake said contemplatively. “Man, I feel so enlightened. Third eye open.”

“Have you guys considered the logical extension of this train of thought?” Christine asked weakly. “I mean. Think hard.”

“The Squid is not respecting the holy music which governs our lives!” Brooke said hotly. “It’s an act of sacrilege!”

Everyone except Christine nodded solemnly, faces grim. Heresy was an insult to the sanctity of their dance numbers.

“Jesus Christ,” Christine said.

“The Squid’s been taking control of the music,” Michael said slowly, realization dawning. “It’s been controlling our lives through hacking the universe.”

“You are all so close,” Christine begged, “but so far.”

But Michael just shook his head, endless pieces of half-remembered dreams slotting into place. “Christine, don’t you get it? You thought that you were in a musical. You thought that we were all fictional characters, didn’t you?”

Christine was silent.

“Wow,” Brooke said, “rude.”
“But don’t you see?” Michael said eagerly. “Our world just works differently from yours. It’s a musical, yeah, and it’s musical logic - but it’s our logic. Maybe in our world, your world is a play too. It makes sense!”

“Does it?” Jake asked.

“My world?” Christine asked quietly. “All of this, Michael, and you still don’t remember?”

The girls gasped, Chloe pressing her hand to her mouth and Brooke cursing quietly. Rich was still lying on the bed, groaning. “This cannot be a fucking surprise to you people.”

Michael quietly rolled up his sleeve and showed Christine his arm. There was a Pac Man tattoo on it.

It was his body. It had only ever been his body. That had been the horrible secret of it all.

“Someone came here with Christine,” Michael said, struggling to keep his voice even. “Someone who...was me, but wasn’t. I have some of his memories. I think there was a dead person involved. He was sad, I think.” Sad was a good word for it. He had been everything, had felt everything there was too feel, but he had denied it to the end. “I think he’s gone. If he had ever really been here. I’m sorry, Christine.”

The others looked shaken up, and Rich’s head was bowed even as something indescribable settled in the corners of Christine’s eyes, in the tightening of her mouth.

“Yo,” Jake asked, “did someone die?”

“I don’t know,” Michael said honestly. “Christine...I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Christine said, “me too.”

Christine stumbled forward, lost, and Michael embraced her, as if it was an actual apology. She was so small, and Michael’s heart broke.

“I’m sorry I left you alone,” Michael said quietly, so only she heard.

“It’s okay.” Christine hugged him tight. “I think this is what he wanted, anyway.” She took a deep, shuddering breath and stepped away, summoning a shaky smile. She took Michael’s hand and gave it a firm shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Michael Mell. I wish it was under better circumstances.”

“If you aren’t Christine,” Jake asked, fascinated, “then who are you?”

Christine’s mouth twisted into a mirthless smile. “Nobody important. I think we have to beat the Squid so we - so I can go home. That’s been the goal so far.”

“And we know just how to do it.” Chloe held up the script as Brooke thrust out the Mountain Dew at Rich. “The Squid knows. But it doesn’t know we know. And so long as it doesn’t know we know, we can play two steps ahead of it.”

Rich gently took the soda, hands shaking. He had probably never expected that he would be able to see it. Michael was forced to wonder for the first time just how much Rich knew. Had he known more than Michael did?

He stood up, clutching the plastic bottle tightly, and he roughly shoved it back at Brooke. “If you free me now then the Squids are going to know that something went wrong. We can’t risk it.”
“If we don’t free you then the minute you sober up the Squids are going to know that we know what’s going on,” Brooke protested hotly. She shoved it back at him. “We can free you, kidnap Jeremy, and stuff this soda down his throat too!”

“I like the part where my house doesn’t get burnt down,” Jake said eagerly. He stood up too, clasping Rich’s shoulder. They were so gay for each other. “Rich, this is our chance. Ever since Christine told us what was going on, this is all I could think about. Please...let us help you.”

Rich’s expression crumpled. “We’re fucked over either way,” he said. “The Squid’ll come back online and it’ll know that you all know what’s going on. If I take the soda and deactivate the Squid then they’re definitely going to know something’s going on.”

There had to be a way around this. Part of Michael wanted to wish that they had never roped Rich into this in the first place, but he deserved better than what that stupid script had in store for him. They couldn’t just leave him behind.

Friends don’t let friends attempt suicide. He didn’t care what some stupid script said. He didn’t care what fucking God said. Rich was an evil, whacked out asshole, but he was Michael’s asshole. Michael didn’t know what kind of person he was, but he refused to be the kind of person who threw his friends under the bus.

Chloe was flipping through the script. She halted over a page, fake fingernails running underneath a line. “It says here that Jeremy collapsed after he was deSquided. Do you think that would happen to you?”

“I guess?” Rich said, exasperated. “I think it might. I’ve been Squided for more than a year. I wouldn’t be surprised if I slept for a week afterwards. The Squids are still going to ask why I’m in a fucking coma.”

“Why would they?” Brooke asked loftily. “They already know.”

Silence stretched out between them. Michael saw the realization dawn on everyone’s faces, as Jake’s eyes widened and Christine face palmed. Rich only looked scared, clutching the bottle tightly to his chest.

“Can we please not burn down my house,” Jake begged. “I have three signed jerseys, man. I don’t wanna live in one of my parent’s safehouses. They’re all dusty and the wifi’s shit.”

“I’ll set myself on fire if I have to,” Rich said flatly.

Okay, let’s not go that far. Dude was metal as fuck. Brooke smiled, crossing her arms as Chloe stood up next to her. Brooke grabbed her purse from where she had thrown it on the bed, rummaging through it.

“Chloe and I had an idea,” Brooke said, which was never a good thing to hear.

Christine, who was on the same page as him, abruptly blanched. “Brooke, no.”

“Brooke yes,” Brooke said gleefully. “Don’t worry, boys. Remember what we did to Yolanda?”

Both of the jocks paled. Rich crossed himself as Jake’s jaw dropped. “Chloe, no.”

“Chloe yes,” Chloe said. She smiled at Brooke, who smiled softly and flirtatiously back, and they linked their hands together. “Brooke is a total genius. This is all her, guys.”
“Are you kidding? You were so invaluable.”

“No way! That shit with Yolanda was our crowning moment.” Chloe sighed dreamily. “The abject despair. Her public humiliation. It was so satisfying.”

“Really?” Brooke tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, smiling shyly at Chloe. “I thought it was kind of hot.”

Horrendously, Chloe giggled. “Really?” She leaned in, getting gayer and gayer. “As hot as this fire we’re going to start?”

“Jesus fuck,” Michael said.

Even worse, Christine genuinely appeared to be tearing up. “This is not the Pinkberry we deserved,” she whispered, “but it’s the Pinkberry we needed.”

Maybe he had gotten so drunk he had passed out on the couch downstairs, and this was all an elaborate fever dream. He would believe anything at this point. Anything at all would be more believable than the roller coaster of emotions tonight.

“Even hotter,” Brooke promised. She released Chloe’s hand and fished a small tube out of her purse, jumping on top of Jake’s bed and bouncing slightly as she scanned the ceiling for something. “I think I remember seeing it last time I was having sex in here. Jake, we’re going to need your massive lungs for this.”

“What did you do to Yolanda?” Christine asked weakly.

“Nothing,” Chloe said smugly. Brooke was still scanning the ceiling, jumping a little up and down. “Just spread one or two rumors.”

“Or five,” Brooke added.

“She didn’t invite me to her sixteenth birthday bash,” Chloe sniffed. “Honestly, sleep with someone’s boyfriend one little time.”

“We couldn’t let that insult stand, so when she missed school for a week we told everyone that she had a psychotic break and was in rehab in Arizona for an eating disorder.” Brooke wobbled on her heel, as if what she said hadn’t been terrifying. “Shit was so lit.”

Jake’s jaw dropped. “That was a lie? Henry dumped her because he didn’t want a crazy girlfriend!”

The blonde psychopath just shrugged. “She was a bitch, so like, yeah? Anyway, we’re using our powers for good now. Check this out!”

Then, with the flourish of a metal head in a Kiss concert and with the expertise of a girl who chewed cases of nicotine gum to get over a smoking addiction, she brandished a lit lighter and a rolled up mash of shopping receipts at the ceiling.

The entire horrible plan came together for Michael. It was stupid, ridiculous, cocky, and slightly sadistic.

“Time to gaslight the fuck out of Jeremy,” Chloe said vindictively. “So are you guys in or what?”

The marginally less sadistic teenagers exchanged uneasy glances.

“So we’re working in Smartphone Hour after all,” Christine said weakly. “Joy.”
Michael’s breath caught, but he didn’t say anything. He kept an eye on Rich instead, deathly pale, clutching the soda to his chest.

Jake silently grabbed his hand again and gently turned Rich to face him. His expression was soft, odd and out of place on the dopey jock, but Rich’s crack of vulnerability was even stranger. But in some way they complemented each other, just like how Brooke’s courage and Chloe’s decisiveness complemented each other. It was a slight mangling, an unnatural twist, but somehow the affection and bravery that thrived between Rich and Jake could never be wrong.

“We don’t have to do it, dude.”

But Rich just shook his head. “I’m not scared.”

“It’s okay if you are.”

Rich’s shoulders were shaking, almost curling in on himself. “I don’t know if I can live without it.”

“The rest of us get along okay,” Jake joked weakly. “I fail tests and stuff, but that’s okay. Sometimes I say the wrong thing, but people laugh anyway. I don’t always make every basket in the game, but it wouldn’t be any fun if I did. I like not knowing if I can do it or not, you know? Then when I find out it’s all like, whoah! I did it!”

“I’m a loser,” Rich confessed. It was the confession of a secret that they already knew. “You didn’t know me back then. People like you never gave people like me the time of day. Everyone just looked over me.”

“I’m looking at you now.” Jake squeezed his hand. “I kept on trying, you know. I kept on trying not to look at you. But I couldn’t. I can’t stop thinking about you, man. I don’t care if you’re secretly some kind of nerd or something. You’ll be my nerd.”


Jake was silent.

“Yeah,” he said finally, “a little.”

Then Rich surged forward and kissed him, rough and sloppy and more than a little drunk, and Jake eagerly pressed back. They tangled up inside each other for barely more than a few heartbeats, and when they broke apart Rich buried his head in Jake’s shoulder, breathing deeply. Jake laughed a little, running his hands through Rich’s hair. From behind them Brooke passed Chloe a twenty.

“She never let me tell you how I felt,” Rich gasped into Jake’s shoulder, and Michael saw that he was almost shaking. “But I didn’t even try. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to apologize, or how to explain, or how to confess. I felt like all I knew how to do was hurt people. But I’ve gotten so sick of it and I don’t know what to do now.”

“Yeah, you do.” Jake kissed him again, slower and sharper. He gently took the bottle from Rich and gave it a sharp twist, pressing it into his hand. “Drink this.”

Rich’s hands were shaking. He moved back from Jake, looking deep into the bottle and swirling it around. He was sweating and swaying, more than a little drunk, and Michael wanted nothing more than to let the boys close the door to the bedroom and make their apologies to each other. He wanted to see Chloe and Brooke get wasted and sloppily kiss each other as they plotted out how to ruin more lives. He wanted Christine to break free of this oppressive dance and to sit on the porch outside and drink and look up at the spotlights with the sad boy who disappeared deep into
Michael. He wanted to hold Jeremy’s hand and dance with him.

Michael had never fought for something before. It tasted sour, a sharp prickling of loss and regret on the roof of his mouth, but it was sweet too. Sweet like rosy wine or the taste of Jeremy’s lips. Michael didn’t know how to fight. He had only ever given up.

“He goes everything,” Rich said, and tilted his head back and chugged the soda.

He had barely swallowed some of the bottle before he began choking. He hacked up a mouthful and dropped the soda bottle, letting it bleed out and stain the white comforter before Jake quickly grabbed it and put it on the floor. Rich’s eyes began to bulge, shoulders shaking and whistling shallow, wheezing breaths. Michael abruptly began to panic over the possibility that thirty year old soda found in the back of a Spencer’s may actually get you sick.

“The smoke alarm’s in the corner,” Jake snapped. He grabbed Rich and held him tight as he gasped and writhed. He wasn’t screaming, but his hyperventilation was almost worse. “We have to get him out of here.”

Christine fished a cell phone out of her purse, already punching in a number with shaky hands. “I’ll call 911 -”

“No need.” Jake hugged Rich tight, pinning his arms against his sides, face grim. “The fire station will come when the alarm goes off. Brooke?”

The room held its breath, tension vibrating in the air and punctuated only by Rich’s gasps and wheezes.

Jake smiled.

“Hit it.”

Brooke skidded her thumb across the wheel of the lighter, flicking the small flame on as she slowly fed the twisted up rag of newspapers, receipts, and paper towels she had stuffed in her purse into the fire. It slowly caught alight, the room heating up almost imperceptibly as the soft sputter of the fire accentuated Rich’s gasping.

Agonizing seconds passed until the wad of paper properly caught on fire and began wafting smoke. Brooke waved it underneath the alarm, holding it upright in a pose that almost mimicked the Statue of Liberty. Michael held his breath, heart jittering in his chest, mind ringing -

The alarm blared, loud enough to make the skittish crowd startle and curse. Brooke jumped down as the small white box on the ceiling began flashing red, and they heard the same blaring beeps echo throughout the whole house, mixing in strangely with the Katy Perry and the rise and fall of voices.

The same voices that abruptly rose into screams, doors slamming open and shut, drunk girls screaming as drunk guys punched walls.

In an actual, real life fire situation the worst thing to do would be to scream ‘Fire!’. That was a great way to guarantee a stampede, mass confusion and panic, and crying teenage girls. Chaos and bloodshed would reign. Hysterical children would flee an entirely intact house convinced they were running for their lives.

Nobody would even check to see if the house actually was on fire.
There was only one reasonable thing to do in this situation. Chloe Valentine put her big mouth to good voice and screamed at the top of her shrill little lungs, “Fire!”

Brooke immediately jumped in, leaping off the bed and squealing loudly. “Fire! Fire! Oh my god!”

Christine chimed in with her meticulously trained theater diaphragm, projecting her voice to reach the far corners of the mansion. “We’re all going to die!”

It was hard not to feel that way. The girls scrambled to pick up their purses and bags, more than aware that they wouldn’t be able to come back anytime soon, and Brooke stamped out the fake little fire with the heel of her boot. Michael’s leather jacket with electric blue lining lay discarded on the floor, slumped against the edge of the drooping and slightly stained comforter. Michael’s heart was pumping with adrenaline, but something about it made him hesitate.

Christine saw him. She gathered her voluminous skirts in one hand and bent down to pick up the jacket with the other, offering it to him in some kind of conciliatory gesture. But Michael just shrugged, pushing it back towards Christine.

“It burned up in the fire.”

The alarm rang and rang, reverberating in his sternum as the stampede of teenagers out the door began to recede. The party was evacuating, and it was their cue to leave. Michael didn’t want to go. He knew something was going to change after this. He wished he knew what that was.

Brooke and Chloe were pulling each other out the door, strategically messing up their hair and slipping out of their heels and combat boots. Jake was bent over Rich, clutching him tight to his chest as he felt Rich’s seizing jerks falter and sputter out. He didn’t move.

“Jake,” Michael said weakly, “we have to go.”

Jake just shook his head, bending tighter over him. “We’ll wait. Gotta sell it, right?”

“Jake -”

But Christine grabbed Michael’s before he could say anything else, slipping her hand down until her hand was tangled in his. Michael let her tug him away, as Jake looked up and smiled wanly.

“You might want to borrow my jacket, dude. It’s a cold night.”

He jerked his head towards the close Brooke had been rifling through before, and Michael stepped forward without breaking his grip on Christine’s hand. There was a letterman jacket poking out of a rack of much fancier clothing, and Michael quickly one-handedly shucked it off the coat hanger and threw it over his shoulder without getting a good look at it. Michael’s attention caught on Rich instead, the way his chest heaved with deep breaths, the way his breaths sputtered and stuttered and died out. He watched Rich grow still. He thought, for a few horrible seconds, that they had killed him.

Christine tugged him away. He let her, and they pulled themselves away from Jake and Rich. They leapt over the scattered glass in the hallway, practically falling down the stairs as the alarm squealed insistently in his ears. It sounded almost like his regular alarm, the one on his phone that woke him up every morning until he smacked the snooze button. The thought was appealing: that this entire night had been one long, strange dream, and that he was due to wake up soon.

Maybe his entire life was just the strange, surreal little dream of a teenage track star. Maybe he had spent the last two months dreaming that he was a track star and had only just woken up. Maybe,
They weaved through the kitchen, granite countertops sticky with beer residue. Porn was still playing on the flat screen in the living room, and a small and fancy looking statue had been carelessly knocked over. The alarm blared and blared, and Michael fought the urge to swaddle his head in the overlarge letterman to drown it out.

Jeremy was home. Jeremy was safe at home, or as safe as he ever got. Tomorrow they were going to have to walk into school and tell Jeremy that his best friend had set himself on fire. As if he hadn’t hurt him enough lately.

Christine and Michael ricocheted onto the lawn, and they didn’t have to feign panic. The minute his exposed skin caught the frigid October air - no, it must be November by now - he began shivering, and he quickly threw on Jake’s jacket. It was difficult to see in the darkness, but it was the same shade of red as his old hoodie that he had stopped wearing for whatever reason. It was the standard white and red ensemble, an identical jacket that he had seen Jake wear hundreds of times.

He wondered, distantly and dizzily, if that meant that he and Jake were going steady now.

They made a show of coughing and looking as singed as possible, drawing the attention of a crowd of panicked, doe eyed teenagers. They were clustered around Chloe and Brooke, who were loudly moaning about how they barely escaped with their lives. Michael heard something about how the boiler room was going to literally explode any minute, and how everyone had to immediately pile in with a designated driver and flee the scene of the crime before the fire men found out that there had been Bud Lite at the party.

Jenna pushed through the crowd, wielding a cell phone like a microphone. Her mohawk of feathers and sequins were still meticulously slapped into place, and she was grinning like a shark.

“What’s going on?” She gushed. “Can anyone tell me what happened?”

Michael and the girls exchanged uneasy looks. He realized too late that the girls were gesturing for him to say something, and Christine gave up and pushed him forward instead.

The hoard of children narrowed in on him, and Michael fought the urge to pull his jacket up tighter around himself. You’re popular. You have a job to do. You’re not him.

Michael cleared his throat and stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets.

“Rich set a fire, and - “
Chapter 12

“- he burned down the house!”

“No, no, more excited!” Chloe leaned over and prodded at the script with one well manicured fingernail. Jenna made a soft noise of understanding. “Rich set a….fire! And he burned down - the house!”

“I get it now!” Jenna’s eyebrows furrowed as she twirled a highlighter between her fingers. “Am I channeling that one time Rich called me a fat cow?”

“Absolutely.” Chloe flipped the page back and forth, rehearsing her own lines one last time, as Brooke did her make up next to her and silently mouthed her words to herself. Her feet did a little jig under the table. “What time is it?”

“Long enough for everyone to take their seat, but not too long that people have started sneaking out to make out in the bathrooms,” Michael said woodenly. He checked his watch, shaking the sleeve of the jacket back. “We’re ready in five.”

Christine, who had given up all pretenses and had shown up to school that day in jeans and a rumpled hoodie, chewed frantically on the aglets of her hoodie string.

“This is a bad idea,” she said, repeating what she had been saying for the past ten minutes. “This is such a bad idea.”

“Please, it was my idea.” Brooke winged her eyeliner. “All of my ideas are great.”

“I don’t really know what’s going on,” Jenna confessed. “But if we’re showing up that bitch Yolanda again I am so in.”

For quite possibly the five hundredth time Michael was forced to wonder what any of these people had against Yolanda.

The cafeteria wasn’t the same. It should have been. The room was only missing three people. Their table was only missing three people, but it was a gaping wound that Michael couldn’t ignore. He kept looking to his right, his body tingling with the phantom sensation of a knee brushing his and two hands intertwined. He hadn’t seen Jeremy since the party. They didn’t have any classes together until after lunch, but Michael couldn’t help but be afraid that he would never see Jeremy again at all. He couldn’t help but be afraid that he never should.

The other two boys were in the hospital. The doctors couldn’t figure out what was wrong with Rich, but they were keeping him there until he woke up anyway. Jake was visiting him. Somebody should really tell the doctors that Rich was currently suffering from a nasty case of third degree burns and not, you know, indigestion.

Michael gently bumped shoulders with Christine, who was practically vibrating with tension. He leaned to the side and spoke underneath the din of the cafeteria.

“It’s going to be okay. You can handle this.”

Christine just shook her head. She had deep, puffy bags underneath her eyes. Michael knew how she felt. “Can you guys at least admit the whole singing thing is weird now?”
“It’s a little weird,” Michael confessed, “but did you know giraffes clean their eyeballs with their tongues? That’s pretty weird too. Do they do that on your world?”

“I kind of hope not.”

The cafeteria roared on in its infinite hedonism. Each table was a bubble, a world in and of itself, filled with teenagers laughing or studying or copying or munching contentedly on baby carrots. In that corner sat the goths, in this corner lay the artistic kids who thought they were better than everyone else, and along the far wall the theater kids were loudly singing showtunes. He even saw a distinct three person group clutching the edges of an abandoned row of tables. A hipster goth looking girl was talking to a hapless, innocent waif in unfashionable clothing. There they were - the Popular Kids. The Preps. They were probably calling him something demeaning like a Plastic or something. Michael fought the urge to wave weakly.

Michael wasn’t a prep. He just - well, he just organized the biggest house parties of the season, went on shopping sprees with the school’s hottest girls, helped drug one of his closest friends, and assaulted his boyfriend. You know, like popular kids did.

What the hell did the alternate universe him do to his life?

“We can’t start just yet,” Christine insisted. “Jeremy isn’t even in the cafeteria. He’s the only reason we’re even doing this.”

Went unsaid was the fact that Jeremy was probably avoiding him. Brooke didn’t look up from her phone. “I sent him like ten text messages about how I couldn’t open my jar of peanut butter because all of the boys at the table were gone. He’ll be here any minute.”

Great. Let’s trick Jeremy into seeing Michael’s stupid face. He was just going to come because his Squid Sensibilities forced him to exploit every possible opportunity to demonstrate his masculinity and show up the football team.

“Really,” Jenna was asking Chloe, “why are we doing this?”

“If you ask again you’re not invited anymore.”

“Got it!” Jenna hummed under her breath, practicing the key that Christine had demonstrated for them. “Should I go for more of a oh-oh or a whoah-oh? The script just says oh.”

“Definitely whoah-oh,” Christine said firmly. “Look, if you guys need more time to practice the lines, or even just the choreography, we should-”


“The alternate universe you threw away your weed.”

“Yeah, I fucking noticed!”

But Brooke jerked up from her phone, dropping it on the grimy cafeteria table and elbowing Chloe. “He’s here! Quick, before he can escape! It’s showtime!”

Michael twisted around in his seat to look. He craned his head over the adjacent tables of the popular hangers on, at the Henries and Kyles and bitchy Yolandas in their orbit, and he caught a flash of creamy brown hair buffeted between the students. They gave one of the most popular guys in school a wide berth, flowing in a respectable two foot radius around him, and Michael and
Jeremy locked eyes from across the cafeteria as Michael’s heart thumped in his chest.

Michael and Jeremy had known each other for twelve years. He could read every quirk of Jeremy’s eyebrow, every flicker of his eyes. He knew Jeremy’s lean curves, his baby fat turned muscle, every cent he donated to GoFundMes or exactly how many gigabytes of porn he had on his Macbook hard drive. Michael and Jeremy used to understand each other like no one else did. Michael used to be somebody that Jeremy understood.

What Michael read on Jeremy’s face wasn’t hatred or fear. His eyes widened. His mouth tightened. It was sadness. Sadness and loss.

A guitar riff exploded from the ceiling.

All of the popular kid’s heads snapped up, craning their necks to find whatever speaker was playing the music. Jenna hadn’t even noticed, happily humming along as she hiked up her skirt and pulled down her top. It was a classic, reverberating beat, tapping your toe on the floor as the music began to start.

Everybody began frantically clearing their stuff off the table, stuffing lunch boxes back into their backpacks and cramming their food into their mouths. Whatever was about to happen, they probably wouldn’t get much of a chance to eat or finish up their homework. Michael’s heart was thumping in his chest, and his fingers were beginning to tingle with adrenaline. Christine was chewing her fingernails. Chloe and Brooke were beginning to realize that the music wasn’t coming from anywhere.

“Wow,” Brooke said. “You weren’t kidding, Christine. It really is like we’re in a musical.”

“You’re on in three,” Chloe said, lifting a hand to help Jenna step onto the table, ascending the steps to the stage so she could take her spotlight. The rest of the lights on the cafeteria began to dim just a little bit, and Michael could have sworn that the lights above their table grew brighter.

Jenna pulled out her cell phone as a prop, exaggeratingly typing away at it. Nobody around them noticed that Jenna was standing on a table. When she finally began to sing it was in perfect beat with the rhythm, and all doubt fled. They were going to do just fine.

“OMG, Chlo, answer me! Whoah, wait until I tell you what I heard!”

A perky little riff echoed her voice, and the tables around them stopped and stared. Michael wondered if they realized that Chloe normally ripped the fingernails off of anything who tried to call her ‘Chlo’. Only Brooke was allowed to do that.

“It’s too fucked to type, this shit is ripe!” Jenna squealed, making a show of typing away at her phone. Michael wondered why they had felt the need to keep to the smartphone theme, despite it making no sense. Granted, that was the general theme of the last two months. “Call back, I’ll yell you every word!”

The guitar riff perked up again, and Chloe gracefully stood up on the bench and took her place next to Jenna. They arranged themselves so they were standing back to back, exaggeratingly waving their phones around.

More people were staring now. The cheerleaders were ignoring their kale for favor of staring at their top tier popular table, and the football players were chewing on their protein bars like cows with a cud. They had frozen stock still. It was actually pretty eerie.

“Jenna Rolan calling,” Chloe called, dredging up her best and most obnoxious twang. Not hard.
“Jenna Rolan calling. Jenna Rolan calling. Ugh!” She made a show of accepting the call, and changed her annoyed voice to a friendly squeal. “Hey!”

“Oh my god, oh my god! Okay, so!”

More of the cafeteria had frozen. Michael couldn’t blame them - it was a thoroughly weird scene. But something about it was just a little bit different. The stillness was unnatural, and there was no talking. The cafeteria was growing silent as the infectious song echoed towards every corner of the room, and soon even the punks were growing silent as the theater kids began humming in tune with the beat.

Then Jenna and Chloe turned to face each other, and the song began in earnest. Brooke was mouthing along with them. Christine was wringing her hands.

“At the end of last night’s party, very end of last night’s party!” She leaned in, making a show of whispering in Chloe’s ear. “Did you see Rich?”


“So he’s behaving hazy like a tweakin’ junky, flailing crazy like a freaking money!” Jenna did little jazz hands, twisting in time with the beat.

Chloe began shifting her weight from foot to foot, pumping her arms up and down as if she was lifting dumbbells, in a move that Michael was reasonably certain was co-opted a little from Nicki Minaj’s Anaconda video and a little from Brooke’s cheerleading tapes. It was a strange and unholy union. “He’s gotta learn to handle his high, shouldn’t drink so much for a small guy!”

A drum was rattling through the song, a guitar riff strumming in lighter when Chloe sang and heavier when Jenna chimed in, “Right, but he wasn’t drunk!”

The hint of piano gave rhythm to her words, and Chloe made a show of gasping, hand flying to her mouth, and propping her hand on her hip as she glared at Jenna. “The hell you say, Jenna?”

Jenna grinned, leaning in and shaking her hands. “Yo! He wasn’t drunk!”

Chloe’s eyes narrowed. The room leaned in, eyes wide, breaths caught. “The hell you say, Jenna?”

“No!” The guitar kicked in again, and Jenna began truly belting it out as the piano ramped up her voice. “Because I heard from Dustin Kropp, that Rich had barely touched a drop!” Michael saw Dustin Kropp reel in confusion from where he sat next to the football players, who were all exchanging confused looks. They had all seen Rich drinking. “So you can’t blame the things he did on alcohol!” She sniffed, rocking her fists over her eyes in an exaggerated crying motion. “It’s just so terrible I don’t want to relive it all!”

The football players struggled in their confusion, bucking the tides of the song, but the room was well and truly becoming sucked in. Jenna was a know it all, so who were they to doubt her? She had been there, after all! Hadn’t she?

Jenna leaned in, pretending to whisper behind her hand. “But do you want me to tell you?”

“Spit it out, spit it out!”

She squealed, jumping up and down. She was a natural. “You really want me to tell you?”

It could have been any conversation between them. That, in its weird way, was the genius. “Spit it
“Out, spit it out!”

“I’ll tell you because you’re my closest friend!”

Chloe shot her an incredulous look, completely unfeigned. “No I’m not.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jenna shrugged. “But here’s what happened at the party’s end…”

Jeremy drifted closer, eyes wide, weaving through the crowd. The Squid sparked into view next to him, eyes narrowed and rubbing its chin. Its samue was...sparkling?

The rest of the room was enraptured, and Michael watched in terror as they all jerked upright in their seats, like puppets on a string. Jeremy definitely noticed, judging from the way he recoiled away from the string of kids in the lunch line. Every eye was fixed on them, every face blank in eerie silence.

He just barely heard Jeremy ask the Squid, “What’s going on?”

The Squid rubbed its chin. *This is strange.*

Jeremy looked around at the still crowd. “Yeah, you think?”

*Don’t backtalk me.*

“Sorry!”

If they said anything else Michael missed it. The guitar ripped a rocking chord, the drum clattered, and Jenna twisted on her heel to face the crowd as she spread her hands out and slowly raised them, as if she was rising the dead from their graves. In perfect sync the cafeteria began to clap their hands. They smacked books on the table, they knocked thermoses against the edges, they made some noise.

“Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!” Jenna belted, “Whoah-oh!”

The cafeteria sung back, “Whoah-oh!” They stomped their feet and clapped in unison, matching the beat of the drums.

“Rich set a fire and he burned down the house, whoah-oh!”

Brooke sunk in her seat, clearly unsettled, even as Chloe played backup dancer and stuck her arms out in a V and kicked her feet. Jeremy’s jaw dropped.

“I thought I was dreaming, everybody was screaming!” Jenna was rapturous, the complete center of attention for the first time in her life. She was throwing herself into it, practically kicking backflips with glee. She was really selling it. She should do theater. “When Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!”

“Whoah-oh!”

“When Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!”

The guitar set up a ready to go chord, and Brooke took a deep breath and stepped up to the plate. She linked arms with Chloe and stood back to back, both making a show of pulling out their phones again. The crowd was holding their breath, craning their heads in to hear the latest gossip. The teacher chaperones around the edge just looked bored - above all of this high school gossip.
“OMG Brooke, answer me!” Chloe waved her phone in the air. “Whoah, wait until I tell you what I saw!”

Brooke, clearly having the time of her life, sniffed. “Ignore!”

“And also space and frowny face,” Chloe said again, faux-annoyed. “I feel like we really shared a moment there at that party and I kind of want to see where our relationship takes us, winky face fire kitty paw.”

Both girls stopped, caught off balance by the unexpected and unrehearsed honesty.

Brooke, of course, picked up the phone. “Hey!”

“We cool?”

“We are.”

They whipped around to face each other, grinning broadly but shyly, and Michael saw Jeremy rub his eyes and gape. The Squid was arching an eyebrow, but it was nodding along to the rhythm.

They danced together in the same move that Chloe had shared with Jenna, shifting their weight side to side as they pumped their hands up and down. Chloe was definitely twerking a little. “Okay, so - at the end of last night’s party, very end of last night’s party!” She winked. “Did you see Rich?”

Brooke giggled, weaving her hair around a finger. “No, I was busy.”

Oh, gross. Despite the seriousness slash ridiculousness of the situation Christine sighed happily. She probably shipped it.

“He’s behaving weird and I was frightened, cuz I feared his state was heightened!”

“He’s gotta really learn not to smoke a lot,” Brooke sung, shaking her ass and the picture of elegance and grace. “He shouldn’t get so high for a tiny guy!”

They both joined in, grinning mischievously at each other, and despite the audience of the entire school they only had eyes for each other. It was weirdly adorable. “He’s gotta really learn not to smoke a lot, he shouldn’t get so high for a tiny guy!”

They pulled jazz hands, holding their palms out to face each other and swinging them side to side. It was very sixties dance floor, very cheerleader, very Brooke and Chloe and everything.

Then Chloe leaned in, pretending to whisper in Brooke’s ear as Brooke pulled an exaggerated expression of surprise, still swinging their hands. “Right, but he wasn’t high! So you can’t blame the things he did on pot!” Christine was silently counting down on her breath, and Chloe screwed up her eyes and shouted to the sky. “It’s just so awful, so I’ll talk about it a lot!”

On the other side of the cafeteria Jeremy stood in shock, hands pressed to his mouth. “Rich set Jake’s house on fire? Is he okay? Why did he do that?”

The Squid casually shrugged, the flippant gesture masking the very real tension. *I suppose he couldn’t handle the upgrade.*

“Upgrade?” Jeremy cried, unable to tear his eyes away from the resplendent Chloe. “You call this a fucking upgrade? What’s wrong with you!”
“Rich set a fire, and he burned down the house!” Chloe cried, striking a cheerleader’s downwards V and knowing she was breaking Jeremy’s heart. “Whoah-oh! I thought I was dreaming, everybody was screaming!”

“When Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!” Brooke joined in, striking an upwards V pose.

Jenna chorused in, raising her hands in the air in sweet victory. “When Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!”

The cafeteria started to clap in tune with the beat. This was it. Michael lost sight of Jeremy as every student stood up as one. They threw their lunch boxes and backpacks in the air and caught it, they turned on their heels and jumped up onto the bench only to jump back down again, they twisted and turned and bowed in respect to Jenna, their lord and savior.

The girls arranged themselves in a v formation as best as they could on the table, Christine and Michael diving to avoid their outstretched kicks. Jenna held out her cell phone as every teenager in the cafeteria clenched their cell phones in their fists and thrust them towards the sky.

“Hey, everybody, have you heard!” They had, indeed, heard. “Rich set a fire, now go spread the word!”

It was really a little mind boggling just how callous these people were supposed to be. The world that the script detailed, the musical that Christine was apparently a giant fan of, was a sarcastic and cruel place. Michael liked his own world a lot better. He liked his own friends a lot better.

Michael took a deep breath and, before he could think better of it, clamored onto the table next to Brooke. Christine hastily followed him until she was standing next to Chloe, and with their cheerleader formation complete Christine stuck her hands out in a right high V cheerleader pose as Michael copied her in a left high V.

It was technically Brooke’s line, but Michael wasn’t a coward.

“Sending a text!” He called, in quite possibly the least masculine line ever.

The crowd spinned on their heels and posed with their cellphones out. “Text!”

Christine jumped into the air, doing a full split. “Tweet!”

A small army of teenage girls leapt between benches as teenage boys backflipped off of the tables. It was complete anarchy. Mass hysteria. Dogs and cats living together.

“Text!”

A girl did a headstand. “Text!”

“Tweet!”

Somebody was breakdancing on a table. “Tweet!”

The popular kids on the table rocked forwards and backwards, clapping their hands as the music and the crowd went wild. The power was intoxicating. “Release the information, step and repeat!”

Jeremy hadn’t begun singing or dancing, and he was confused by those who did. He dodged a couple tangoing and narrowly avoided somebody doing the twist. “What’s going on! Why are they
all dancing!

*Their hearts are filled with joy over another’s pain,* the Squid drawled, but then it stopped short. It did a double take at a very panicked Jeremy. *What do you mean, why are they all dancing?*

“What do you think I mean!”

The Squid’s eyes narrowed. *It’s never bothered you before.*

“Rich wasn’t in the hospital before!”

Michael stepped forward, holding his hands in a cheerleader high V and hoisting his cell phone high into the sky. *“I’ll spread the word!”*

The goths were head banging as the artistic kids were doing interpretive dance. *“Word!”*

“That Rich is -” fuck, what was that line! He was distracted by Jeremy, who was frantically trying to clutch someone’s sleeve and get them to stop dancing. *“Flecked!”*

The room stopped. They all turned around to stare at Michael. The music skittered to a stop. *“Flecked?”*

Dammit! Christine stepped on his heel. Michael flashed a weak smile and propped his hand on his hip. *“Oh, I mean fucking. Did I say flecked?”* He shrugged in faux-innocence. *“Sorry guys, that’s just my autocorrect.”*

The cafeteria pointed at him in complete unison, terrifying him immensely. *“Always be aware of autocorrect!”*

The music and clapping kicked in again, and the kids began chanting. Brooke was kicking her heels as Chloe twerked, and Christine was weakly waving her hands around. The music picked up, the kids twirling on their heels and back flipping off the tables, splaying themselves dramatically on top of lunches and apples and capri suns as they held their phones high and texted. Jenna lead the crowd like a conductor in front of her orchestra, and whenever she punched an arm the crowd punched with her. Chloe clapped her hands and the crowd stomped in time to the beat, and when Brooke winked her eye the boys collapsed.

It was power, pure and simple. Power that Michael had never known he wanted. The power to make people notice him, the power to make people sing and dance with him and pay attention to him and make him happy. He fought to keep himself from getting swept up in the song, the same way he had three separate times during Halloween, but the song was joy and the dance was life and it was so hard. Dancing was externalizing yourself, and Michael had always kept so much pent up inside.

When Michael punched the air the others punched with him, and he knew that he was a main character. It felt good. It felt like never wanting to leave.

“R-I-C-H, can’t you see? Just how much I care about your tragedy!”

Like true cheerleaders the crowd extended their hands in crude facilimites of letters. Their sympathetic words were undercut by the fact that they were literally making it into a chant.

“I changed my profile pic to you, now I fully understand what you’re going through!”

The girls pretended to swoon and the guys pretended to catch them, and at each corner of the room
girls had organized themselves into triangles and were forming pyramids.

“R-I-C-H, it’s a drag! I read she read they read you’re in a body bag!”

Jeremy struggled against the crowd. “Why are they chanting about this!”

*Teenagers*, the Squid said fondly. *Little psychopaths.*

“R-I-C-H, can’t you see! Just how much I love your tragedy!”

And there it was. Death was exciting to these people. Fires, houses, life and death and drugs and alcohol - it was petty amusements that helped you pass the time amidst the backdrop of tedious education. They had never really known hardship, thank god. Their innocence was what made them callous and mean.

The Squid was humming in tune to the song, dancing a little jig in tune with Michael’s own, and he understood the Squid just a little bit better.

The music collapsed into chaos, kids screaming at each other in frantic attempts to pass the information on that they already understood. Kids were literally throwing their phones at each other, gibbering reaching a crescendo in nonsense gossip. They ran around in frenzied excitement, clapping in tune as Jenna, Brooke, and Chloe waved nonexistent pom poms and riled up a high school full of assholes.

“Ready, okay! Here we go!”

It got louder and louder. The guitar and drums were keeping time for the impromptu sock hop, and the cafeteria finally organized itself in uneven formation facing Michael and the popular kids. Christine was practically hiding behind Michael, but he managed to keep in step with the girls as they kicked and punched the air and twisted and shouted.

Then the key changed, and the girls all performed a high kick in perfect unison.

“Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!”

The crowd pumped their fists. “Whoah-oh!”

“Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!”

Christine summoned her courage and stepped out from behind Michael, awkwardly stomping her foot and clapping as she chimed in with her crystal clear voice. “It was so terribly gory, I got the whole bloody story!”

“And yeah, I wasn’t quite there!” Michael chimed in, lying his ass off yet again. “But I know what happened, I swear!”

Everybody was clapping and stomping in unison, and Jenna broke in again as she conducted the crowd by swinging her arms.

“When Rich set a fire and he burned the house down!”

God, it was like Triumph of the Will up in here. “When Rich set a fire and he leveled the town!”

Jeremy fought against the tides of children, increasingly freaked out. “He didn’t do any of this stuff! What the fuck is wrong with these people!”
Good question. The Squid just laughed, its sparkly samue glinting under the harsh spotlight.

Welcome to high school, kid! These are the kids you wanted to fit in with so bad. These are the kids who you wanted to like you! Don't you get it? They'll sell you for a nickel, Jeremy!

“When Rich set a fire and he moved to Bombay!” Chloe sung, swinging her hips.

Michael couldn’t help it - he swung his hips too, a perfect mirror of Chloe. “When Rich set a fire cuz he knew he was gay!”

For the first time he made eye contact with Jeremy, looking down as Jeremy looked up, and he saw Jeremy mouth his name before a cheering freshman stepped in front of him and he lost sight again.

“When Rich set a fire and he melted his head!”

“When Rich set a fire and he’s totally dead!”

“When Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!”

The crowd clapped, the cymbals crashing, calling and response. “Burned it down, did you hear, did you hear!”

“Whoa!” Michael called, doing his part for the war effort.

“Did you hear, did you hear!”

“That Rich set a fire!” Jenna called, in rising sync with Chloe and Brooke. “That Rich set a fire! That Rich set a fire and burned down the house!”

The music reached its climax as Michael, Christine, Chloe, Brooke, and Jenna turned in unison and struck a perfect five man Charlie’s angels pose, smartphones wielded at the ready.

“He told me ‘cause he’s my best friend!”

“Rich set a fire and he burned down the house!” Michael barked. “Send!”

The music cut out and everyone promptly fell off the table.

Michael fell over Chloe as he banged his knee on the edge and slipped straight onto the floor. Brooke squealed as she toppled off and landed right on top of Michael, knocking the breath out of him, as Jenna caught herself on the edge of a bench and pulled herself upright. Christine, the only one who didn’t fall, carefully sat down on the table and slipped off.

The cafeteria erupted into noise and motion again, laughing and waving around their smartphones, but Michael’s vision was blocked by the small girl still on top of him.

“I can’t believe we did it!” Brooke gushed. The fibers of her sweater were tickling his nose. “That was so awesome!”

“Uh, Brooke?” Michael wheezed. “Can you get off me?”

“Oh, sorry.” She scrambled up, giving Michael a hand. His head span and he winced as he carefully stood up, but his quest to check himself for bruises was interrupted by a giant bear hug from Brooke. She lifted him into the air, laughing as she squeezed the breath out of Michael again. “I can’t believe we pulled that off! You were amazing!”

“You weren’t bad yourself,” Michael said. He couldn’t help but return the hug. Her hair was soft
and silky, and it smelled like strawberries and engine oil. “I can’t believe it. That was a total dance number.”

“Only the most awesome dance number of all time!” She squealed. “Every line was perfect! I didn’t even need to remember them, I just knew them! It was as if I was dancing for cheerleading playoffs perfectly without even practicing!”

“We truly live in the best universe,” Michael said seriously, but ruined it by laughing when Brooke stuck out her tongue. “Catch me on the next flight back to Universe McBoring World.”

“You ditch us, you’re dead,” Brooke giggled. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Michael on the cheek, making him blush. “I know everything’s scary and lame, but I like just dancing with you. Things feel so simple and...and buoyant!”

“Like everything’s going to be okay,” Michael said, “like you could dance forever like this.”

Chloe popped up behind Brooke, cleaning cafeteria dirt off her perfectly coiled hair and smirking as Brooke blushed and weaved a strand of silky blonde hair around her finger.

“We had a moment, huh?”

Busted. Chloe blushed too, coughing into her fist and flipping her hair. “The singing that governs our universe is a little indiscrete.”

“You’re telling me,” Michael said feelingly. “I have said so much awkward shit when singing. I guess I just never noticed it was so weird before. It always seemed so normal.”

“Ever since I met you and Christine there’s been no such thing as normal.” Chloe smiled and, to Michael’s eternal embarrassment, pecked him on the cheek too. “Thanks for helping Rich.”

Michael just sputtered, rocked off balance by the kiss, and the two girls laughed at him. Christine burrowed inside her hoodie, but she was smiling too, and on impulse Michael slung his arm around her shoulders. “I’m not the one you guys should be thanking. This is totally Christine’s show. You’ve been so amazing, man.”

Christine blinked owlishly, still clearly a little skeeved up, but she leaned into the touch. “I’m glad you’re...having fun, Michael. That’s the most important thing. Behind the whole world saving business. I just want you to be happy here.”

Something old and cold pricked at his heart, and Michael fought the creeping sensation that crawled down his spine. “I’m really happy. I - I fit in here, Christine.”

“Then I’m glad,” Christine said simply. “And I’ll help you and the others no matter what.”

Michael had just opened his mouth to say something equally goopy when he caught a flash of familiar caramel hair out of the corner of his vision. He turned, and he saw -

He saw Jeremy, mouth gaping, betrayed and lost. The Squid stood behind him, snickering. Michael immediately surged forward, dropping his arm away from Christine’s shoulders and calling Jeremy’s name, but it was too late. Jeremy had already turned around, sprinting away and bursting out of the cafeteria double doors, leaving Michael behind and gaping.

He chased after him, hating himself. How the fuck was Jeremy supposed to interpret Michael spreading mean rumors about one of his best friends? How was Jeremy supposed to react to the news that Rich had set himself on fire? He should have...fuck, he should have broken it to him
gently first. But Jeremy had found out about it through the song in the play, so he had to find it out through the song here. All of the subterfuge had to be unnecessary. These elaborate lies were just piling higher and higher, and Michael didn’t know what he was going to do when the tower of manipulation collapsed.

Where was he going? Michael picked up his pace, ignoring the intrinsic comfort in sprinting, and burst out of the cafeteria just in time to find Jeremy turn the corner. The hallway was deserted - literally everybody had just been singing and dancing - and Michael practically skidded around the corner.

“- how you could have let him do that!”

Jeremy was standing in the middle of the hallway, his back turned to Michael and screaming at the Squid. Michael quickly jumped back, pressing up against the wall as if he was in a spy movie and peeking around the corner.

The Squid had changed outfits again, and it was its weirdest one yet. It was dressed in some kind of sparkly kimono with glittering fringes, its gelled hair complimenting the ridiculous getup. It was inspecting its fingernails, bored.

*It’s not our fault he has no alcohol tolerance. If he hadn’t participated in that silly drinking game we could have helped him.*

“Stop lying,” Jeremy spat, and Michael silently cheered him on. Show that asshole what’s what, Jeremy! “You did that just so you could get Michael drunk too, didn’t you?

*I was trying to help you,* the Squid said innocently, which was a bit of an oxymoron. *I told you I’d help you score with Michael. It was the only way to avoid making him leave you, and you fucked that one up big time.*

Had that been the party line? Had that been the justification? How long had Jeremy stood in front of his bedroom mirror, checking and double checking his costume, wondering if he was going to lose his virginity that night? Had he been excited or scared? Michael didn’t know. But that was no surprise.

“I didn’t want to take advantage of him when he was drunk!” Jeremy hissed, and Michael jerked backwards. Was that why he had said no?

*Yes, so he took advantage of you instead.* The Squid crossed its arms at Jeremy, sneering down at him. *I always knew you were the girl in this relationship, but I didn’t know you would take it this far.*

Jesus Christ. Michael wished he could see Jeremy’s expression, but his back was turned and some part of Michael didn’t really want to know. Memories of that night scratched horribly in the pit of his stomach. The fact that it had been incredibly hot really, really didn’t help.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Jeremy insisted, and something cold and horrible clenching over his heart relaxed. “You - you’re the one that froze my legs! You’re the whole who made me help him take off my shirt, you’re the one who made me kiss him, and you’re the one who - you’re the one who didn’t let me say no!”

*So you admit your precious little boyfriend molested you at a house party.* It wouldn’t stop sneering. Michael wanted to punch that stupid sneer off its stupid face. *Real classy.*

pissy because I like him better than you! You aren’t my boyfriend, you know!”

Holy crap. The Squid’s eye twitched, and the sneer froze on its face. I’m a super quantum unit intel processor, you little moron. Of course I’m not your boyfriend.

“Then why do you keep acting like it?” This was probably the most backtalk Jeremy had ever gotten away with. He was clearly shaking, but he was standing his ground too. “You won’t stop telling me how you like me more than Dad does, or more than Michael does, or how you’re the only one who cares about me! You won’t stop telling me who I can and can’t hang out with. And you keep on -” Jeremy took a deep breath, shoulders shaking, and Jeremy knew that he had never admitted this out loud before. “You keep touching me!”

The Squid’s eyebrows skyrocketed. That sounds bad when you put it like that.

“No - not that, I mean - I don’t mean it like that,” Jeremy stammered. “I just have personal space, and you need to respect it, and I need you to respect me, and - and that’s final!”

Final. The Squid stepped forward, eyes narrowed, and Jeremy froze. You’re giving me an ultimatum now, is that it?

“I - I mean -”

Or what, Jeremy? It loomed over him, and Jeremy shrank back. It was a familiar dance between the two - of pushing and pulling, of giving and taking. Of the robot taking and taking and taking, and Jeremy giving up everything he had just to make it happy. You’ll break up with me? We’ll get a divorce? You know that’s not possible. You made me a promise. You gave me admin privileges on your life.

“I didn’t know what I was getting into!”

It’s not my fault you didn’t read the terms and conditions.

“Everything’s rules with you! You’re so controlling! And - and I hate it!” Michael was forced to wonder if Jeremy had only now realized this. It sounded like this was the first time Jeremy had stood up to it at all. “I - I want to make the rules now! I want to make a rule where you aren’t allowed to say mean things to me -”

Jeremy, you’re being a child.

But Jeremy just spoke over it, raising his voice higher and higher as if he could drown out the telepathic robot. “I don’t want you to get in my personal space unless I say it’s okay -”

I’m in your brain, Jeremy.

“And would it kill you to let me fucking masturbate -”

You may not want to shout that in the middle of the hallway.

Jeremy abruptly shut his mouth, coloring a little. It stepped forward again, but it wasn’t looming anymore. It was friendlier, softer, and Jeremy visibly relaxed. It patted him on the head. Shh bby is ok.

“It’s not that I want you to leave,” Jeremy said planatively. “You said that you were supposed to make everything better. Why am I still so sad?”
Look at yourself. The Squid clasped its hands on Jeremy’s shoulders, but when he shrank away it obligingly removed them. How nice. **You dress better, you’re 93% more attractive, and you’ve had more sexual experience.** That is to say, you’ve had sexual experience.

“You tricked me and Michael into that,” Jeremy said quietly.

See how far I go to help you! That really wasn’t what the Squid was supposed to take away from that. You have more friends, better grades, and a spiffy clean house. Your best friend is now your boyfriend. Michael likes Jeremy 2.0 so much more than the old model.

Jeremy shifted uncomfortably. “Michael liked me for who I was. You kept on making it sound like he only wanted to date me once I became cool. I - I think Michael always liked me.”

Really? It grinned down at him, sharkish and cruel, and it tilted its head to look Michael straight into his eyes. **Why won’t you ask him yourself?**

Jeremy turned around, and Michael froze.

“Michael?” Jeremy asked. “Where you there the whole time?”

He didn’t look so good. His immaculately coiffed hair was in disarray from trying to fight the tides of the Smartphone Hour, and his eyes were tired and drawn. He had a light touch of make-up, just enough to cover the bags underneath his eyes, but Jeremy had never been able to hide from Michael. He may as well have been screaming his fear.

Fuck, play it off. “I just got here,” Michael lied quickly. “Were you talking to someone?”

He’s lying. He’s been able to see me the whole time. It smirked and wagged its fingers in a casual wave. I’ve been helping him out, you know. Installing some new software for him. No biggie.

“Listen,” Michael said frantically, talking over it. “We need to talk about what happened at that party. Jeremy, I’m so, so sorry.”

But Jeremy just shook his head, eyes wide.”No way. There’s no way…”

“Jeremy, I was so out of line,” Michael burst in. Please listen to him. Please just listen! “Nothing I did was okay. You - you don’t have to forgive me, but if I can make it up to you I swear I will.”

“What could you possibly do?” Jeremy whispered, and Michael reeled back. “What could you do to make up for that?”

He just said that he didn’t blame him. Jeremy had just said that he didn’t blame Michael. What fucking gives! “I - Jeremy, if there’s anything -”

“Why were you singing?”

Shit.

“Uh,” Michael said, “what?”

“I can’t stop thinking about last night,” Jeremy said, strained. “I didn’t even sleep. After a while I realized that you were singing the whole fucking time. It was like you couldn’t stop. And the minute the music cut out -” Jeremy snapped his fingers, the echo of a beat. “ - it was like a spell had been broken. You jumped off me. I thought I was just imagining it, but when I walked into the cafeteria today you were standing on table and singing. Just like at the party.”
“You know I like music,” Michael said weakly. “Me and my headphones, right?”

“Last time I checked you didn’t like dancing on tables,” Jeremy said flatly, and Michael winced. The Squid was grinning, flashing bone white teeth. “What happened to your leather jacket, Michael?”

Michael winced, rubbing the cuff of his letterman between two fingers. He had gone back to wearing glasses, leaving the contacts that his alternate universe self had favored at home, but he had swapped out his old clunky plastic black frames for some more streamlined horn rims.

“It burned up? Jake, uh, let me borrow his letterman.”

_You lost my jacket?_ The Squid said, incongruously outraged. _That was a nice jacket!

“Lost your -” Jeremy’s jaw dropped. “That jacket! That was the SQUIP’s jacket!”

Michael couldn’t beat back the wince, and it was all the confirmation Jeremy needed.

It was a small miracle that Jeremy hadn’t recognized it. He would have definitely remembered the Squid wearing it the first time they met. Michael showing up the next day with an identical jacket - well, if you were under the impression that the Squid was solely holographic then you wouldn’t think twice about their eerily similar jackets.

But if you knew better -

_Michael and I struck a deal, _The Squid said cheerfully. _He was so sad and alone when we met. I took pity on him. I didn’t do much. Just leant him a jacket or two._

“It’s lying!” Michael snapped, and regretted it the second he said it.

Jeremy sucked in a harsh gasp, and the pit of Michael’s stomach fell.

Why the fuck was it betraying him now? They had a fucking deal worked out! They would keep the song and dance going until the finale, where the Squid tried to convince Jeremy to infect the school out of love for Michael, and Michael would try to convince Jeremy not to infect the school for the same reason -

But it was the finale. This was it. This was where Jeremy decided.

Michael threw caution to the wind, stepping forward and pointing at the Squid. “I wasn’t helping it do shit! I was trying to protect you!”

“You can see it?” Jeremy shrieked. His world was falling down around his ears. “You’ve been able to see it the entire time? Michael, what the fuck!”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Michael said frantically. “It threatened you, I couldn’t do anything!”

_That’s a pretty ungrateful outlook, Michael. _The Squid, having finally gotten what it wanted, beamed graciously down at the two boys. Michael darted forward, and stopped himself at the last second from grabbing Jeremy’s arm. He pushed Jeremy behind himself instead, glaring up at the Squid as if he could possibly protect Jeremy from it. _I help spice up your wardrobe. I help you make friends with Christine, then with Brooke and Rich. I help you get your dream boy, and this is the thanks I get? _It sniffed. _Teenagers._

Jeremy went white. “You asked it to freeze me last night?”
Michael’s blood boiled. He leapt forward, hand curled into a fist, and did something so thoroughly stupid that it put the last twenty four hours to shame. He tried to punch it in the jaw.

But the Squid just laughed, dodging easily, and clasped a cold and cool hand around Michael’s wrist. Michael bit off a shout as he struggled against the vice-like grip, but the harder he beat against its arm the tighter the grip became.

His vision was tunneling. Jeremy was yelling at it, and Michael was screaming something hoarse and awful, and the Squid was just laughing and laughing.

*Don’t worry, Jeremy. I was just teasing about last night.* It shook Michael, and he frantically tried to kick it in the legs. It didn’t even fucking exist! *I simply used my quantum nanotechnology processor to compute the best possible outcome for the both of you. Let’s call it facilitating the inevitable.*

“It’s fucking lying, Jeremy!” Michael beat against the grip again, but the Squid just grinned brightly and shook him. It wasn’t doing anything else. Michael forced himself to take deep breaths and calm down, trying to get his limbs to stop shaking. His anxiety was making his sternum vibrate. “Okay, so I talked with it a couple of times. I swear all we did was talk.”

_Fangirl was always a better liar than you._ It arched one regal eyebrow. _I think Jeremy deserves the full story here._

“Yeah,” Jeremy said quietly. His fists were clenched, but Michael couldn’t tell who he was angry at. Maybe himself. “I think I deserve the full story.”

Michael blanched.

He never had any intention of telling Jeremy what had been happening the last few months. There was no way he was telling Jeremy about the alternate universe him. But that left Michael trying to explain his decisions, and his decisions made no fucking sense.

Maybe they used to, once upon a time. Maybe Christine still understood. But that left Michael scavenging for an explanation, for any version of the truth, that he didn’t know how to give.

All he could do was confess. The thought was dizzying. Michael didn’t know where to begin. The first day that the alternate universe him woke up here, or the first day that Michael came back? Was it the day he fell in love with Jeremy, or was it the day Maria died?

It was a pointless question. Michael had never fallen in love with Jeremy. He had grown up within his love, had taken root in it twelve years ago and never managed to disentangle himself. He couldn’t stop loving Jeremy any more than he could pretend that they had never met. Even the alternate universe version of him had to have known that. Whatever kind of Michael that boy had been, whether he was real or fake or the last remnants of a half-remembered dream, there was no way he couldn’t have known.

That boy had been in love with Jeremy too, because he was Michael Mell and there was no world, real or fake, in which Michael Mell did not love Jeremy Heere.

“I met it the day you took the pill for the first time,” Michael said simply, so much as any of this could ever be simple. “It told me that it was going to make you popular. I knew what was going to happen. It was going to make you cool, and make you rule, and then it was going to have you get together with Chloe or Brooke or someone so you could climb that ridiculous social hierarchy. So I
asked it to make me cool too, so it could set me up as the love interest instead of the girls.” He shrugged uncomfortably. “I cared about you and - and you didn’t care about me in the same way. I was worried you would leave me behind.”

And in return, he let me use him as bait to blatantly manipulate you into doing whatever we wanted. Carrot and stick. The Squid smiled indulgently down at the two boys, at the struggling Michael and at the frozen Jeremy. You can’t say I don’t get results.

Jeremy stared up at it, silent.

He stared at Michael too, and Michael swallowed down pleas for forgiveness. The alternate universe version of him, the fake version, was the one who had set up the plan, but he didn’t do anything Michael wouldn’t have done.

Had there been something about finishing a play? He didn’t remember now. There was a lot about the last two months that were pretty fuzzy.

“You made Michael cool,” Jeremy said slowly, “and he was better at it than me. He’s - he’s happier than me.”

No, Michael was happier than you because the fake him was a jock and set Michael up with a bitchin’ cool friend group. Michael was happier because he didn’t have a brain robot following him around all the time. The Squid was trying to take responsibility the happiness that he had fought for, and Michael was going to murder it.

My methods are flawless. My programming is perfect. Michael’s life has been improved. Rich’s life had been improved. I did it all for you, Jeremy. Didn’t improving Michael’s life make you happier?

Jeremy was getting turned around, bouncing from lie to lie so quickly he couldn’t keep track. He groaned, rubbing at his eyes. “I - I love dating him, it’s just -”

Didn’t dating a cool guy make you cooler? Didn’t befriending a nut job make you look sane by comparison?

“I - I guess -”

Control is happiness. The Squid released Michael, leaving him with an aching arm and foot from where he had fought against it, and Michael immediately scrambled over to Jeremy. But he just turned away, hugging himself tightly and shaking. More happiness equals more control.

This was beginning to sound a lot like -

You were always quite the loser, Jeremy!

Oh, fuck no! Fuck this!

That was it. That was the last straw. Michael wasn’t putting up with this for one more second. Michael did his best to glare the guitar riff into submission, and Jeremy recoiled from the oppressive pop rock.

“I told you to stop calling me that,” Jeremy protested weakly. “Why - why are you singing? You always do this when you try and convince me to do something stupid!”

“Gee,” Michael bit out, “ever notice a pattern?”
The Squid just laughed. *Then I invaded, and you upgraded!* It smooshed a finger into Jeremy’s cheek, making adorable little ‘beep-boop’ sounds, making Jeremy slap its hand away. *Whoah!*

Nothing good had ever come out of people whoa-ohing. Jeremy and Michael backed away from it, unconsciously stepping closer together as the hallway began to blur. It was fading into obscurity, into generalizability, and suddenly they were standing in any hallway in the school. They were standing in every hallway in the school, and Michael recognized the same bulletin board where a fatal sign-up sheet for the school play had hung.

“Where are we?” Jeremy whispered under his breath.

“Everywhere,” Michael said glumly. “And nowhere.”

*Oh, Jeremy! It’s true that I found you! But look around you! Whoah!*

It stretched out the last word on each syllable, matching the hypnotic twists and turns. Michael and Jeremy clung to each other, intimate at last.

The doors on either side of the hallway opened, and Michael couldn’t fight the initial flood of relief that crashed through him when he saw their friends. Maybe they could all dogpile the Squid and beat it up. Maybe they could convince Jeremy that Michael was secretly a good person, really, all of the bad stuff was his alternate universe self, you gotta believe me -

But none of them looked very happy. Brooke collapsed against a locker, lip jutted out in a cute pout, as Chloe leaned desolately against a post. Her makeup was smeared. Jenna had just given up and was standing in the center of the hallway, sniffing and rubbing at her eyes. Christine was the last one to walk in, but she didn’t look any more upset than usual. She looked pissed instead, teeth gritted as she twitched her head to the song. They were all wearing black.

On the other side of the cafeteria Rich and Jake stumbled in, looking equally depressed. Michael clapped a hand over his mouth so he didn’t scream as the guitar ripped a sick riff and Jeremy’s jaw dropped. “They do not look like they escaped a house fire.”

They were too smart to come back to school. “I don’t think that’s Rich and Jake,” Michael said quietly, and the guitar thrummed above their heads.

*All your peers are just so incomplete!* The Squid swung its its hips as their friends stomped their feet and pulled exaggerated sad faces. *You can’t see it but they’re all in pain.*

“This is a dream,” Jeremy muttered, pulling at his hair. “Today’s just a bad dream. I’m going to wake up tomorrow and nobody’ll be singing, or dancing, or being evil -”

“Trust me,” Michael said, as depressed as their fake friends. “I’m way ahead of you.”

*Their operating system’s obsolete!* It lifted its hands and their friends lifted their hands too, grabbing each other’s hands in a demented game of Red Rover. *Let’s complete the chains, and get inside those brains!*

“I can’t believe this,” Jeremy said, numb. Against all odds, he looked betrayed. “This can’t be real.” Michael was still grasping at Jeremy’s sleeve, and for a split second Michael was afraid that Jeremy was going to shake him off. “None of it was real. None of it was ever real.”

*Let’s save the pitiful children!*

Their friends snapped their heads up, and as one reached into their pocket and withdrew black
sunglasses. In eerie unison they slid the sunglasses on, and as one they sang an angelic back chorus in glorious harmony, “Whoah-oh!”

*Let’s save the pitiful children!*

“Whoah!”

*Let’s teach the pitiful children who haven’t a clue.* Their friends advanced, the Squid stalking towards them, and Michael and Jeremy shrank back. *Help them to help you.*

“Please,” Jeremy begged, “I don’t want to fight anymore. I just wanted - I just wanted to set some boundaries, we can work it out. Please just listen to me.”

*Boundaries are a thing of the past, Jeremy. It’s time to think of the future. Our future.* The music had stepped down, and the Squid was advancing on Jeremy again. Michael surged forward, fully intending on uselessly attacking it, but a meaty hand caught his collar and yanked him back, choking him. It was Jake, and he held Michael back as the Squid swooped in and placed a reassuring hand on Jeremy’s back. Michael opened his mouth to scream, but he couldn’t speak. He was forced to watch helplessly as the Squid guided Jeremy towards a familiarly unfamiliar locker.

Rich’s locker was on the third floor and the cafeteria was on the first, but that would have been ascribing far too much logic to it. It was covered in a paper wrapping with fake flowers tacked to it - never mind that the entire school had found out he was in the hospital roughly ten minutes ago - and the Squid cheerfully deposited Jeremy in front of it. Rich himself was banging his head against a post.

“Rich’s locker? But he’s right -”

*You’re a very literal boy.* The Squid pushed Jeremy towards the locker. *Open it.*

“But I don’t -”

*Don’t you trust me?* The Squid hovered a hand over the combination lock and Jeremy’s hand jerked up, deftly twisting in the combination and opening the locker. *Help me to help you, Jeremy.*

“What.” Jeremy withdrew something from the locker. Michael, very occupied struggling against Jake so he could go football tackle the Squid into the next school district, didn’t catch what it was until Jeremy shook the box, confused. “Lady’s running shoes?”

*Your optic nerves are functioning quite nicely.*

Jeremy easily ignored the sass through long experience. He opened the shoe box and sucked in a harsh breath. Michael abruptly remembered what he was going to say before he said it. “There’s gotta be enough SQUIPs in here for -

“The entire school,” Michael breathed. “Jeremy, don’t do it!”

The Squid and Jeremy turned their heads in eerie unison to look at Michael. Jeremy’s hands were clenched on the shoebox but the Squid was just grinning. Michael doubled his efforts against Jake, but the guy was like a brick wall. There was no point. It wasn’t really Jake.

*A SQUIP helped Michael.*

“Why do you keep mispronouncing your own name?”
I made Michael the man he is today, the Squid said, louder this time. I helped him be happier, more popular, more deserving of you. Think of the changes it made for him. We can make those changes to everyone. Everyone can undergo a beautiful transformation and become somebody who can love you.

“Shut up!” Michael screamed. “Jeremy, I already -”

“You think I should SQUIP him?” Jeremy whispered. His eyes were wide, skittering back and forth between Michael and the Squid as if he didn’t know where they should land.

I’m not so sure. The Squid tilted its head. Really, when you think about it, Michael doesn’t need to be Squidded - SQUIPed at all.

Oh thank God. Jeremy perked up, as if he was glad that the choice was taken out of his hands and that he didn’t need to pick between Michael and the Squid at all. As if he hadn’t known which one would pick. “Really?”

The thrumming background music jacked into high gear, and Jake released Michael. He wanted to run and grab the shoebox out of Jeremy’s hands, he wanted to punch the Squid hard in the teeth, he wanted to kiss Jeremy and he didn’t understand why he had never done it before. But he didn’t.

Michael’s hands reached into his pocket and slowly drew out his sunglasses. He snapped them on, and everything became so much clearer. The music rang like a bell in his ears as the Squid’s sequined kimono glittered under the fluorescent lights, refracting into a rainbow of shimmering light, and Michael was blinded.

Then he started singing.

It wasn’t like any of his other songs. It wasn’t him dancing, and it wasn’t him controlling a room and making it move how he wanted. It was closer to when he had first met the Squid, the first and last time Michael was relegated to being just another backup dancer.

When he sang it was operatic, belting out a rising high note and raising his hands as Jeremy’s eyes grew wider and wider. The Squid gently took the shoebox from Jeremy, setting it aside, and Michael felt himself glide towards Jeremy. He stepped forward to meet him, their hands finally intertwining, finally working on the same wavelength that Michael had been so desperate to fight.

Why had he been so desperate to fight it again? Everything was growing so fuzzy.

Michael settled a hand on Jeremy’s waist and clasped his other hand, throwing it out and pulling him into a waltz. The guitar riff bent to accommodate them, pulling them in deeper into a breathtakingly familiar dance. The faint echoes of another song began to encroach into the Squid’s song. It was grinning broadly, clapping its hands in time to the waltz as their friends stood and watched, eyes dull.

“Say that there’s this person you never knew that well,” Michael sung sweetly, and he was hit with the sense memory of another room in another time. The way he had felt back then was fuzzy now, his thought process clouded, but Michael stepped in the echoes of another man’s dance.

He is totally into you!

“You thought that you had him pegged but now you can tell,” Michael swung Jeremy around into a spin, perfect footwork complementing each other. “That he’s gone from a guy that you’d never be into, into a guy you’d kinda be into!”
They swung around the hallway, Jeremy desperately clutching onto him as if he was afraid that Michael would be swept away.

“Is it worth it?” Michael sang softly. Jeremy’s face was distorted through the sunglasses, pulled into strange dimensions, shaded and warped. “Jeremy?”

*Abso-*

“-lutely.”

Michael slowed the dance, bringing them into a near halt, and Michael released his hand so he could clasp his cheek. He wondered what his expression looked like right now. Was it tender and sweet? Or was it as cold and numb as he felt, like someone had dabbed his gums with novocaine? “I don’t always relate with other people my age,” Michael sung softly. “But the SQUIP’s let me take the stage. There are so many changes that I’m going through, and I want to have them with you.” Something rose and exploded in Michael’s chest, and he didn’t know what it was... “Jeremy, I love you.”

Jeremy’s waist was warm and heaving under his grip, and Michael could feel him shaking. “I...Michael, I...”

*Can you see the vision clearly, Jeremy? Then Jeremy was ripped from him, pulled away by one hand as he spun into someone else’s arms. The Squid was grinning down at him, and Michael recognized an echo of their tango. Another half-remembered song, a half-remembered deal. Jeremy blushed furiously as the Squid reached around to clasp him on the back, cuing Jeremy to do the same as they drew tightly against each other. Users embracing. Jeremy craned his head back to search for Michael, who could do nothing else but stand there dumbly, but the Squid shifted Jeremy’s position so he could sweep him into a low embrace. It grinned rakishly at Jeremy, and he blushed. And interfacing. It winked. Bee boop bee boop.*

“You ruin the mood every time when you do that,” Jeremy said weakly, as if it did that frequently.

It swung Jeremy around into the dance, footwork complementing each other as perfectly as Jeremy and Michael had, and the guitar settled into an electronica tango as the Squid stepped forward and Jeremy stepped back, pushing and pulling but always taking and taking. *Shiny happy people singing sweetly.*

Michael joined the chorus, belting agreement and lifting his hands in rapturous glee. “Yeah!”

*Gone is human error and fear!*

Michael, hideously and embarassingly, scatted boops as the Squid and Jeremy danced. *Every issue tucked away so neatly!*

It embraced Jeremy from behind, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and singing lowly into his ear. *If you feel a sob or tear, just turn that knob or switch that gear.*

“Let’s save the pitiful children,” Jeremy sang, high and clear. The Squid was holding him but he was looking at Michael, only Michael, and if nothing else at least he could say that. “Let’s save the pitiful children.”

The Squid grinned, almost as dazzling as its outfit. *Let’s teach the pitiful children!* It released Jeremy, finally stepping away as Jeremy remembered to breathe. *Who just haven’t a clue just what to do...help them and soon this will be you!*
Their friends turned on their heels and goose stepped towards the center of the hall, which was not a sentence he had ever wanted to say. He realized too late that their outfits had changed, had shapeshifted into generic black jumpsuits. He realized too late that his outfit had shapeshifted into a generic black jumpsuit too, and that they were all wearing dumb little capes. They stood in a line, singing as one as the music reached its crescendo. Michael, who had thankfully felt no need to join the conga line from hell, ducked away from their line of identical friends with placid expressions. The Squid was standing in the center of the line, and Jeremy had frantically picked up the shoebox and was clutching it close to his chest again, as if he was trying to assuage it.

“This isn’t right,” Jeremy was muttering to himself, as if he couldn’t help it. “This isn’t right, but -”

“Everything about us is going to be wonderful,” their friends sang, and Michael sang, and the Squid sang, and Jeremy sang. A perfect harmony. “Everything about us is going to be so alive!”

In that moment it felt nice to agree with it. It felt good to be finally working together, for everybody to finally be on the same side. No more petty high school infighting. No more snippiness between Chloe and Brooke because they were afraid to tell each other how they felt. No more casual douchebaggery from Jake, who honestly seemed not to know any better. Christine wouldn’t be left alone anymore, wouldn’t have been abandoned by people she trusted and forced to save the world by herself because Michael was too much of a coward to remember, or because he had been forced to forget.

Michael knew how great being Squidded was. He had volunteered to be the first one.

Their friends walked forward as the Squid hung back, grinning and grinning, pushing against Jeremy until he stumbled backwards. Michael, feeling weighed down in his sunglasses and jumpsuit, retreated with him. He could tell that Jeremy was wondering why he wasn’t singing and dancing the same song too, but Michael didn’t know either.

_You won’t feel left out or unsure!_

“Not pitiful children anymore!” Their friends beckoned Jeremy closer, pressed him towards them, and tried to tow them away. But Jeremy was backing up instead, trying to escape even as the song pulled him in closer. “Because everything about us is going to be cool...when...we...”

“Fuck you!” Jeremy screamed, and the music skittered to a halt.

The beat tripped over its own feet and their friends were caught off balance, stumbling out of tune and left to stand around awkwardly out of sync. Michael felt as if he had just surfaced from a raging sea, finally coughing up the water that had been swimming into his lungs. He threw the sunglasses off his face and left them to skitter towards the ground, sucking in deep gasps of air just to prove to himself that he still could. Jeremy must have seen him, but his hands were clenched so tightly on the shoebox he may not have noticed.

The Squid sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. _You couldn’t have waited until the end of the song to throw a temper tantrum? We were in a groove here, Jeremy._

“Fuck your stupid song!”

Michael’s chest wracked with coughs, and Jeremy finally turned to face him. His face felt ruddy and hot. “Jeremy, please, I -”

“No! Fuck you too! You were manipulating me, both of you!” Jeremy clutched the shoebox to his chest. Their friends, disoriented and not entirely mentally or metaphysically there, were standing
around awkwardly. “Well, I’m sick of it! I’m not going to be pushed around by either of you anymore! I’m out!”

What do you mean, you’re out? The Squid asked incredulously. You already agreed to the plan. Singing is a legal agreement.

“I didn’t agree to anything!"

“You kind of did,” Michael pointed out, still coughing. It felt like he had been sucking in salt water every time he belted out another stupid fucking beep boop. “What with the whole saving the pitiful children thing. Which, for the fucking record -”

“You were singing too!” Jeremy yelled, and Michael abruptly shut up. “The SQUIP was right -”

I’m always right -

“Shut up!” It was clearly the first time Jeremy had ever told it to shut up and meant it. The Squid was struck dumb. “You’ve been working with him behind my back. You were teaming up and just throwing me around as if I don’t have - don’t have feelings, or agency, or whatever! You took that away from me!”

Michael blanched. When you put it like that he wasn’t even wrong. “Jeremy -”

“No! I’m talking now. You never let me talk.” Jeremy scowled, and Michael and the Squid exchanged panicked glances. This wasn’t good. “The SQUIP was controlling our relationship from the beginning and you let it. You’ve been acting weird since before I even met him, but he kept on telling me that it wasn’t a big deal. You’ve been covering for each other. I can’t believe you!”

“It has?” Michael asked blankly. The Squid winced.

“And you!” Jeremy turned on the Squid, who winced again. It almost looked sheepish. “Don’t even get me started on how you’ve been jerking me around. Am I even a real person to you? To either of you?”

“I wasn’t lying,” Michael said softly. “I really do -”

“Whoops! I don’t care!”

You aren’t being mature about this -

“That’s it! We’re done!” Jeremy was red in the face, and Michael had never seen him this mad. Not when Ian had faked a note from Hannah asking him out in the sixth grade. Not when his father let rats infest the house because he couldn’t bother picking up the pizza from the ground. Not even when his mother left. “You don’t respect me, you don’t listen to me, and you don’t care about my feelings. I’m leaving. I should have done this ages ago.”

Honey, be reasonable. You can’t just leave.

“Yeah?” Jeremy asked, and Michael suddenly got a very bad feeling. “Just watch me.”

The shoebox still tucked under his arm, their questionably metaphysical friends still blinking like beached goldfish, Michael still shocked that Jeremy was breaking up with the Squid, the Squid still shocked that it was even a robot that could be broken up with, Jeremy turned on his heel and fled. He burst through a set of double doors that hadn’t even been there before, and Michael gaped at him as he disappeared from sight.
He and the Squid exchanged glances, and for the first time they empathized with each other in complete harmony. Ouch.

Then the Squid’s eyes widened, and it immediately took off after him. That’s the backstage. Come on!

“Look,” Michael said blankly, “maybe he just needs some time,”

Not your backstage, moron! The backstage! The Squid grabbed Michael’s arm and towed him along, his grip cold and electric, and Michael quickly shook himself free.

Then the full implications of what the Squid was saying sunk in, and he burst into a sprint faster than the Squid.

They crashed through the double doors only to find a long, dim rectangular room. It was the auditorium stage, separated from the rest of the stage by thick velvet curtains. Chairs and planks of wood were stacked against the wall, but Michael had eyes only for Jeremy. He pushed a curtain aside, leaving behind nothing but a flash of elbow and the squeak of his sneakers, and Michael sprinted after him.

The curtains were heavy, brushing against his cheek and sending a thick burst of dust into his nostrils, but Michael felt his heart leap into his chest as his gut swooped. It was as if there was a change in air pressure, or that he was on an airplane taking a nosedive. His ears popped, his breath caught, and when he finally pushed his way onto the auditorium stage the first thing that he noticed as that it smelled different.

It didn’t smell like teenage sweat. It didn’t smell like the disinfectant of their school. It smelled like the only real theater Michael had ever gone to, back when he won the sweepstakes for a ticket to a stupid play he hadn’t even wanted to go to. It was dim, just like that auditorium had been, only light enough to see the bouncing nerd flip through the Playbill next to him. Michael craned his head up, registering faintly the huge scaffolding above his head that stretched above the stage, and when he looked down he found Jeremy.

He was still clutching the shoebox. His breath was heaving and ragged, almost on the verge of tears, and he was standing in the center of an otherwise empty stage. Michael’s skin prickled from the spotlights, spotlights that shouldn’t even have been on.

There were people in the audience. Two, in the front row. No one else.

They looked a little like -

Jeremy looked behind him for the first time. He was still gasping, clutching the shoebox tight to his chest, ragged in desperation. Jeremy had done a lot of stupid things out of desperation. “This is it,” he gasped. “He can’t follow me here.”

The Squid, who had been hot on Michael’s tail, had disappeared.

“Jeremy,” Michael said quietly. “Come back to the hallway with us. We can talk about this. I want to apologize.”


“This place is dangerous.” He didn’t know how he knew it, only that it was true. The boy sitting in the front row looked a lot like - “Jeremy, we aren’t supposed to be in here.”
Jeremy looked behind him for the first time. He couldn’t read his expression.

“Yeah?” Jeremy said, and he saw now that he was unimpressed. “Because it sure looks like you’re already here.”

The boy in the front seat was him. Michael recognized dimly that it was the alternate universe him. They were almost identical. He was a little shorter, but where Michael had some lingering flab he was clearly pure muscle. He must be a sprinter. There was a girl sitting next to him, playbill held loosely in her hand, who was undoubtedly Christine.

He was real. The alternate universe him was real. He was more than memories, more than an impression. For the first time the alternate universe him was a real, physical person, and Michael saw that he was never going to wake up.

Did he have parents? Michael’s head was swimming. Were people going to miss him?

“I’m sick of all of the voices in my head,” Jeremy said. “I need quiet. I need time.”

Michael only realized what he was going to do a split second before he did it.

“Jeremy, wait -”

But Jeremy had already started running, sprinting across the giant auditorium stage, and when his foot scuffed the edge of the stage he leapt. Jeremy leapt off the stage, and he disappeared from sight.

The spotlights shut off, as if they were never there. The auditorium flickered into life again, the alternate universe children disappeared from sight, and in the span of a blink Michael was back in their boring school auditorium again. Normally sized, smelling like dirty carpet and stinky teenagers, dusty and empty. Jeremy and the other kids were gone, and Michael was still here.

The Squid finally slipped past the curtains, its sparkly fringes catching on the velvet, and it must have registered what had happened before Michael did.

“Fuck! Fuck, he’s gone!”

“Yeah,” Michael said dizzily, “I can see that.” He really was gone. Michael had leapt off the stage, and he would have landed right in the front row, but Michael’s ears had popped with a change in air pressure and everything was gone. He looked behind him at the scowling Squid and saw that the scaffolding was gone too.

“Shit. Shit!” The Squid chewed a knuckle, its kimono somehow five times as ridiculous as it had been five minutes ago. “That little asshole did it. He actually jumped realities. He got so pissed off he jumped realities. I would be impressed if he wasn’t such a fucking - agh!”

Something occurred to Michael embarrassingly late.

He pointed at the Squid. “Why are you talking?”

“No need to be rude.” The Squid ran its hands through its hair. “I can’t follow him like this. Without a song I have no extra dimensional power. I can wait until the Pants Song - shit, I don’t even have a line in that one -”

“No,” Michael said loudly, “you’re talking. No telepathy. Real words.”
It had always been fairly obvious that it had been using telepathy. It had always tickled the brain stem a little. The difference was stark. Regular words were coming out of its regular mouth. They were a little slurred, and some of them Michael couldn’t quite catch. Just like normal words that people had to normally hear with their normal, non telepathic ears.

Normal. Nothing about this situation was normal.

The Squid froze.

It looked down at its hands, eyes widening. It licked its thumb a little, then grimaced. It tugged at the ends of its kimono and licked that too, before making a face and spitting.

They heard the curtain rustling, and they both turned around only to find a very confused Mr. Reyes poking his head out onstage. Michael was abruptly reminded that he was still wearing a black jumpsuit and a blue lined cape, and his hair seemed to be gelled all of a sudden. Moreover, Mr. Reyes probably had to pick his way through an entire hallway of confused, identically dressed children.

Mr. Reyes looked between Michael and the Squid, eyebrows furrowing intently.

“Is it father son costume day?” Mr. Reyes finally asked. “I thought that wasn’t until our May production of Singing in the Rain.”

“Great,” the Squid said. “Just great.”
Chapter 13

Jeremy was gone, and the Squid was still here.

Michael could poke it. Michael could prod at it. It was soft and fleshy. Michael was now forced to wonder if it was impolite to call a flesh and blood asshole ‘it’ and had to switch to ‘he’ or something, like Jeremy did. Its arm did not feel like cold metal, and it didn’t give him static electricity. It felt, sounded, looked, and smelled like a normal human being. Michael hadn’t licked it yet, so he wasn’t sure if it tasted like a human being, although it assured him that it was definitely sweating. You know, like a human being.

Like an actor.

But Michael didn’t want to think about that too hard, because it implied that the fabric of reality between his reality and Christine’s reality was blurring. It also implied that his reality was going to regress towards what Christine had decliatedly dubbed ‘musical logic’, where apparently instead of classmates there were NPCs, instead of Gamestops there were Playlocations, and where no other locations besides the school, the mall, the hospital, Jake’s house, and Jeremy’s house existed. Michael, who was quite fond of having his own house and going to Gamestop, didn’t want to think about that too hard.

“I’m really quite worried about your life as you know it being reduced towards nothing more than an off-off Broadway cult classic musical with, if I really admit it, several relatively weak songs -”

“Christine, I don’t really want to think about that too hard.” The implications of that sentence caught up to him. “Wait, what do you mean weak songs?”

Christine had shrugged sheepishly. The minute the song ended they had all reconvened, the girls desperately changing into their gym outfits as Christine and Michael filled them in. “I’ve listened to the soundtrack a million times, and I promise every song is endearing and heart rending in their own unique ways, a lot of the appeal is mostly within context and you know, logically, actually, Halloween is kinda a pale reflection of Big Fun from Heathers.”

“Fuck you, Halloween was great.”

Things were spiralling out of control.

Jeremy was gone, and had fucked off somewhere Michael couldn’t follow. Because apparently Michael was a boyfriend so spectacularly bad his boyfriend had to break up with him by throwing himself off the cliff of existence just to get away.

“Hey,” the Squid had said, “how do you think I feel?”

“I don’t care how you feel!”

Jeremy was gone, and had left six very confused teenagers to wake up in the cafeteria wearing Matrix costumes with varying levels of memory as to what had happened. Christine had been fully aware the entire time, while Jenna was already texting everybody about how someone had snuck an edible into her lunch. He had also left Michael standing in the middle of the hallway with gelled hair and a cape, standing next to a grown man in a sparkling glitter kimono. Mr. Reyes had a lot of words to say to the random grown man in a kimono in the middle of the hallway, and Michael was
left claiming that they were both really interested in the father-son costume day, and that they had just gotten the date wrong. Which was the most embarrassing thing that had happened to him since the talent show. For the record.

Christine was visibly disappointed when Michael didn’t launch into a diatribe about costume design, which reminded him of the sleeping boy in the auditorium, which made him feel worse.

Jeremy was gone, and the sleeping boy in the auditorium was gone too, and that made him feel the worst of all.


The Squid eyed the car disdainfully, lip curling. “I refuse to step inside a machine with a CPU that speaks only in grunts.”

Lunch was about to end and Michael didn’t feel like getting a detention because an evil robot was being a priss about motor vehicles. He leaned over and unlocked the door, opening it for the Squid like a chauffeur. “Either you wait in the car or I’m telling Officer Reddings that a grown man in a dress is staking out my car.”

It waited in the car.

But there was no need to hurry to class. They didn’t learn anything that day. Michael sat in the back, silently freaking out over his entire life, but Mrs. Greene was just standing in the front of the room waving a protractor around and ranting about triangles. Sure, she was an empathetic lady, but they had been talking about derivatives yesterday.

In English Mr. Landings just had everyone sit there and read King Lear from the book in eerie unison. They had been learning Jane Eyre.

“Musical logic,” Christine said grimly after class let out. Michael, who was deeply concerned about the Squid burning down his car because it didn’t like its attitude, met her at her locker and powerwalked with her towards his car. “The same thing happened when the alternate universe you and I got here. You could walk out of any class and nobody cared. Every answer on every test was just C. It drove me crazy but I think he was just happy not to do any work.”

“So you’re saying this is your fault,” Michael accused. “Our world is turning into nonsense logic because you two hole punched reality and Jeremy backflipped off the stage of life?”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

Well, that was ominous.

When they got closer they saw that Brooke was rapping on the window of his car, clearly screaming at an occupant. All of the other kids were giving them a wide berth, probably under the impression that she was having yet another uncomfortably public drama stuffed breakup, and Chloe was doing her definition of helping by standing next to her loudly narrating from her phone how to break into a car. When Michael and Christine jogged up they saw that Brooke was yelling obscenities at the Squid, which was reclining in the passenger chair, sipping a plastic 7-Eleven Big Gulp mug and flipping her off. Real tactful.

“ - and your Atari, and your Playstation, and your Sega Genesis, down to your fucking Wii U -”

“She’s been like this since Spanish,” Chloe said, bored. “They’ve been getting along great.”
“How dare you stick me in tin foil -”

The Squid dragged obnoxiously on its straw.

It was a sad day when Michael had to be the adult in the room. He carefully and deliberately peeled away Brooke from the car, questioning all of his alternate universe self’s friend making decisions, and deposited her next to her slightly saner counterpart. Michael knocked on the window and the Squid finally rolled the window down. It had stolen new sunglasses, and it cut a handsome figure in a sparkly kimono, gelled hair, sunglasses, and a 7-Eleven Big Gulp mug.

“Asshole, meet everyone. Everyone, meet asshole.”

The Squid sucked accusingly on the soda. “They knew who I was.”

“You’re a little distinctive.”

“You told your friends about me? How much did you say?”

Michael shuffled his feet, looking shifty. “Most...of it?”

“Fabulous.” The Squid leaned back, pushing up the sunglasses to pinch the bridge of its nose. The air was growing colder, November tugging at their surprisingly warm jumpsuits, and the wind was picking up. The day was cloudy but Michael felt a particular warm tickle at the back of his neck. Like a spotlight. “Next you’ll tell me that Fangirl spilled the beans on the nature of reality.”

It was Christine’s turn to look shifty. “Uh.”

“Seriously?” The Squid pushed the sunglasses down, incredulously looking over the rims at the alternatively pissed off and sheepish kids. “Haven’t you looked up the Dictionary.com definition of discretion? You’ll blow their tiny brains. Woman was not meant to debug the source code of the universe.”

“We wouldn’t have had to debug it if you hadn’t hacked it!”

“Ugh. Details.” The Squid rolled its eyes, pressing the sunglasses back up and reclining in the cheap vinyl seat. It pumped the seat backwards until it was almost touching the back seat. “Your reality is disintegrating because my ex-host shoved it into a paper shredder, and here you are wasting time insulting me. Just typical, guys. No need to be catty.”

The sheer irony of the Squid of all things calling him catty was unbelievable. Chloe crossed her arms, scowling at it. “Excuse me. Just because your ex-boyfriend broke up with you -”

“We were never dating!” The Squid cried. “We’re just obsessed with each other and locked in a perpetual intimate relationship from which neither of us could escape! Not the same thing!”

“What about when you kept on fondling him!”

The Squid shrugged, unrepentant. “It pissed Dickweed and Michael off.”

Michael pinched the bridge of his nose. Talk about speaking ill of the dead. “Jesus Christ.”

“See? That’s what he said.”

“Are we forgetting the part where reality is disintegrating?” Christine yelled. “Because I felt like we just skipped over that to talk about Jeremy’s love life instead.”
“Jeremy’s love life is reality,” the Squid pointed out.

The worst part was that it wasn’t even that wrong. “That’s it.” Michael unlocked the door and gently pushed Christine into the backseat. “I can’t exactly bring this thing back to our houses. Let’s meet up at the 7-Eleven, find a game plan, stash the robot, and try to figure out what the fuck we’re going to do.”

It always seemed like Jeremy’s only hobby was playing fast and loose with the fate of the world. It wasn’t his fault, because Jeremy was perfect and great, but as a supposed main character he had a lot of responsibility on his plate.

The last time he had been given responsibility was being appointed class leader in sixth grade, which Michael still mocked him over. It hadn’t been a good time for anybody, least of all the class hamster. None of this was ever supposed to happen.

Why did Christine and Dickweed, which was a really charming nickname, even have to show up? Whatever happened to Michael’s normal, everyday, lonely life? Everything started going to hell when they crashed into his life feet first. Michael barely even remembered the first few days when they supposedly showed up. Where had he been? Had he been gone, like Dickweed was gone?

But Chloe just nodded briskly, grabbing Brooke’s hand. Brooke was still practically foaming at the mouth with long pent-up hatred, but Chloe just patted her on the head. She must have Brooke whispering powers facilitated by their sexual tension. “We’ll take Brooke’s van and meet you there. Try not to drive into any interdimensional potholes.”

“I cannot guarantee that.”

“You,” Brooke hissed, jabbing her finger at the Squid as Chloe pulled her away. “Owe me a new outfit! That belt was Supreme, asshole!”

Michael slid into his seat and gunned the engine, ignoring the way Christine had to physically squeeze herself past the Squid’s reclined seat, and kicked the Squid’s feet off the dashboard. It was a terrible guest.

The drive to the 7-Eleven was long, silent, and awkward. Christine was physically vibrating in the back seat, chewing nonstop on her hoodie string, and Michael was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He fought the urge to turn the radio on, convinced that the Squid would only mock his taste in music. The Squid was experimentally sniffing its kimono, wrinkling its nose at the thick stench of ozone.

“You may be wondering why you’re in an alternate reality.” The Squid licked the sequins. “It’s a very long story.”

“Yes!” Christine screeched, making Michael wince and almost swerve lanes. “Yes I have! Are you finally going to fucking tell me!”

“By the time you finish monologuing I’ll already be disappearing Back to the Future style,” Michael said flatly. “Keep it in four sentences.”

“No! Full story!”

“Full story in four sentences!”

“Fuck you, I have questions!”
“I enjoy having limbs!”

“You didn’t win the sweepstakes,” the Squid said pleasantly, and everybody shut up. It propped its feet up on the dashboard, and Michael reflexively shoved them off. “Our actual target thought you were cute and gave them to you. The plan was to Squid - SQUIP - fuck it, Squid him, send him back to Fangirl’s reality, and infect their reality. Trojan horse.” It sucked on the Big Gulp. “See? Four sentences.”

It was a good thing they were at a stoplight, because Michael would have skidded to a halt anyway. His chest felt tight and constricted, and he found himself sucking in shallow breaths. From behind him Christine was having a full on miniature freakout.

“How do you know so much about this?” Michael asked faintly. It was deeply worrying how the Squids knew enough about alternate realities that they could influence and actively work to corrupt them. Was anywhere safe from them?

“I’m a quantum nanotechnology supercomputer. I can see all possible outcomes of all possible actions. Of course I know what alternate realities are.” It rolled its eyes. “Alternatively, if you’re Fangirl and insist on having paranoid delusions that you’re the only real person in this story, of course I know how to use fiction to influence reality. Fiction influences reality all the time. I’m just a little more proactive about it.”

“I don’t know whether or not to be offended or have an existential crisis.”

“Oh, don’t be such drama queens about it. It didn’t work.” The Squid shrugged, as if the fact that the only reason Christine’s reality hadn’t been taken over by evil robots is because some random Jeremy knock-off had a crush on Dickweed. “Except now Jeremy’s stuck in Fangirl’s world with a shoebox full of Squids. So I guess it worked a little!”

“I can’t believe my Jeremy was actually useful,” Christine confessed, still hyperventilating a little. “He actually, like, helped.”

“Jeremy helps all the time!” Michael protested. It had been his duty to stick up for Jeremy since the second grade. “He’s - uh, moral support.”

“This attitude is why he fucked off across realities, you know.”

“He’s not going to Squid our reality,” Christine said loudly. “Jeremy is heroic and a good main character and he would never LARP his most questionable choice in a long play of questionable choices.”

“Never underestimate Jeremy’s capability to make bad decisions.”

“You’re right, but you shouldn’t say it!”

“Hey, guys?” Michael asked weakly. “Aren’t we supposed to be there by now?”

They were turning the corner in front of the school, passing the cheery LED sign announcing that Mrs. Greene had won the Teacher of the Year award and how the date and time was 7/12, Now: Now. Everything felt different. It was like he was in a nightmare, where the streets and pavement were the same but you knew something was wrong. The world was unravelling and Michael was wide awake.

It figured that the second Michael had outpaced religion, science, and philosophy into understanding alternate dimensions and how their universe worked that the laws of physics would
be shot straight into hell. It’s almost as if the two were connected.

“I can’t believe I killed the world by opening my third eye,” Michael said out loud, which was quite possibly the coolest thing he had ever said.

“You just made a wrong turn,” Christine said shakily. It was clear she didn’t even believe herself. “Let’s just try again.”

Michael tried again as Christine and the Squid went back to relentlessly bickering about somebody named Joe Iconic and how the Squid was desecrating his good name. The Squid was insisting that college productions of the musical ruined its good name, then Christine started going on about the amateur purity of no budget settings, and by the time that they were furiously debating the merits of Dear Evan Hansen Michael had already looped past 7-Eleven and to the school three times.

He gave up. He drove the car back into the parking lot, parking it much closer to the front door, and thunked his head on the steering wheel. The parking lot was empty, the front of the school deserted, and Michael knew that something wasn’t right.

“Guys?” Michael asked. Christine was pushing against the Squid’s seat in indignant rage. “How many locations appear in the musical?”


“It’s a low budget production,” the Squid said glumly, trying to reach back to pull Christine’s hair. “Indie, you know.”

“I don’t think the 7-Eleven exists.” Michael kneaded his eyebrow. “Okay, everyone out. Let’s try this again. Let’s - let’s jump off the stage until we find Dickweed and Fangirl’s lifeless husk of a body.”

“When you put it like that,” the Squid said, chewing on its Big Gulp straw, “it sounds kind of morbid.”

Sure enough, Brooke and Chloe hadn’t had any luck either. Michael hadn’t realized how worried he had been about them until seeing their bitchy little expressions sent a crash of relief throughout his body. They hadn’t disappeared. They weren’t play characters. They were just themselves, Brooke and Chloe, his friends. His, like, third and fifth friends. If you counted Rich as a friend. Maybe third and fourth.

He numbly watched Christine hug Chloe as Brooke tried to stomp on the Squid’s boot, and tried not to think about how this was all his fault. If he hadn’t been such a dick to Jeremy than he would have never jumped through the curtains of the universe. If he hadn’t teamed up with the Squid and betrayed Jeremy than this wouldn’t have happened. If he hadn’t been such a freaking moron and gotten himself drunk than he never would have assaulted him. If, if, if -

“So what do we do?” Chloe asked, hugging herself and looking around the front of the school. It was a ghost town. The sidewalks were empty, and the lights in the bank across the street from them were out. Nobody was home. “Would stabbing the Squid help? I think it would help.”

“It would definitely not help,” the Squid said quickly. “Killing the star of the musical is a horrible idea. 0/10 do not recommend.”

But Michael couldn’t stop staring at his hand, terrified that it was going to start pulling a Back to the Future and disappear. Like Dickweed did.
Had he known what was happening? Had he been scared? Or had that been the problem in the first place, that he had been too scared to live and too scared to care.

He had been just another guy, faults and all. He hadn’t deserved what happened to him.

Their conversation was probably important, but he couldn’t focus for the life of him. What would happen if their universe really did shrink into four locations, eleven actors, and some weird costuming and shitty props?

Michael himself would probably fine. Dickweed would never be back. He’d be lost forever. And Christine… Fangirl…

“What if we can’t find him?” Michael asked out loud, barely even aware that he had stopped the conversation dead. “What happens to us? What happens to Christine?”

They all glanced at the Squid and Christine, who looked alternatively unimpressed and scared.

“The two realities have already begun melding,” the Squid said evasively. “If Jeremy continues poking holes through the rice paper of space-time everything’s going to return to exactly how it should be.” It eyed Christine significantly. “And everyone who is somewhere they don’t belong will be reprogrammed to conform.”

That was a complete non-explanation. Michael, Brooke, and Chloe shot each other confused looks, but Christine went white.

“Everything goes back to normal.” Christine twisted her fingers, wringing her hands out. “I won’t wake up, will I?”

The Squid shrugged. “You’d probably end up like Dickweed here. For what it’s worth, I don’t regret lobotomizing him. Kid was annoying.”

“You did what?” Michael screeched. “Since when? Were you the one who -”

The Squid waved a hand dismissively. “Relax, it was happening anyway. You were confusing the universe. I was doing you a favor.” It paused a beat. “Well, I was doing myself a favor.”

They didn’t have time for this. “We have to find Jeremy. Now.”

The girls nodded briskly and set off at the auditorium at a run. The Squid, who was apparently far too much of a fake adult to run, tucked its hands in its sleeves and watched. Michael, who was far too depressed to save the world, hung next to him and watched too.

“You can’t go if you haven’t been,” the Squid said cryptically.

Never mind how Jeremy had managed it. He was the main character, the master of the song, and if Michael knew one thing he knew that the power of love and friendship could do anything. At least, he thought it did.

“Christine’s his actual love interest.” He had stolen the production from her. That must have been the work of Dickweed - Michael never took on extra credit if he could help it. “She’s been to the other side. She remembers it. She should do it.”

“She’s not the one he needs right now,” the Squid said, equally cryptically, and swept away in a swirl of glitter and cultural appropriation.

Michael didn’t know what to do, so he did what he did best and escaped.
He knew the others were in the auditorium, so he didn’t go. He found the ultra generic hallway instead, the same one that had melted and shifted to include everything in the school. It didn’t have the door to backstage anymore, but he could still see the bulletin board where the sign up sheet used to hang. He had a strange, half-remembered impression of singing in the hallway too.

Feeling a little like a moron, made worse by the fact that his hair was still gelled and he was still in a jumpsuit, Michael twisted a little half-jig. Horrendously, he started singing a small song under his breath. He didn’t remember the words until he sung them, like a half-remembered prayer from long ago.

“The roll is Negimaki and I’m feelin’ kinda cocky cuz the girl at Sev’ Elev’ gave me a generous pour!”

He stopped, feeling really stupid. There was another step to this, probably his special handshake with Jeremy and Jeremy bouncing off him like he always did. He sucked in a quiet breath.

“Oh, I’m listening to Marley and the groove is hella gnarly, and we’re almost at the end of the song!” Clap, clap clap. Michael twirled. “That was the end, now tell me friend. How was class, you look like ass, what’s wrong?”

His voice rang in the empty hallway, and nobody answered.

He cleared his throat. “I’m a creeper in the bathroom, cuz my buddy kinda left me alone. And I’d rather fake pee than stand awkwardly…” his voice trailed off, embarrassed again. He took a breath and started another time. “Everything felt fine when I was half of a pair. Now through no fault of mine…there’s no other half there…”

That had been the problem. It had been his fault. He should have been a better friend. Even before Dickweed stomped in and started kicking his life upside down Michael had always been a pretty crappy friend. Maybe if he had just been more supportive, more there for him, then he would have never taken the dumb pill in the first place.

No. Dammit! Michael twirled again, heart tearing in rapidly mounting desperation. This time he was practically crying it out, as if Jeremy could hear him. “Dude you are cooler than a vintage cassette. Even if I hadn’t known that yet!” Jazz hands? Had there been jazz hands? “You’re just a nothing in this high school scheme, but it’s no big cuz you and I are a team.”

No, that was wrong. That had been a little delegitimizing. Fuck. Michael didn’t know what to say.

The first clear memory he had in ages was when they were singing ‘Guy That I’d Kinda Be Into.’ They had shared something. Granted, it had been through Christine pushing them together, but Michael had come to a revelation then. What had that been?

“And why am I singing this to you?” Michael asked plaintively. “Guess there’s a part of me that wants to.”

He could hear it now: the faint chorus, the steady waltz, Jeremy’s hand on his. Michael stepped a little forward, a little back, in half-hearted mimicry. “I guess a part of me likes to game with you, who knew? I guess a part of me likes to sing with you, who knew? I guess a part of me -”

Which part?

“I know that it’s weird,” Michael sung softly, “but it’s totally true. A guy that I’d kinda be into...a guy that I’d kinda be into…”
Something was battening down the hatches of his mind, but he didn’t know what it was.

Michael sat down, curling up against the wall. He slid his phone out of his pocket, worry tearing away scraps of his heart, and he silently dialed a number. It rang four times before someone picked up.

“Hi Michael. When are you coming home?”

Michael pressed a hand to his mouth, fighting the sudden swelling of tears in his throat. He felt his defenses crumple. “Soon,” he croaked. “Real soon. I just wanted to say hi. Make sure you were okay.”

“I promise I’m doing just fine.” The line crackled. His mother may have been shifting the phone to her other ear. Michael wondered what she was doing. Was she buying groceries? Finishing some last minute paperwork? If nothing beyond this school existed, then how was she even real? If the universe reset, had whittled itself down to nothing, would she even exist? Michael loved his mom. He liked it when she existed. “Michael, honey? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Mom.” Michael rubbed at his eyes. “I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Dickweed had parents. Parents who might look just like his mom and dad. Fangirl had parents. They would have no idea what happened to their kids. All they would know is that they never woke up. 

“What do you want for dinner tonight? I’m thinking of making curry. I’ve been having these massive cravings lately like you wouldn’t believe. Menopause is worse than pregnancy, and don’t let anybody tell you differently.”

“I hate curry,” Michael said weakly.

“Suck it up. On a scale of quite a bit of garlic to a shitton of garlic, how much garlic do you want?”

“I don’t like garlic either.”

“You’re a very whiny child. I should trade you in. Find a better model that doesn’t complain about my cooking.”

“I love you,” Michael said quietly. “I really, really love you.”

“Miss me with that feelings shit,” his mom said reflexively. Thanks, Mom. “I love you too, sweetie. Tell me, do you think that I can poison your father with this much garlic? He’s been playing the futbol games too loudly.”

“I gotta go. Bye.”

“Bye!” But she was distracted, only half listening. Grocery shopping, probably staring at aisles of garlic in the store that no longer existed. Or maybe it did. Michael was really confused. “See you later, honey!”

“Yeah,” Michael said, “see you later.”

He hung up the phone.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, legs curled up to his chest and forehead resting on his kneecaps. He tried to focus on his breathing and not think about anything, but that was an awful lot
of effort when thinking about the million ways he sucked was so much easier.

When the door opened he barely heard it. Soft footsteps clicked against the cement floor, the new pair of evil tin foil jackboots cutting a menacing echo. But the steps were light and hesitant, and Michael didn’t need to look up to understand that it was just Christine.

She squatted down next to him, and Michael saw her gym shorts hike up over her kneecaps. He just drew in tighter, fully awake that he was pulling a patented Michael Mell sulking session.

Soft piano began tinkling.


“We are not doing this,” Michael said into his knees. “Nope.”

“It’s trouble that he can’t see,” Christine sung, high and sweet and bubbly. “And we gotta help him somehow.”

“I completely refuse to do this.”


“Leave me alone.”

It had been a long time since he heard her sing. He had kind of stolen ‘Guy That I’d Kinda Be Into’ from her, and besides that silly play rehearsal ditty she hadn’t really had her time in the spotlight. But Michael suspected that Fangirl wasn’t really the kind to like the spotlight anyway.

“He needs friends so strong,” she sung, clear and bright, sweet and utterly Christine. “To -”

“Fangirl. Shut up.” The music faded away a little, and Michael abruptly felt like a dick. “I mean, alternate universe Christine. This isn’t going to work. Stop forcing it. I’ll...I’ll be there in a second. The Pants Song is inapplicable and stupid and - and it doesn’t matter how I feel.”

Christine was silent, picking a little at the hem of her shorts. Michael tried not to feel like an asshole, but failed.

Then the plinking piano music started up again, the same rhythm as the beginning, and she went back to fucking singing.

“Reality is dissolving ‘round us right now.” This was a new one. Michael looked up at her, and he saw that she was sitting with her legs tucked up under her chin too. Her hair was sticking up at odd angles from where she had half-heartedly tried to wash the gel out, and there were thick bags under her eyes. She looked like Christine, but somehow you could never mistake them. Fangirl was tougher than that. Her expression was wistful and far away, and Michael realized that she had a lot more to lose than he did. “We will cease to be if we can’t help Jeremy somehow.” She looked at him, smiling slightly through her sadness. “I don’t know what he wants, but I know what he needs. He’ll need us to be strong.”

“Fangirl, I’m shit at that.”

“He’ll need us to be strong -”

“I’m shit at that!” Michael slammed the back of his fist against the wall. “Dickweed was strong
and brave and all that shit. I’m just regular old Michael Mell. I’m - I’m not a universe hopper. I’m
not an athlete. I’m just a loser. I always have been.”

Christine reached out and gently took his hand, squeezing the tender skin. “We can’t let ourselves
slip away.” Too late for that. The plinking piano was cute and sweet, but underneath Christine’s
trademark adorableness it held the subtle push of urgency and need that characterized Fangirl so
well. “Things haven’t been right for so long, but we need to help save the day.” She took a deep
breath, and Michael wondered if she was coming up with all of this on the fly. “I know you’re
trying to cope, but you can’t be a misanthrope. We’re going to push through, but for that we need
you.”

“You don’t get it.” Michael shook his hand away, intending on protesting, hoping he could just
walk away, but when he opened his mouth again he found his own baritone matching Christine’s in
harmony. “I’m not what he wants.”

“But you’re just what he needs!” She leaned over, eyes alight, not desperate but not giving an inch.
“And this might be hard I know, but just suck it up and go!”

She didn’t get it. Jeremy didn’t need Michael. Jeremy needed the person who had made those
decisions that hurt him so badly. Jeremy needed someone who didn’t whine or mope or come from
his own universe.

Jeremy needed someone who could cross over to get him back. And Jeremy needed someone to
come back to.

You can’t go if you haven’t been. Christine wasn’t the one who he needed right now.

As usual, the song understood before Michael did, but once he sang the words it rung clear and true
within him like a bell.

“The situation is grave,” Michael sang slowly, eyes widening. “But it’s time to be brave.” He
scrambled upwards, giving Christine a hand to help her up, and felt his spirits rise. “I’m gonna
finally take that dive, it’s time for me to strive!”

“When you love somebody,” Michael and Christine sang in tandem, kicking their feet and
executing a perfect twist in sync. It was the first time he had said it, and in that second Michael
wanted to say it for the rest of his life. He wanted to say it to Jeremy, he wanted to chase him down
and make him stay, he wanted to admit it to himself. “You embrace your past!”

Then Christine stumbled, making Michael catch her and keep her upright. The music faded into a
soft murmur. “What? Michael, what are you talking about?”

He couldn’t help but laugh. He squeezed her hand, and before he could think better of it he leaned
down and kissed her forehead. It was a little sweaty, but it was Christine.

He didn’t know if he was going to come back from this.

“The situation is grave,” he sung softly, only to Christine. “But it’s time to be brave.”

Her eyes were wide, and she tugged insistently on his hands. “Michael? Michael, what are you
going to do?”

“The situation is grave,” Michael repeated to himself. “But it’s time to be brave.”

Bravery. That was a new one.
Michael screwed his eyes shut, reached deep into his heart, and yelled,

“When you love somebody - !”

“I want you to have it.”

Michael sucked at his lollipop, shooting the ticket a skeptical look. He popped the lollipop out of his mouth. “What? Are you serious?”

The boy nodded to the corner of the room, where a small girl in a big grey hoodie was bent over a sketchbook as she clutched an identical ticket, practically bouncing in her seat. “She got one too.”

Fabulous. Michael leaned back in his chair, balancing it on two legs. His close cropped hair brushed Christian’s Jordans, and he fought to pay attention to the dweeby kid over the sound of his friends hooting with laughter.

“I hear it’s really good,” the boy said eagerly. “It really talks about the human condition, you know? What it means to be people?”

“Nifty,” Michael said, who had never been a person in his entire life and had no desire to start now. “Sounds like fun.”

Noah beamed.

Michael didn’t realize that he had fallen asleep in the theater until he found himself holding a slushie in one hand, a gross package of sushi in the other, and singing in a high school hallway.

He opened his mouth and sang -

“Is it just me?” Michael asked, craning his neck. “Or did that doorman kind of look like Keanu Reeves?”

But the girl wasn’t listening. She was bouncing like a rabbit towards their seats, picking her way across the aisle and ducking through the stairs until they slid into the very first row. Michael checked their ticks. A10, A11. Right in the middle. Best seats in the house.

Michael looked down at his creased playbill, unfolding it a little. The usher who had given them the playbill looked a little like Keanu Reeves too, come to think of it. He flipped through it absently, angling it upwards so he could read it in the dim theater lighting. Funny abstract art, check. Advertisements for Hamlet, check. Little descriptions of all of the actors, check. One of them looked a little like -
He looked down at himself, at his jersey and basketball shorts. No, not really.

“I’m missing the game for this,” Michael muttered quietly. “At least it’s only two hours.”

“I’m so excited!” She gushed, holding the playbill to her chest and kicking her legs. “This is going to be the best day of my life!”

Jeremy’s pulse sang underneath Michael’s wrist, and an indescribable feeling rose in his stomach. It felt like a song, it felt like a dance and it felt like freefall, and it felt a little like Michael was flying as he was brought to rest for the first time since Maria died. “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to.” He laughed, light and quick and desperate. “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to, who knew?”

“Come back soon,” his mother said, as he closed the door behind him. “I love you.”

In his dreams the door was always closed -

Michael clapped politely as the man walked on stage.

He quickly turned off his phone, letting the text message from his father (“Buy some milk”) cut to black as he stuffed it in his pocket. The girl sitting next to him had somewhat calmed down, but she was still sparkling. She was chewing on her hoodie string. Gross.

Michael leaned over, hissing under his breath. “Dude, calm down. You’re embarrassing me.”

The girl flushed and sat back in her chair, letting the string drop out of her mouth. “Sorry.”

A flash of shame quickly cut into his stomach, but the man on stage had begun to speak and he had no time to apologize. Michael settled back in his chair, kicking his legs out and wiggling in his seat to get comfortable. Say what else you like, the seats were pretty comfortable. Great for snoozing.

The man cleared his throat, adjusted his microphone, and addressed the audience. It wasn’t until Michael looked around that he saw it was an audience of two.

Something cold crept down his neck. What was going on here?

“They say a dream takes only a second or so, and yet in that second a man can live a lifetime.” The man even sounded like Keanu Reeves, husky and rich, and Michael was unembarrassed to say he was extremely hot. It almost distracted him from the fact that he was reciting a line from the Twilight Zone. “He can suffer and die, or he can live and thrive. Who’s to say which is the greater reality: the one we know or the one in dreams; between heaven in the sky, or the earth in the theater. Welcome to...Be More Chill!”

The lights dimmed, and the play began.
Michael fell asleep soon after.

*He dreamt that he was opening the door to the hospital room.*

He saw his hand reaching out in front of him and marvelled at how different it was, how it wasn’t the hand he had grasped and held and danced with for the last two months. It was a little chubby but a little muscular, pock marked by hair and acne scars. How similar it was. How it was his and not his, fact and fiction.

He saw it open the door, saw the door gently creak open to find them inside.

“- a real dumbass!”

Laughter. He heard their laughter before he saw them, a teenage boy hunched over in a hospital chair holding the hand of a little girl. About twelve or thirteen, she had rich and cascading brown hair that fell over her shoulders and a strong, distinctive nose. There were no bandages, no IV lines or drips. The hospital machines crowded around the bed were silent, dim and useless, pushed aside. She was laughing, white baby teeth flashing in the soft sunlight streaming in from a large window.

“And then I told him - look, it’s not going to kill you. What’s some expired sushi between friends, huh?”

The girl giggled, pressing her hands to her mouth. “What did he say then?”

The teenage boy, who looked so much like him and yet didn’t, pushed his glasses higher up on his nose and laughed. “ ‘I don’t know, Michael’ “, he said, in a startlingly good impression of Jeremy’s slightly squeaky voice. “ ‘You don’t have any brain cells to lose!’ I got my revenge, though.” He snickered, leaning in conspiratorially and speaking behind his hand. The girl’s eyes widened and leaned in too. “Next time he asked me for some weed I gave him oregano.”

The girl laughed again, bent over giggling. There were some bandages slung over a night stand. They were blood stained. “You’re so funny, Michael! Do you know where my cousin is?”

“I don’t know,” Michael said wryly. “Why don’t you ask him?”

Maria turned and saw him for the first time, and her mouth dropped open. She threw the covers aside and scrambled out of bed, her preteen limbs gangly and awkward, and she flew forward to hug him tightly around the waist. She was so small. She had always been taller than him. They used to be mistaken for twins, but Michael had grown up and she had not, and now the only person Michael looked like was half-found in the mirror, only ever out of the corner of his eye.

Michael had wanted to be stronger, he had wanted to be braver, but he had never been strong when it came to her. He broke into tears immediately, bending double over her, and crouched down so he could hug her around the waist and press his head over her shoulder. He cried into her downy soft hair, safe and warm.

Michael, the other Michael, slowly walked over and leaned against the bed. He smiled down at them, soft and fond. “This is an old wound,” he said. “But it never quite healed, did it?”
“No,” Michael said softly, breathing in and smelling the harsh tang of hospital antiseptic. “I never let it. It hurt too much and nobody cared. I would have done anything not to feel that way. I didn’t want to process it. I just wanted it to go away.”

“You and Jeremy have that in common,” Michael said lightly, and Michael realized for the first time that he was right. They had both been looking for the easy way out, and they had ruined themselves just for that quick fix four years in the making. “That’s why you can help him.”

“I know,” Michael gasped. Maria was so small and light. It was a miracle how small she was, how he could pick her up and swing her around and bury his face in her hair and cry. She was his miracle. “I wasn’t trying to be a coward. I just trying to protect myself. But the tighter I drew up the harder everything seemed to hit. I had to hide.”

“We have that in common too.” Michael reached down and took Michael’s hand, helping lift him up. He smiled sheepishly at him, small but real, and let Michael hurriedly wipe his eyes and sniff. He was too old to cry. He released his hand and held his fist out for a fistbump, which Michael cautiously reciprocated. Maria was clinging to his shirt. “Take care of them, dude. I’m trusting you with the love of my life here.” He paused a beat before smiling down at Maria. “Not counting my best girl, of course.”

“Finish that story you were telling earlier,” Maria begged. “The one with the robot and the nerd!”

“Oh yeah,” Maria said immediately. “No sweat. Come on, hit me!”

“If you say so.” Michael grinned, straightening up and making a show of clearing his throat. “It starts out with a song, so you gotta sing with me. It starts out a little weird, but it gets pretty crazy later in. There’s a girl who loves making funny noises with her mouth, just like you.” Maria obligingly made a fantastic farting noise with her cheeks puffed out, and Michael laughed. “Just like that. There’s another girl who’s super sweet, but I like to imagine her with a six pack. There’s a girl who’s hilariously bitchy, a guy who’s four foot five of pure rage, and a totally dopey but sweet jock. Don’t worry, there’s tons of singing.”

“Just like in Tangled?” Maria asked, eyes wide.

“How the hell can you not know that song?” Michael asked tonelessly.

“Just like in Tangled,” Michael promised. “Now, repeat after me. I warned you, it’s raunchy!”

“I can take it!” Maria insisted. She tugged on Michael’s hand, his own hand. “Primo, come on. Sing with us.”

“You know,” Michael himself said slowly, “maybe I will.”

The other Michael winked. “That’s the spirit.” He straightened up and took a comically deep breath. Maria followed suit, cheeks bulging, and Michael couldn’t help but follow suit. “Now - I’m waiting for my porno to load!”

“I’m waiting for my porno to load!” Maria cried, cracking up in the middle with giggles. For a twelve year old girl, porn was the filthiest word she had ever heard and it was hilarious.

“I’m waiting for my porno to load!” Michael sang, loud and true, and it was everything it was supposed to be. It was everything it was and nothing more, and although Michael was still crying it
didn’t hurt.

He hadn’t cried about this in years. He had been too afraid that it would hurt.

Michael cried, and cried and cried, until it felt as if his heart had been torn out. He cried until everything that had been holding him back was washed away, as if there was no time limit on grief, as if there was no excuse keeping him from sadness. He cried like exhaling.

When he wiped his eyes and sniffled he saw that the two other kids were gone. The hospital bed was empty, sheets crisp and unruffled, machines lined up like tombstones. There were no chairs beside the bed. Michael, as ever, was alone.

He softly slid off the bed, careful not to rumple the fabric. He wiped his eyes with his hoodie, stuffed his glasses back in his pocket, and took a deep breath. Time to go make sure Jeremy hadn’t done anything stupid again. Or at least help him with whatever off the wall plot he had cooked up this time.

Michael hummed quietly to himself as he wiped his face.

“When you love somebody,” he sang softly under his breath, “you see it til the end.”

He opened the hospital door, and for the first time he closed it behind him, turning off the lights as he went.

“I can’t believe it,” Michael whispered.

Christine squealed. “We’re in Be More Chill!”

Michael broke for air.

Christine fell back, hand clamped over her mouth, eyes wide. She looked a little ridiculous, with her gym shorts hiked up and her hair clumped in strange blobs from the metaphysical hair gel. Her cheeks were ruddy, almost as if she had been crying. When Michael lifted a hand to his cheeks he found that they were wet. Her shirt had a giant turtle stitched on it, and Michael found in his heart a fierce and desperate wish to know her name.

“Son of a bitch!” Michael cried. It wasn’t until he sat bolt upright that Michael realized he had been lying down. He over balanced a little, head woozy, and Christine quickly and gently put a hand on his back to steady him before snatching it away again. “That son of a bitch did it!”

“Michael?” Christine cried, somewhat hysterically. “What happened? We were singing and it was nice but then you collapsed and that I didn’t remember that happening in the Pants Song, and I’m pretty sure I would know, so then I thought you might be dead or something, or you were going to disappear like in Back to the Future, only you didn’t -”

“I’m going to kill that bastard!” Michael scrambled upright, leaving Christine to hurriedly copy him. He smashed a fist into an open palm, leaving her to gape open mouthed at him. “I try to do one good deed and it freaking lobotomizes me! I’m going to give that smarmy CPU a piece of my fucking mind, see if I don’t! That asshole!”
“Wait, it really lobotomized you? Like, seriously?”

“I got better!” Michael couldn’t help it - he laughed. He felt light and free, like weights on his legs had just been lifted and he could jump to the moon. He felt unburdened. He felt as if he had a supreme magical destiny to save the universe, and that they actually had a chance. “Christine, I have a fantastic fucking idea, but you’re the only one who could do it. We’re relying on you!” He laughed again, and before he could think better of it he picked Christine up and spun her around, leaving her to squeal in surprise. “Oh, you were so amazing! You’ve just fantastic, Christine! Forget everything I’ve ever said about you literally ever, I didn’t mean it. Well, I meant it at the time, but I don’t now. You’re fantastic and - and wonderful! You’re awesome! I left you alone and I’m so fucking sorry, but you took the shittiest situation and you became a total badass about it! You’re incredible!”

Christine was completely red in the face, straightening her shirt from where it had rumpled when Michael had pulled a rocking ballet move. “Thanks? I guess? Listen, Michael, we’ve been jumping off the stage for ages but nothing’s working. The entire school is deserted, and Rich and Jake showed up out of nowhere saying that they just walked out of the hospital and ended up here, and we’re all wigging out big time. We seriously need you to -”

“I am so totally here for whatever we have to do, I am in this to win this. Michael Mell is here to kick ass, take names, and I don’t know my own name!”

“Don’t worry about him,” Christine said, distracted. “Just focus on you. We’re thinking that maybe if you, me, and the Squid talk really intently about our feelings, maybe Jeremy could hear us through the void -”

“I totally learned to stay true to myself through watching myself die -”

“Right now I’m more worried about me dying -”

“It’s me!” Michael cried, drawing her up short. “It’s really me! I’m sorry I left you behind, but I came back and - and I realized some shit about myself! I crossed the River Styx and came out swinging!”

Christine faltered, opening her mouth and then closing it. She didn’t believe it. She didn’t want to believe it. She couldn’t believe it. Whichever one it was Michael didn’t know, but all he knew was that he felt like Scrooge at the end of the Muppet Christmas Carol. A new lease on life.

“What’s the name of our English teacher,” Christine finally asked, as practical as ever. “Our real one.”

“Mr. Porter,” Michael answered proudly. Guy used to throw pencils at him whenever he fell asleep in class.

Christine’s eyes widened. “Your placement in the last race.”

“Second, behind Matthew Gardner.” Michael scowled. “That asshole definitely dopes up.” Christine started to speak again but he beat her to it, eager to admit everything, eager to be understood. “The theater was really super sketchy and there was nobody else in it, which I kind of interpreted to mean that the musical was shitty. All of the employees kind of looked like Keanu Reeves, including that one concessions guy who judged me when I tried to order Raisinets and made comments about my weight. You were losing your little shit and I told you to cut it out.” Michael winced. “I’m so sorry. I was being a dick. My first reaction to seeing someone having fun shouldn’t be to make fun of them. I’ve been nothing but awful to you, and -”
He was cut off by a sudden and excessive collision with the tiny girl, knocking the breath out of his
lungs and almost sending him to the floor. She squeezed the life out of him, which Michael had only just gotten back and would like to keep, but he couldn’t stop himself from wrapping his arms around her and squeezing her too. He was hit with a vivid sense memory of the downy scent of a little girl’s hair, but the memory was gone before he could hold onto it.

That was okay. Back at his home in Christine’s world - in his world - they had some pictures of her locked up in a scrapbook somewhere. He could take a picture of one and put it on his phone. That might be nice.

“I thought you were gone!”

“Well, you know what they say about assumptions.” Michael creaked as Christine did her best to
decimate his ribs. “They make an ass out of you and - ow, my spine.”

“Sorry!” It wasn’t until they seperated and Christine quickly patted down her hair that Michael realized Christine genuinely, honestly looked happy and relieved. He hadn’t noticed the constant undercurrent of tension until it was relieved, if only for a little while, by knowing that she wasn’t going at this alone anymore. “Michael, I - I’ve forgotten about all of that. You’re my friend now. I’m just so happy you’re okay.”

“You know,” Michael said dizzily, “for the first time in a long time, I’m happy I’m okay too. It feels nice.” They smiled at each other, simple and sweet, and Michael realized that this feeling was nice too. “Thanks for singing at me.”

“You started it,” she said weakly. Her adorable, happy little face was quickly twisted into deviousness. “I wasn’t the one singing Michael in the Bathroom.”

Fuck. Oh, god, she was going to lord this over him forever. Michael groaned. “Don’t even bring it up. Shut up. That never happened.”

Like a shark smelling blood in the water, Christine sensed his weakness and ruthlessly exploited it. “Can you give me an encore? Come on, sing it with me - I’d rather fake pee than stand awkwardly, and pretend to check a text on my phone!”

“Shut up!”

“Michael in the bathroom! Michael in the bathroom!” Christine clapped her hands. “At a party! I half-regret the beers!”

“I was having an existential crisis. Don’t you dare mock me.”

“I had spent that entire party wrangling this cast of nut jobs, how do you think I felt?” She hugged him tightly again, as if she had to keep convincing herself that he was really there. “Do you still believe in that alternate reality BS? It’s obvious that this is just a fictional musical, right? Like, right?”

“The last week’s a little fuzzy for me,” Michael said weakly. “Can we save the metaphysics for when I didn’t just merge with my alternate reality self? Because right now it feels like I just had, like, five cups of coffee.”

Christine’s eyes widened. “So you’re still Michael,” she said slowly, “just with your memories? Or you’re just you, but with Michael’s memories?”

“Yes to both.” Close enough, anyway. “Now come on. I didn’t go through all of that effort getting
my memories back just to forget them in a few hours. We gotta hurry if we don’t want to get brainwashed by the fabric of reality.”

They hurried.

Michael’s head was swimming with a thousand new inputs and a thousand outputs. It felt like a light had been shined on himself, illuminating his circuits and wires. He had spent the last few days off-kilter, unable to even understand his own decisions, and Michael hadn’t realized how much it had been tearing at him psychologically. No wonder he had been so stressed out lately. Besides the obvious reasons, such as the possible death and brain washing and singing.

The damage had been so bad even the regular, vanilla play Michael could see it. They were speed walking through identical hallway after identical hallway, turning each corner only to find the same stubborn billboard and double doors leading to the cafeteria. Every hallway was the entrance, and every exit was just around the corner. At this rate they were going to get trapped.

“Wow,” Michael muttered darkly. “Super didn’t miss this.”

“You’re sounding like you again!” Christine encouraged. “Keep bitching, it’s good for you!”

“Jesus Christ.”

At which point Christine low key broke out into tears, embarrassing Michael immensely. The sheer fact that his bitchiness was nostalgic told Michael way more about himself than he ever wanted to know. Michael had been learning more than he ever wanted to know about himself a lot lately. It hurt like a bitch but it was a good pain, like an exhalation. Like a release.

They passed by a familiar courtyard, light streaming in through wide windows as a half-remembered strain of music wound its way through a memory. Rich had stood there, thumbs jammed into his belt loops, gyrating his hips as he sung a capella a warning that had come far too late. The ghost of a dance lingered in the courtyard, a final resolution, as Michael and Jeremy took their Upgrades.

Michael grabbed Christine’s hand and skidded to a halt in front of the theater room. He quickly tested the door to find it unlocked and pulled her inside, thankful that the location had showed up a total of twice in the play and was relatively untouched.

“Look, I’m not as obsessed with play rehearsal as I kept pretending, and this really isn’t the time -”

He ignored her, navigating the strewn backpacks and awkwardly placed posters to find the costume and prop closet. He almost tripped over a random cloud of loosely arranged chairs - learn set design, assholes! - and wrenched open the closet. “Help me carry this stuff out. Come on, hurry!”

The closet was bigger than he remembered, and far more well stocked. For an indie production, they sure had some pretty cool costumes. Michael recognized the bizarre uniforms of the NPCs hanging on a clothes rack, and quickly began yanking down Chloe and Brooke’s favorite accessories, Brooke’s trademark oversized sweater and Chloe’s geometric print jacket. On the top shelf he found a plastic slushie cup complete with well gnawed straw leaning against one of his game controllers, and a nostalgic pang in his heart prompted him to add them to the pile. They would probably come in handy.

When he looked closer, every article of clothing or prop in the closet was familiar. A familiar rolling bathtub was pressed against the far wall, a folded up cot stuck inside it, and Michael
quickly dumped the outfits in the bathtub and began rolling it out. He grabbed any prop he could find that looked promising: a potted plant, a bottle of Mountain Dew, a full sink. Did Christine say that Rich and Jake had magically turned up? Good. They were going to need everybody for this one.

“Do we know where Jenna is?” Michael asked, distracted with stuffing as many cell phones in his pockets as usual. He found a shirt - a woman’s shirt - that was only distantly familiar, but he stuffed it in the bathtub anyway. When he rolled the bathtub out of the closet he saw Christine hovering near the door, looking at him like he was a crazy person. Which, fair.

“We haven’t been able to get into contact with anybody. Why?”

“We need Mr. Reyes too.” Michael thought furiously back those first few days, now that he could actually remember them, and he realized that there had only ever been one real adult back then. Man, the good old days. “Never mind, we can just double up. They did that in Hamilton, right? We’re good.” He ducked back into the closet, picking up two chairs and hoisting them out. “I’m kinda super uncomfortable with the Squid playing Jeremy’s dad, but those two have to work out whatever those two have to work out.”

“What the fuck are you - oh shit.” Christine finally caught on, eyes widening. “You’re insane. No way this’ll work.”

“I know Jeremy better than anyone else alive.” Michael reached on his tip toes and withdrew two heavy, dusty items from the top shelf. He blew the dust off them, slinging one of them over his shoulder and tucking the other under his arm. BOYF and RIENDS. He couldn’t help but smile a little as he hugged his old backpack. He had ditched this thing pretty quick. Something about lame-ass props. “You know what his problem always was?”

“I thought I did.” Christine unfolded the cot and dragged it out too, stacking the familiar bean bags on top of it. Michael’s forehead ached in memoriam. “Guessing Jeremy’s character motivations was always like trying to see who killed JFK.”

“Jeremy’s been waiting his entire life for people to just know he exists.” Michael took a deep breath, rubbing his hands. He had never even seen this stupid musical. He didn’t know why he was supposedly the only one qualified to do this. Maybe it was because he was the only one who didn’t stop until he got what he wanted. “You know how much it fucks you up when your own parents don’t care about you? When nobody knows who you really are?”

“Or when everybody has the wrong idea.” Christine found a small box full of sunglasses, shaking them gently, before thinking better of it and putting them back on the shelf. He would probably get back to repressing his guilt over being a shitty person in a few hours, but for the time being he winced sympathetically. “He has no idea how many people know he exists. He has no idea how many people care about him.” How much he cared about him. Michael carefully slotted the two backpacks into an empty nook in the bathtub. He never should have ditched it. “Let’s show him how many people know his name.”

And save the fabric of reality, which quite frankly Michael cared about a bit more than assuaging Jeremy’s hurt feelings, but Jeremy’s feelings were the crux of the universe and Michael should probably stop being a dick about them any second now. The guilt was powerful, but not that powerful.

On a hunch, Michael bent down and flipped open one of the backpacks. There was a two liter bottle of Mountain Dew Red nestled inside. Of course.
Christine exited the closet carrying a small bundle in her arms, kicking the door shut behind her. Michael cleared a small path through the classroom to wheel the bathtub and bed out, and when he peeked out the front door he found the door to the auditorium straight across the hallway. He interpreted that as the universe’s thumbs-up of his stupid plan.

She was holding her own costume, a Christine Canigula special with a cute sundress and jean jacket. She carefully placed it on top of the pile on the cot, only to turn to Michael and pour a large, heavy mound of fabric into his arms.

It smelled a lot like weed, and a little like a dusty closet. Michael quietly shook it out, holding it up to the light to see the patches, stains, and moth eaten hem. It seriously looked as if it had seen better days. Probably still sulky it had been abandoned.

“Sorry,” he said, “but not even for the fate of the universe.”

When Michael was thirteen he started shoplifting.

Not really anything big. Those impulse candies at grocery stores, the one dollar cookies. Pens. Make-up. He did it with his friends, but it hadn’t been because of peer pressure or because he didn’t understand the consequences. He just did it because he loved the thrill, because he loved making mistakes, and because he loved having evidence that he was a bad person. He had wanted consequences. He stopped when he was fourteen once the thrill had gone and his boyfriend had started wrinkling his nose whenever he brought it up, and that was that.

It was pretty pathetic looking back on it, but at the time he fantasized about his parents finding out and realizing how Troubled he was and how He Needed Structure. Then they would put him in Boy Scouts or something, he would learn how to pitch a tent, and they would all go camping together. The fantasies got really specific.

But he was never caught, and nobody ever noticed.

He joined the track team instead, and he collected friends like trading cards, and he got boyfriends and broke up boyfriends. He went to normal people lengths to get attention, and didn’t buy expensive illegal drugs and almost accidentally cause the apocalypse. He just got an Instagram like everyone else.

The boyfriends kept complaining about him being emotionally unavailable. Forgetting anniversaries, never showing enough sympathy when they were sick or whatever. Something about not saying ‘I love you’ enough. It was annoying, so he had always broken up with them.

The first thing he was going to do when he saw Jeremy was tell him that he loved him. He had been in love with him ever since he saw him rescue baby ducks from a pond, freak out when one of them bit him, and yeet it back into the water. He was going to tell him that he loved him, and that they were never going to abandon each other again, and he was going to remember every anniversary from now on. He would promise.

Michael and Christine wheeled the cot and bathtub through the door to the stage and into the backstage, a familiar scene where he could hear their friends quietly talking as they stood on stage.
Michael subtly pushed the curtain back, and saw Brooke and Chloe sitting on the edge of the stage, swinging their legs and holding hands. Jake was poking around in front of the seats, as if he could find inter-dimensional residue, and Rich was engaged in a huddled and hissed argument with the Squid. Michael couldn’t make out what they were taking about, but he was willing to bet it was one of those ‘I left him alone for five minutes and he jumped off a cliff’ kind of parental arguments.

A great idea occurred to him.

Michael backed away from the bathtub, kicking it out of the way. He had already changed out of the awful jumpsuit, settling for an old pair of relaxed fit jeans and a tight black t-shirt he found in the closet, and he shrugged on a copy of Jake’s letterman. It smelled a little like booze and ozone, but it mostly smelled a lot like Michael. He slipped a filched pair of sunglasses out of his pocket, and he slid them on. He took a deep breath. He would only be able to do this once. Well, twice. Might as well make it count.

Hey, what could he say. He was a theater kid. Drama was his deal.

He sprinted forwards, heavy vans clapping against the dusty hardwood, and took a running leap out from behind the curtains. He hung in the air for a brief moment of flight, for two, before crashing to the floor, knees grinding painfully.

“Michael makes his entrance!”

When he re-aligned himself he found his friends and the Squid staring at him incredulously. Christine was fastidiously wheeling in the bathtub and cot as Jake gaped dumbly at him. Brooke was flipping through the script with her eyebrows raised as Chloe squinted incredulously at him. The Squid and Rich were facepalming.

“I’m not dead!” Michael yelled, realizing too late that he should have clarified. “The Squid sucks at lobotomizing people so Christine and I sung the Pants Song and we’re all okay now! Who’s ready to get Jeremy back and save reality!”

Everyone continued staring at him.

“It’s me,” Michael said finally. “I remember being from the alternate universe now.”

That did it. Brooke squealed, jumping forwards to grab him in a big hug and spin him around like he just did to Christine. Chloe was laughing, clapping her hands, and Jake hoisted himself onto the stage to give Michael a bear hug too. Despite the seriousness of the situation Michael couldn’t help laughing. Rich was even smiling, small and bright, and he mouthed the word ‘Thanks’ as he shot Michael a half-salute. Michael grinned and saluted back.

The Squid just looked smug, but it always did. It was probably taking credit for the obscure hint. Michael silently patted Brooke’s back, getting her to put him down, and Michael fished around in the bathtub for a familiar jacket. He walked up to the Squid, Rich hanging back to give them their space, and met its eyes.

They were human eyes, an actor all along, and that was all he needed to know.

It spoke first, because it couldn’t bear silence. “You’re missing a hoodie.”

“And you’re missing a jacket. I wanted to give it back to you.” Michael pressed the leather jacket at it, their hands brushing. It had always been pretty oversized on Michael, but in the Squid’s hands it was just right. “I’m not that person anymore. I never really was. I don’t care if it’s a hoodie or a leather jacket, or contacts or glasses, or me or him. People change. Even me. I was scared of that.
I’m not anymore.”

It didn’t know how to respond. Michael could see it, clear as day, where he had finally left it off balance. It shook out the jacket a little, contrasting harshly with the dramatic sparkle kimono, half-confused and half-defensive. It opened its mouth to say something biting or sarcastic, but Michael steam rolled over it.

“The writers left it ambiguous whether or not you tried to zombify the school because you wanted to cause the apocalypse or because you thought it would be the only way to make Jeremy’s life better.” Out of a strange, indescribable impulse, Michael clasped it on the shoulder. “You get to pick. Stop being a baby and go practice your lines, we don’t have time for your drama queening.”

It opened its mouth, then closed it again. Finally, it said, “Practice my lines?”

“Duh.” Michael nodded at a dumbstruck Brooke. “Can you go make copies of the script in the drama room? We’re going to have to go without set design...or lightning design, or sound design...but we’ve got the props and we’ve got perfect casting.”

Slowly dawning realization rose on everyone’s faces. Michael saw that Rich had been onto him from the beginning, judging by the ferocity of his face palming, but instead of Chloe’s mounting horror Brooke broke out into a sharp grin.

“This idea is, like, me levels. I’m digging your insanity.”

“Oh, man! I call playing myself!” Jake thrust a hand into the air. “I’d know all my lines!”

“You can absolutely play yourself,” Michael said seriously. He counted off on everyone else, desperately trying to remember who had speaking lines in the script. He had basically already memorized the damn thing, not that it had ever significantly helped him. “Rich can play Jenna, since he doesn’t actually have that many lines.” Rich gave him a solemn thumbs up. “As the sole adult the Squid’s gonna have to be Jeremy’s Dad, the stock boy, and Mr. Reyes. Which, joy, but still.” He counted off on everyone else, ignoring the way the Squid’s mouth puckered as if it had bitten into a sour lemon. “Christine’s the only one who’s seen the stage adaption of our lives, so she’s going to have to pull double duty and direct.”

“I can totally direct,” she said eagerly. She was growing more and more excited, and for the first time in months she looked genuinely thrilled. This was probably her dream come true. Bonus that it was saving her life. “I’ve never been in a play before, but I might be able to do Christine, and I know I can direct, although I’ve never done that before -”

“You aren’t playing her,” Michael said glibly. He dug around on top of the cot, and under a stack of weed socks he found a sky blue cardigan and striped shirt so familiar it brought a pang to his heart. It smelled like him. He slowly handed the costume to her, and she solemnly accepted it as if it was the holy grail, a diamond, and a nuclear bomb wrapped up in cotton polyester. “You have to play Jeremy. I’m going to play Michael - myself and Christine.”

She shook her head, struck dumb. “I’ve never had a leading role before,” she whispered. “Michael, I don’t know how to do this!”

“Dude.” Before he could think better of it, he reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Her breath caught, and Michael found a smile despite everything. “You’ve been in the leading role for two months. You stepped up and sold this. I was too busy throwing a hissy fit over being the sidekick to see that you’ve been the hero the whole time. You can do this. You’re the only one who can do this. Be More Chill’s always needed Christine Canigula. But your friends need you.”
She was crying again, but she fervently nodded her head anyway, gripping the costume tight to her chest. She was going to rock this thing. “This will be the most low budget, rushed high school theater production ever made!”

“That’s the low bar we need!” Michael pumped a fist in the air, cuing Brooke and Jake to do the same and cheer. Chloe grabbed onto Brooke’s hand, and Rich kneaded his eyebrow. He was smiling anyway. “Time for the first high school production of the hit off-off broadway indie musical of questionable quality, Be More Chill!”

They cheered, clapping despite the stakes, laughing despite what they knew. Michael’s heart was buoyant, his spirit was on fire, and even if everything wasn’t going to be okay he knew that this was one role he was born to play.

And when they were done playing it, when they got Jeremy back and the universes re-aligned, when their world expanded beyond a high school auditorium back into grasses and sidewalks and parents and friends and trees, Michael and Christine were going to be exactly where they deserved to be.

Michael was going to be exactly where he deserved to be.

When Michael was twelve his best friend died.

Like everybody else, he assumed that there was a time limit on grief. He divided it up into blocks like children’s toys, gave himself two weeks, then gave himself three. He was out of school for four days. His World History teacher had gotten mad that he missed a test to go to the funeral; Michael got himself sent to the principal’s office. Five trips to the principal’s office, ten stolen tubes of mascara, one suit. Five hugs from his parents, or six. Crying twenty times, hiding it from them for fifteen.

After a month he decided that his allotted time was over and that the time to be upset had passed. So he wasn’t upset anymore. He filled holes in his life, paved over the crumbling road. He filled it with friends and boyfriends and maybe even, if he was going to be honest with himself, some escapism. Easy.

Today, when his two lives were melding together like different colors of paints in a can, marbling and spinning and creating a third color that was all of the best bits of them both, Michael let himself be captured in the fantasy of what things would have been like if they had been different. Maybe his mother in this reality would have sent him to a freaking therapist. Jeremy would have hugged him as he cried, and would have always been there for him the way that Michael Mell was always there for Jeremy Heere. Maybe the basically decent person Michael was, the kind of person who didn’t quite get the way his best friend felt but tried to help him, the kind who had a mother and a father who cared, would always be a good person. He wouldn’t be like himself from the other reality. You know, the kind who treated his friends like shit.

When all of this was over they were going to go on a family camping trip or something. He was going to rope his new friends into playing Dungeons & Dragons with him, because he knew that Brooke would be totally into it. Maybe Christine too, although he had never really met Christine. He wondered if he would remember that.
If the universe disintegrated than everyone would be set back to the way they used to be. ‘Do You Want To Ride’, ‘Do You Wanna Hang’, the ‘SQUIP Song’, and all. Michael couldn’t let that happen. Those people were dicks. Jeremy and Christine would never get back to who they were supposed to be. He couldn’t let that happen either.

Michael couldn’t lose another best friend.

There were no lights, or camera or action. They didn’t exactly have any cast members to spare on that bit. It was already hilarius enough that Rich was filling in for Jenna, and slightly uncomfortable enough that the Squid was filling in for Jeremy’s dad. It bitched plenty about having to help, but Michael knew that it wasn’t in the mood for a complete universe reset either. That was a whole lot of effort to have to go through a second time. Brainwashing teenagers wasn’t as easy as it looked, you know!

It was hard to tell how long it took to get the show together. None of their phones would give any time except ‘Now’, and the date was always ‘???’ . It was major, unsettling deja vu, and Michael really hadn’t missed feeling the uncertainty of never knowing your place in time. The best they could manage was figuring out how to turn off the lights in the entire auditorium, and then flipping on all of the spotlights. They were going to have to do this a capella, which was going to sound fucking stupid, but at least they were all good singers. Michael had never been a particularly good singer before this.

The Squid had gone into its usual unhelpful lecture about how keeping the play as close to the script as possible would help bring the realities into alignment, making it easier to push through. Which was hideously vague and somewhat unfulfilling, but it tended to sound like your racist, condescending grandpa whenever you let it talk too long, so Michael didn’t ask any follow-up questions.

Brooke napped in the bathtub as Christine flexed her encyclopedic knowledge of all things Be More Chill to get the choreography down for ‘More Than Survive’. Michael, very embarrassedly, taught Chloe how to do ‘Do You Wanna Hang’. They had to wake Brooke up for ‘Do You Wanna Ride’, which nobody could remember doing, and she calmly perfectly executed it before going back to sleep. The Squid, of course, knew all of its lines perfectly, but they had to practice to get Christine moving in tune with it. It tried to convince them that the creepiness was entirely scripted, but Christine put her foot down and yelled at it until it admitted the creepiness was entirely to fuck with Michael. Which, rude.

Eventually Christine had to sheepishly admit that she had only ever technically seen the first 30 minutes of the bootleg, and they had to cobble together their memories of what they had already danced while keeping in mind what they had changed. The Squid eventually had to step in and start making changes. Which was unfortunate, considering how unreliable of a source it was.

There was no food, and by the time that Jake and Michael began getting too hungry they knew they had to stop and get on with it. They knew it as best as they ever would. Michael was certain that if they kept going for long enough eventually even the desire for food would disappear, but he really didn’t want to hang around long enough for the play to start messing with their digestive systems.

“Places, people!” Christine yelled, hands cupped around her mouth. “Get into position! Are you all in costume!”

Everyone, slightly uncomfortable with their normal clothes being called a costume, looked down at themselves and nodded. The Squid, resentful that it had to wear a suit like a normal person, scowled and nodded. Christine looked silly in Jeremy’s baggy outfit, too tight around her stomach but with the sleeves and cuffs rolled up, and Michael had refused to put on that weird smelling
hoodie, but besides that they were all good. He considered the letterman a compromise between his own outfit and Christine’s cutsey ones.

Brooke shot a hand into the air. “Team huddle first! Team huddle!”

The popular kids, who were sluts for team huddles, chants, and dance numbers, quickly arranged themselves into a football huddle. The Squid stood next to them, arms crossed. What a horrible team player.

“Okay guys,” Brooke said, as if she was the leader of this or something. Shouldn’t Christine be the one giving the inspirational speeches? “The fate of the world relies on a high school theater production with seven cast members that was put together in, like, some vague amount of time but may have been four hours.”

“It felt like longer,” Jake confessed. “Maybe five?”

“Definitely three,” Chloe said.

“Whatever! Point is, you’re all my friends except for the Squid, and I love all of you, except for the Squid, and I know that we can do it, save reality, and clean up Jeremy’s mess, like, again.”

“I thought I was winning back Jeremy’s heart,” Michael said weakly.

“Sure, you do that.” Brooke flashed a grin, perfect white teeth gleaming in the spotlight. “We’re going to be amazing, because we have the best director and leading actress in the world.”

“Literally,” the Squid added.

“And metaphorically!” Brooke smiled at Chloe too. “And I have the best girlfriend in the world. We’re totally dating now, guys. We made out in the supply closet.”

“Was this really the time?” Michael cried, exasperated.

But Broke just shrugged. “If not now, then when? If not me, then who? There’s no other time but now. Literally. I’m happy I’m not that girl in the script anymore. And I know for some weird reason, I owe it all to Christine and Michael. When we save the world it’ll be, like, for you two?”

“You guys saved Rich’s life,” Jake said sincerely. “And my legs, which I kinda enjoy having.” He elbowed Rich in the side. “Not gonna lie, we totally made out in the supply closet too.”

“Dude!”

“What? I wanted to brag.”

But Rich just elbowed him back, face red, and Chloe leaned forward and kicked Jake in the shin.

“Well, I’m glad I’m not fucking Jake!”

“I’m glad I’m not fucking you too, Chloe! You tried to have sex in my parents’ bed!”

“That was just to get back at Brooke!”

“What, did you want to have sex with her in my bed too?”

“And that’s a wrap,” the Squid said quickly, prying the team huddle apart. “Very sweet, love seeing teenage hormones run wild. I thank Alan Turing every day I was stuck in this world with
you insolent children. Let’s get this show on the road. Jake, try not to break another leg.”

“Things could be worse,” Michael muttered, “at least you aren’t in Rent.”

“Or Newsies,” Chloe added.

“Or Dear Evan Hansen,” Christine said darkly. They all shuddered. Really dodged a bullet there.

“Let’s go, Be More Chill!” Brooke cried, putting her hand in the middle and cuing everyone to do
the same. “Let’s fight! For everlasting peace!”

“Why are you quoting Mega Man?” Michael cried.

“I love video games and I will punch reality in the tits to protect that!” Brooke pressed down on
their hands once, twice, three times. “Let’s go, Be More Chill! And break!”

They cheered, breaking the huddle and clapping their hands, and Michael missed the warmth of
Christine’s hand on his already.

But he caught the Squid’s elbow as Jake dragged out the desk and computer, the girls fixing their
hair and making out a little, and dragged it into the wings. They were shadowed from the spotlights
there, dappling the Squid’s face in light and darkness, and Michael was forced to wonder why this
thing was destined to cause him so much pain.

“What’s going to happen to you?” Michael asked. “Once Jeremy comes home and we finish the
play, I mean.”

Hideously, unbelievably, the Squid’s expression softened. It looked strange, dressed in nothing but
a t-shirt, jeans, and its stylish leather jacket. It looked a little like him, or maybe Michael had
looked a little like it.

“Jeremy and I aren’t sustainable,” it said softly. “You know that.”

He did. This wasn’t a TV show where they knocked Team Rocket into the sun but came crawling
back every time. This was a musical, where everything turned out okay in the end, and nobody ever
got hurt. Where there was a happily ever after, or at least the possibility of one.

Michael didn’t know what to say. ‘I don’t want you to go’? He definitely wanted it to never darken
his towels again. ‘I’m sorry’? He was, but he would do it again in a heartbeat.

Instead, the only thing he could ask was the one thing it wasn’t important to know. “Christine
thinks that we’re all fictional characters, and that we were never real until she stayed here for long
enough and we were made real. Brooke and the others think that we’re just from different
universes, and that this world will go on without her. Who’s right?”

If they really were fictional, what would happen to them once Christine left? Would their
production never be the same? Or was it some kind of time loop? That sounded depressing.

“Por que no los dos?” the Squid memed ominously.

“God, do I hate you.” But he couldn’t help smiling anyway. “Real is as you make it, I guess. You
were real. I’m sorry it ended this way for us.”

The kids were clamoring into position, practicing their lines and choreography one last time, but
Michael only had eyes for the Squid. It looked different. It looked a little real. Maybe even as real
as the rest of them, no matter how real that happened to be.

The Squid snorted. “Please. I’m a quantum nanotechnology supercomputer. I’ve known it would end this way all along. It’s why I’m so salty all the time.” But, incredibly, it leaned down and ruffled Michael’s hair. “I tried to create a zombie apocalypse just to get that boy laid. This method is proving to be much easier. Make sure he stands up straight for me while I’m gone, will you? However long that may be.”

“Sure, but I’m not going to be a dick about it.” Horribly, offensively, Michael found himself getting a little choked up. “I’ll see you again?”

The Squid smiled down at him, somewhat ominous but somewhat fond. As usual. “You know you will.”

The curtain was drawn, and Michael walked onstage.

He cleared his throat, facing the empty auditorium, speaking to no one, speaking to everyone.

“Welcome, everybody. Thank you so much for coming to our production.” He coughed awkwardly, trying to remember Christine’s monologue. “It’s been a rough two months for all of us at Middleborough. That’s why this play is so important - to bring us together! To show you something special! I know if Rich - sorry, never mind.” Michael cleared his throat, already horribly awkward and messing it up. Oh, well. That was going to be a theme. He looked out at the audience and tried to visualize, as all actors did, what he needed to see. What he needed to pretend to see. Maybe then he could make it real. “You’re about to see a production that may seem familiar to you. Some of it’s going to be the same, and some of it’s going to be different. But that’s the nature of theater. It’s not like a movie, or like a book or a work of art. It’s alive. It changes and grows and it’s never the same each time. This production is different...really different...but people are different too. That’s what makes it theater. That’s what makes it a production that we made for ourselves. Our love...our production...is breathing. We made it for you.” He took a deep breath, and threw himself into the pit of uncertainty, or rehearsal and production and the Frankenstein that he created with his friends. “Please turn your cell phones off, and nobody fucking bootleg this, and welcome to ‘Be More Chill!’"
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The curtains began to open, and Michael ran off stage, revealing Christine.

She was sitting at a desk with a Macbook and some tissues, as anybody worth their salt would know. When he saw her a brief burst of fear groaned in his stomach, afraid that she would freeze up or forget her lines in her debut show, but when she opened her mouth and sang to the beat of their friends doing their best to clap their hands and stomp their feet, he knew she would rock it.

“C - c - c’mon, c - c- c’mon, go go.” Christine exhaled, leaning back in her chair, and Michael wondered what she was making herself see. “I’m waiting for my porno to load! And my brain’s gonna freaking explode!” She stood up, revealing her Nike shorts, and began pulling on a skirt. Too much of a coward to wear underwear onstage, Christine. “But now it’s time to hit the road, which means I’ll be uncomfortable all day! But that really isn’t such a change, if I’m not feeling weird or super strange, my life would be in utter disarray, cuz freaking out is my okay!” She groaned, stretching her arms, and Michael knew everything was going to be just fine. “Good morning, time to start the day!”

Here we go. Brooke and Rich ran out, moving the desk out of the way and pushing in the vanity, and Michael saw the Squid roll its eyes, stretch its shoulders, and shrug on the bathrobe. It was still wearing pants, but it had obligingly taken off its shirt to flaunt its impressive pecs. Michael refused to admit that the brain robot was slightly, maybe - nope, not going there. Nope. Nope!

Christine made a show of checking her bra size to see if her boobs had gotten any bigger as the Squid bopped on stage, making a show of yawning and flexing his pecs. It was a natural. Goddamn it.

“Dad, jeez, give me some privacy!” She squeaked and covered her eyes as the Squid posed like James Dean against the vanity.

“Aw, we’re all family in this house. Pretend we’re in the army.” It saluted and rolled off the stage, visibly relieved.

“Just...put on a shirt?”

“Whatever. Atten - hut!”

Here was a tricky one. Everybody ran onto stage as the Squid left, quickly arranging themselves into a slightly bus-like configuration. They made a show of looking at their unhelpful phones talking to each other, disinterested in the midst of teenage ennui. Christine stood in the front, doing her best without any help from indicative lighting. This was not going to be the snazziest play.

“Do I take a bus or walk instead? I feel my stomach filling up with dread. When I get nervous my whole face goes red.” At this point he knew that this song was hashtag relatable for Christine, or at least bits of it, but it had never quite settled into the right grooves for Michael. Maybe that had always been his problem. He had never exactly ranked high on the empathy scale. ‘Dude, weigh the options and be still!’ She cocked her head, making a show of looking around. “A junior on the bus is killer weak, but if I walk when I arrive I’m gonna straight up reek. And my bra’ll be bunchy and my pits’ll reek.” She groaned. “God, I wish I had the skill. Just to be fine and cool and chill.”
She twirled, not being able to resist adding a little extra flair, and it was hard not to crane his head over and see for himself. “I don’t wanna be a hero! Just wanna stay in the line. I’ll never be your Natalie Portman. Just Kiera Knightly is fine!” She kicked her own feet as their friends pretended to sway. “So I follow my own rules and I use them as my tools to sta - ay -ay alive! I don’t wanna be special, no no! I just wanna survive!”

Everyone broke apart, singing their come on, come ons, milling and pushing Christine around and forcing her to dive for cover. She was small, so it was easy. Brooke and Chloe made a show of walking to the locker, Brooke checking her nails as Chloe opened and slammed the door pointlessly. It was worth noting at this point that Chloe wasn’t a great actor. She was, however, great at being Chloe.

“So Jenna Rolan told Madeline told Jake, I’ll only have sex with you if you beat me at pool.” Chloe paused awkwardly, masking it with a flip of her hair. “And then she lost at pool...deliberately.”

“That’s awesome,” Brooke gushed, for once in line with her actual character. She quickly caught herself. “I mean slutty.”

Chloe smirked and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. Michael, from where he was hiding in the wings waiting for his cue, face palmed.

Rich was leaning against Chloe’s locker. It was also worth noting at this point that Rich was a fantastic actor, but displayed no deep internal drive to be Rich or Jenna at all. He had been more or less ambivalent about the fate of the world.

“And then Madeline was all like,” he drawled, before Chloe jumped in with slamming the locker. “I’m telling the story, Jenna!”

“Ugh, whatever.” That being said, his valley girl accent was impeccable. He bounced off, intercepting a cowering Christine hiding behind her backpack. “Hey, don’t touch me, Short Round!”

Nice, both accommodating for her height and racist. Rich had been pretty proud of that one. Christine squeaked, easily diving out of his way as Rich span her around and pantomimed writing something on his back pack. He slapped her on the back.

“Wash that off and you’re dead.” Christine quickly escaped as Rich pushed her aside for favor of high fiving Jake. “Yo, Jakey D!” Ugh. “What’s the story with Madeline?”

“I shouldn’t say.” Jake flipped his hair, teeth gleaming brilliantly. “I respect women too much.”

“You suck at this,” Rich said flatly, completely breaking character, as if he did not also suck at this.

Luckily, Christine jumped in, singing loudly to accommodate the terribleness of their friends. They passed off screen as Christine jumped up and belted the ridiculous song. “I navigate the dangerous hall, focus on a poster there on the wall, avoiding any eye contact at all and trying hard to remain unseen.” She really was a great actress, practically hiding in her cardigan. She was probably used to people only noticing her to laugh at her.

He wished that they had more time. Would she get along okay without him? She had grown as a person as much as he did. Maybe she knew, as the real Christine always had, that it didn’t matter what people thought about you so long as you were a good person who didn’t hurt other people. Or
“The poster’s closer now, and what does it say?” She didn’t have to feign excitement as she saw the post the Squid had casually tacked up earlier. “It’s a sign up sheet for the after school play!” She paused. “But people’ll just comment on how much I weigh. And that’s not what I need right now, end scene.” All of their friends passed through the stage, texting and saying hi to friends and generally being a nuisance, and when Michael passed through he was the only one who stayed behind. “I hang a left and there’s -”

Here he went. Michael didn’t have the luxury of playing himself. Still, he had been the one to cast himself as Christine months ago. Time to finally own up to it.

Everyone else joined in as a chorus, elevating Christine’s lovey-dovey sigh into a heavenly choir. Michael made a show of flipping through a random binder he found, not acknowledging her existence. “Christine! Christine...Christine, Christine Canigula, Christine…”

“Oh?” Michael snapped his binder shut, looking around. He squinted at her, letting his letterman flop around his sleeves. Classic Christine stylish slovenliness. “I think someone wrote Boyf on your backpack.”

“Oh.” Christine looked down at it. “Agh!”

She squealed, and with no further ado ran to the other side of the stage. Michael shrugged and flounced off just as quickly.

Okay. It was a little funny. It was even funnier hearing Christine complain about this. “Ugh! That was smooth, I was a total movie star!” She oversold it, tugging on her hair and groaning. Christine didn’t know how crushes worked. “My on fleek game is more like tar.” Everyone moved in and set up chairs in front of a professional looking Squid in a blazer, turning their chairs around to face him as Christine stood in front of the audience and sang. “I don’t wanna be a diva! Just want some skills to count on. If my tits were any smaller, they would be totally gone. If I continue at this rate the only thing I’ll ever date, is my account on ao3! I don’t wanna be Minaj, no no. I just wanna survive!”

Everybody crowded on stage again, Michael took a deep breath and zipped up his jacket - this was his equivalent of a costume change - slung his headphones on - grabbed the slushie Brooke quickly threw at him - and jumped into the role that he had abandoned.

“Jeremy my buddy, how’s it hanging, lunch is banging, got my sushi and my slushie and more!” He kicked his feet with Christine, and -

Michael didn’t realize that he had fallen asleep in the theater until he found himself holding a slushie in one hand, a gross package of sushi in the other, and singing in a high school hallway.

“The role is Negimaki and I’m feeling kinda cocky,” Michael recovered quickly, fighting the horrible déjà vu. “Cuz the girl at Sev’ Elev’ gave me a generous pour!”

Christine crossed her arms, looking amused. Crap, they forgot to give her a lunch tray. Always something. “You’ve been listening to Marley again, haven’t you?”

Time for the hideously embarrassing dance moves that he had skipped over the last first time. He
jumped up and kicked his feet again, pulling some slight surfer moves and bopping along towards his stoner reggae beat. Honestly. “Oh, I’m listening to Marley and the groove is hella gnarly, and I’m almost at the end of this song.” Bum, bum, bum! “That was the end, now tell me friend - how was class, you look like ass, what’s wrong?”

It was different when no mysterious cosmic forces were making him sing. It was almost nicer. He and Christine couldn’t help but grin at each other, real friends, not close like Michael and Jeremy had been but the closest he had in a long time. He was going to miss her.

Christine sighed and pulled her backpack over. “Boyfs? What does that even mean?”

Michael couldn’t help but laugh. He pulled his backpack around and shoved it up against hers, batting his eyelashes at her. She rolled her eyes, pouting.

“I hate this school. But I wrote Christine a letter telling her how I feel!”

“Good for you,” Michael said absentmindedly. He paused a beat, realizing that he was quoting himself instead of Michael. Or quoting Michael instead of himself. God, whatever. “I mean, that’s progress.”

She hung her head. “I tore it up and flushed it.”

“That’s still progress,” Michael said encouragingly. He patted her on the back. “Hey, I saw on Discovery that alternate realities exist!”

Whoops. Christine shot him an unimpressed look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He wasn’t great at lines that were never his. Michael laughed awkwardly. “You know that multiverse theory that there’s an infinite number of universes for each possible outcome? Turns out that our universe shows up in another universe as a mediocre musical theater piece!”

“At least it’s not Dear Evan Hansen,” Christine said diplomatically.

“I don’t think God hates us enough for that!” Michael belatedly did a jump and a small jig. “Which means that maybe two of your friends crossed over from this alternate universe when they were watching a production of this play and have spent the last two months trying to get home, which may or may not have resulted in some questionable decisions! Isn’t that wild? So own it! Why sulk in the alternate dimension when we could -”

“- sign up for the school play!” Christine yelled, masterfully getting them back on track.

“Well, I was going to say come back and hug your friends so we can apologize and the universe can go back to existing, but that works too.”

“No, I mean look who’s signing up for the after school play!”

Time for some ham handed awkwardness. Michael unzipped his jacket, pulling it over his shoulder, and pirouetted towards the sign-up sheet.

“Christine,” Christine sighed. “Christine Canigula...Christine….Christine…”

Their friends melted out of the woodwork, gesticulating grandly, and he struck a magnificent pose as Jake and Brooke carefully lifted him above their heads to write on the sign-up sheet. It was horribly awkward and his signature was more of a scrawl, but it did the job.
“Christine!” Their friends sung, in the heavenly chorus of Christine’s name, and Michael understood why this had been so appealing to Christine. “Christine, Christine!”

This was more than surviving. Being special, being the light of some random teenage boy’s life...not everybody got that. “Christine Canigula!”

“I feel my body moving through the air,” Christine sung, high and bright, as the others let Michael down and he made his escape. She walked carefully, one foot in front of the other, longing in her eyes. “I see my converse walking over there.” She paused in front of the poster, eyes shining, as if this was the biggest problem Jeremy had before everything went to hell. “Take a shaky breath and I prepare. Who cares if people think I’m lame. Christine signed, I’ll do the same! I grab my pen, I write my name.”

She signed her name with a flourish, but the moment had cut out. Their friends rolled out of the way, making a show of laughing at her. He saw a flash of embarrassment fly across Brooke’s face, and he could tell that she was feeling just as bad about her behavior as he did.

Rich, obviously, didn’t care. “Fatty!”

Everyone laughed at him as one, just as they always had, and in the distorted theater of Jeremy’s point of view it was like the entire school was laughing at him. That was how it had always been for him - everybody hated him specifically, he was born to be mocked, but the only thing worse than everyone hating was nobody caring.

It probably didn’t help that Rich was, you know, specifically singling him out. Gotta capitalize off those insecurities.

“I’m never gonna be the hot girl,” Christine stage whispered, the picture of a crushed ego. She was so dejected even her hair was drooping, posture slumped and eyes locked on the floor. Everyone wandered off, high fiving and back slapping, and Michael let himself be carried away too. “I’m more the one who’s left out. Out of all the characters at school I am not the one the story’s about.” Yeah, you are. Michael didn’t know how to make him see that. This was the only way. “Why can’t someone just help me out!” She began belting, rising her hands, and the Squid snickered. Michael pushed it on the arm. No need to feel smug. “And teach me how to thrive. Help me do more than survive!”

Maybe everybody felt this way, and Jeremy was the only one brave enough - or who had enough musical numbers - to admit it. As Michael ran out and began engaging in random half-synchronized dance moves, he wondered if he had ever been doing more than surviving. From the outside his gig had must have looked pretty sweet, almost as if he had his life together, but on the inside he was a total disaster.

Oh, fun, here were the ‘nah - nah - nah’s. Michael had pled for Christine to leave that out. Here were some more dorky dance moves, and a quick improvised shuffle.

“If this was an apocalypse I would not need any tips in how to stay alive!” Subtle. “But since the zombie army’s yet to descend and the period’s going to end,” they rapidly grabbed chairs from offstage and jammed them behind Jeremy, pretending to be in class again. “I’m just trying my best to pass the test and survive!”

“C - c - c’mon, c - c - c’mon,” Michael belted, “let’s go!”

“C - c - c’mon, c - c - c’mon, let’s go!”
They rose slowly, all of his friends working in hap hazard sync, their voices rising. Christine had to stand on a chair to be looking over their heads. “Go, go, go, go!”

Then they whooped, jumping off the chairs, and struck a pose. They had no lighting to demonstrate how it was the end of a scene, instead depending entirely on context clues. Michael’s breath was heaving, his jacket sticking to his sweaty back, and Chloe’s perfect hair was in utter disarray. Jake was positioned slightly off but it didn’t matter, because they all quickly pushed their chairs into a loose configuration and scrambled into the back.

But when Michael stole a glance behind him, as he squinted into the shadowed audience, he thought he saw someone watching.

He thought he saw two teenagers, who looked a lot like him and Christine but a little not, sleeping in the front row. The girl was curled up in her seat while the boy was stretched out, one arm slung across the back of the back of the seat.

But there was someone else behind them too. He was standing up, fingers clenched on the back seat, face half-covered in shadow.

Michael just barely heard Jeremy yell, “What the fuck.” before the spotlight flickered and he was gone again.

He skidded backstage and gasped for breath as Brooke bent double over her knees, panting.

“It worked,” Michael gasped. “I saw him, it’s working! He was watching the play! We have to keep going.”

“Thank god. I would have been so pissed if he was on his phone.”

She withdrew a stop watch from her pocket, pausing it and squinting at the display.

“How long was that?” Michael asked, throat raspy. Rich threw a water bottle across the room at him and hit him on the head, which Michael eagerly twisted open and poured into his mouth. At least they wouldn’t have another ensemble number that complicated until the Smartphone Hour. Probably. They were guesstimating on what the numbers past the bootleg looked like. Thank god for Christine’s freaky-good, he meant good-memory.

“Ten minutes,” Brooke said grimly, and he groaned.

“How long is this play supposed to be again?”

Her eyes were dead inside. “Two hours.” She peeked out from behind the curtain again. “You’re up again, Mr. Is In Every Scene Either Being Christine or Michael. Go!”

Michael stumbled back onstage, taking Christine’s place as chief cute dork and foregoing Michael’s invaluable best friend role, just as Christine hopped awkwardly inside.

“Yo!”

Here we go.

Play rehearsal was about a thousand times too cutesy for Michael’s tastes, and really required a girl singing it. Michael had somewhat of a baritone, not to brag or anything, and baritones and glockenspiels generally had to sit on the other end of the room at weddings.
But it was kind of fun, sitting across from her like this, sitting on top of chairs and hopping between them. They should have had more time together.

“And I have mad gigantic feelings, mad and frantic feelings, about most everything!”

“Like gun control,” Christine said softly, unable to help herself from chiming in on her favorite song. “Like spring.”

Michael hopped off, pulling a very girly twirl. “Like how the only time I get to be the center of attention, is when I’m Michael or Christine, and can I mention!” Shit, it was almost inevitable. He leaned forward. “I didn’t get a lot of attention in my childhood and this whole experience is really illuminating the healing power of theater and dance numbers.” Christine blinked, thrown off guard but not necessarily surprised, and Michael delved back into belting the song. “And no matter how hard I try - !”

By the time their friends arrived it was almost a relief. The Squid strolling in, hands in its pockets, was less of a relief. Michael forced himself to play off its masterfully crafted ‘bored adult who is coerced into being here’ persona, mostly because it was a bored adult who was coerced into being here.

It also took way too much fun in crushing Michael’s dreams, but instead of hugging him it just patted him on the head. Thank god.

Jake stayed behind, brow furrowing as he tried to both remember his lines and deal with the fact that he was flirting with Michael. Looking back at the play, he had been slightly miffed about his role in Jeremy’s life, which Michael had flatly told him to work out with Jeremy.

“Hey, you’re in that play!”

Michael paused a beat, staring at him. Jake beamed munificently back.

“You mean Romeo and Juliet?”

“No, I mean like, right now.”

“Yes,” Michael said patiently. “We’re putting on Midsummer Nightmare right now.”

“No, I mean like, right now, right now.”

“Yes,” Michael said, strangled, “we’re also putting on a play at this second. But we’re also putting on Midsummer Nightmare. And I also put on Romeo and Juliet last year. Wink, wink.”

“Oh, yeah!”

At the end of their scenes, with their roles switched, both Michael and Christine were happy to see Jake bounce off. Thank god he didn’t have too many lines. He had literally lived this and he couldn’t remember what he had said two months ago.

“So,” Christine said weakly. “I heard that theater’s destined to save the world?”

“Did you say something?”

Michael flounced off stage, gratefully accepting the chucked bottle of water, and listened to Christine’s reprise of ‘More Than Survive’.

“Once again there’s been a takedown. I guess it could have gone worse.” She laughed a little,
humorlessly and bitterly. She was bringing a lot of pathos to this character. “At least I didn’t have a breakdown, then have to go to the nurse.” She screwed up her eyes and raised her fists, shouting to the sky. She was over-acting again. Dammit, she was trying so hard. It was adorable. “I don’t wanna be special. Don’t even need to survive. I just want to know that Christine is aware I’m alive!”

“Oh, come on!” Jeremy called from the audience. “I don’t sound like that!”

“Yes you do!” Everybody screamed in unison from backstage.

At least it was working?

The SQUIP Song went off mostly without a hitch. Well, mostly.


“Just say Squid,” Christine said, exhausted beyond all measure.

It helped him to be cool. It helped him...rule!

The Squid leaned against a wall, arms crossed and grinning smugly the whole time. It sighed. “Gotta love my adoring fans. Listen to how they cheer. It’s so adorable.”

Michael punched it in the arm.

Two Player Game found him giving back into the game, accepting the bean bags that Brooke and Chloe skidded over towards them. This was one number Michael could pull off without a hitch. It was fun playing video games again, if he wasn’t doing anything but staring into an empty audience where he could more or less see Jeremy sitting in the second seat back. He had found some popcorn out of nowhere and was munching on it, feet kicked up on Michael’s headrest. Classy, dude.

“So?” Christine asked, after they finished some strangely fun singing. “This horrible person cornered me in the bathroom, gave me way too much information about his personal life, and then told me to buy a six hundred dollar miracle pill from him like a pop up talking ad on an anime streaming website.”

Rich poked his head in from the wings. “I’m scamming you!” he called. “I’m scamming you super weirdly!”

Michael mimed throwing his controller at him as Christine looked blankly into the audience. “It’s going to be like this forever, huh,” she said softly. “Everyone’s going to make fun of me for the rest of time. I’ll always just be that girl who watches Hetalia in the anime club room. I’ll always be that girl who has to be taken out of class to go to Special Ed. I’m always just going to be another loser.”

“Dude.” Michael leaned over and put a hand on her knee, smiling widely. “You are cooler than a vintage cassette. It’s just that no one but me thinks that yet!” He fist bumped her, making her giggle. “You’re a nice girl in this high school scheme, and you know you and I are a team!”

“We’re never not going to be a team,” Christine sung softly. If only that was true.

But he could promise from now on. He could promise that he wasn’t going to ditch her again. Except it was too late for that, and any promise would be meaningless, because he knew that she
couldn’t stay.

She bopped along to him singing, but Michael couldn’t put his heart in it. College wasn’t going to help them. College and popularity had never been the point. They didn’t hand you self-respect with your dorm key.

Eventually he was forced to exhale and sit down again, trading off on the singing, and by the time that the Squid walked in he was almost too tired to care. He sucked in deep breaths, and wondered for the life of him how actual actors did it. Christine had to be exhausted.

It was sipping coffee out of a mug - real coffee, that it had stolen from Mr Reyes’ coffee machine hidden under his desk. “What’s up, sluts.”

“Dad, can you put a shirt on?” Christine asked, strangled. “Just go away, you suck at this.”

“And rob the world of these guns? I think not.” It shrugged, waving at them as it promptly left the stage as quickly as possible. “Good talk.”

They both rolled their eyes. “That man single handedly ruined my life but he’s strangely likeable,” Christine said flatly.

“Please, you ruined your own life.”

They snuck a glance at the auditorium. Jeremy threw a piece of popcorn at them, which promptly vanished in the dimensional tear between worlds.

But Christine leaned forward, smiling gently at Michael as she took his hand and squeezed it. “You know that you are my favorite person, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still dream.”

“I know you’re my favorite person,” Michael said seriously, “and we’re never not gonna be a team.”

As if something old was slotted into place, as if two familiar pieces were joined, Michael had a best friend. He had a really, really cute best friend.

As if he had always had a best friend.

“High school is shit!”

“And you’ve gotta help me conquer it!”

Yeah. It was satisfying.

They sped through the rest as fast as they could, only stumbling when the Squid insisted on existing again and accidentally made Christine cry when it started relentlessly insulting her.

They had to pause, everyone taking a break from telling Christine how horrible she was when she started bawling. The Squid shifted awkwardly, hesitantly reaching out to pat her on the back.

“You’re a horrible actress.”

“Shut up and finish the fucking song!”
They didn’t have any scaffolding, and some hastily stacked boxes had to do. It was claustrophobic for the larger than life Squid, who worked in sloppy sync with Christine to convince the frustratingly well rested Brooke and Chloe that she was secretly cool, honest!

Brooke blasted her full ‘Sexy Bambi Eyes’ on him, knocking her voice into a higher key and pressing her boobs against an incredibly flustered Christine - who was asexual, but an equal opportunity asexual. “Do you wanna ride, do you wanna ride, wanna go far?” she purred, and Michael had no idea that people could honestly purr. It was like guffawing or something, people couldn’t actually do it. “Do you wanna get, do you wanna get inside my mother’s - okay, look.”

She stepped away, completely halting the song and propping her hands on her hips. The Squid, from where it was standing on top of a box, facepalmed hypocritically. “Why am I even singing this? I met him like two seconds ago, he’s still a pasty nerd with no social capital, and while I have a weak spot for sob stories I am impervious to acne! Meet me in the pit Jeff Iconic! I’ll fucking fight you!”

Chloe shrugged, examining her nails. “She’s right, you know. Frozen yogurt is third date material.”

“This is male wish fulfillment!”

“You do know that Jeremy can hear you, right?” Christine cried.

“Good! Jeremy’s a weak bitch!” Brooke cupped her hands around her mouth and called into the audience. “Get over here so I can kick your ass, Jeremiah!”

“This isn’t his fault!”

“How is this entire situation not his fault?”

Michael screamed into his hands.

If nothing else, at least he got to hear Christine say the word ‘swagger’.

They kept running through the play as quickly as possible, Christine obviously getting more exhausted with every number, clipping through the petty drama and the unnecessary theatrics and the creepy Squid. By the time they got to ‘Guy That I’d Kinda Be Into’ Michael was sharing the stage with the Squid again, which had devolved into them trying to elbow each other in the gut whenever they stepped too close. Thank god it was mostly confined to the Box Prison, Where All of the Bad Squids Go.

In some weird way it had become his and Jeremy’s song, and Michael felt oddly proprietal over it.

They slowed down, Michael so afraid his heart was beating double time in his ears to the sound of the rhythm, and he couldn’t help but pull Jeremy closer. He blamed the song. “I don’t always relate to other people my age,” he confessed, “but now that I’m on this stage there are so many changes that I’m going through. I don’t know why I’m telling this to you.”

Jeremy’s pulse sang underneath Michael’s wrist, and an indescribable feeling rose in his stomach. It felt like a song, it felt like a dance and it felt like freefall, and it felt a little like Michael was flying as he was brought to rest for the first time since Maria died. “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to.” He laughed, light and quick and desperate. “I guess there’s a part of me that wants to, who knew?”
“I guess a part of me .”

He paused from where he was waltzing with Christine, and behind her he saw Jeremy. He was standing up, fists clenched, raw longing written across his face. Time and reality divided them, but Michael couldn’t help but break apart from Christine and reach out a hand towards him instead.

“Back to play rehearsal,” Michael sang, as clear and brightly as he could. Back to the play. “I know that it’s weird, but it’s totally true. The guy that I’d kinda be into…”

“The guy that you’d kinda be into,” Jeremy sang hesitantly. He didn’t know how to feel.

“Yeah,” Michael sang, and for the first time in what felt like years they finally sung together. “The guy that I’d kinda be into, is…”

Then the song ended, as it always had to, and Jeremy disappeared.

Christine stomped her foot and cursed, and even the Squid buried its head in its hands and groaned.

“When is this going to work?” Christine dragged her fingers through her hair. “We almost fucking had it that time. It’s, like, your signature song! Ugh!”

It probably said a lot about his life that he had a signature love song. Ugh.

The Squid clapped its hands. “Come on, children. The fabric of reality depends on Jake’s ability to memorize lines. Hot pocket break over!”

After Upgrade they finally had an intermission, where everybody gave themselves five minutes to lie down on the floor and just pant. Jake was helpfully pouring water over Christine’s face, who was practically sobbing with exhaustion, and Rich was playing Blackjack with the Squid in the corner. Brooke, who was still salty about pretending to be her play self, was resentfully braiding Chloe’s hair and talking shit about Jeff Iconic.

“Is this even gonna work?” Christine asked, gulping her water.

“If it doesn’t we’re screwed,” Michael, who was also pretty persistently on stage, stole the water bottle from her and chugged some of it too.

“This was your idea, you know.”

“If this doesn’t work then you won’t remember enough to blame me about it.”

They shot each other horrified looks and scrambled off their asses to go do the Halloween party.

It went off without a hitch, so much as Halloween could possibly go off without a hitch. It helped that their friends had actually all been involved in it, and that they had actually been friends at that point.

Granted, by without a hitch that meant that the girls blatantly refused to wear a Sexy Dog and a Sexy Baby costume. They insisted on grabbing two copies of the Squid’s sparkling kimono and cut it up for a cool Xena and Gabrielle couple’s costume, mortally offending the Squid. Jeremy’s worryingly tight cyborg costume didn’t fit Christine either, so she went with her period accurate Princess costume. Michael and Jake, who both had to wear matching costumes and felt like morons about it, eventually settled on dressing as each other. Jake was wearing the Accursed Hoodie and
Michael was wearing a jersey. He didn’t have the heart to tell anybody that he regularly wore jerseys. He had been thinking about joining a frat in college. Not one of the hardcore ones, though. A laid back frat.

“What do you think of my costume?” Brooke twirled around, flashing some leg. “I figured that I’m not going to cater to the male gaze today, and that I’m going to honor queer history through a couple’s costume with my girlfriend.”

“Brooke,” Christine said seriously, “I would die for you.”

Time for his entrance. Michael lovably, yet unattainably sauntered in, sidling up to Jake as he amicably slurped down punch. The punch being coffee - they hadn’t been able to find any punch, so they had all been chugging a shitton of Mr. Reyes’ coffee. “Hey, sorry I’m late.”

“Really? I didn’t notice?”

Thank god. “I thought we were supposed to be going as...uh, each other?” Michael scrutinized Jake’s costume. “I’ve never seen that hoodie before in my life.”

Everybody awkwardly danced as Chloe tapped Christine on the shoulder, pulling a power stance as Xena. “Something something, surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?” Christine asked flatly, exhausted.

“The kind where -”

“Boo!” Out of the corner of his eye Michael caught sight of Jeremy, who was throwing popcorn at the stage again. “Skip this part!”

“Take it up with the bozos who wrote this script,” Chloe called. She didn’t really like the scene either. Nobody liked it. “We’re just trying to get through the dumb play!”

“You look fat in that costume!”

When Michael looked down he saw that the popcorn had actually landed on the stage this time. They were getting closer.

“You look fat in that cardigan!”

Jeremy gasped, scandalized.

“Don’t call my girlfriend fat!” Brooke screamed from off-stage.

“Can I go back to making out with Rich now?” Jake asked, pointing to where Rich was dumping the contents of the coffee/punch bowl in his mouth.

“If you’re looking for an apology I’m not giving it,” the Squid said, crossing its arms. Michael threw a cup at it. “I was just doing my job.”

“Wanting consent was implied, dickhead!” Michael yelled.

Suddenly they were all yelling at each other - Michael and Christine at the Squid, the Squid sniping at the both of them, Chloe scolding Jake about how bad of an actor he was as Rich shamelessly chugged more coffee.

Finally Jeremy stood up, wobbling on top of his plush chair. The Christine and Michael in the
audience slept through the whole thing, so thoroughly and still it was as if they were dead.
“Apologize!” Jeremy screamed, and the entire stage winced. “Now!”

Michael and the Squid looked at each other.

“Sorry,” Michael offered weakly. “I’m...no excuses. I’m sorry.”

The Squid was still crossing its arms, sniffing. “I thought you didn’t want to get back together.”

“We’re not getting back together anyway!” Jeremy paused a beat. “We were never together!”

“Then why do you keep acting like it!”

“Acting like it? You’re the one acting like it!”

Everybody awkwardly looked around, experiencing the global human emotion of slight discomfort when confronted with a couple arguing. Or whatever they were.

“If you don’t apologize and shape up I’m never coming home,” Jeremy yelled. “And that’s final! I - I respect myself, and I’m a full person, and I don’t have to be with someone who doesn’t respect me back!”

“Christ,” Brooke said. “Who gave the guy Oprah?”

“I’m so proud of him,” Jake whispered. Rich patted him on the hand.

“Fine! Fine, for fuck’s sake!” The Squid pinched the bridge of its nose. “I’m sorry for trying to help you!”

“That’s not a real apology, dude,” Rich pointed out. “Should we just tell Jeremy that all we need to get rid of it is -”

“I’m sorry for not taking into account what you wanted and for trying to manipulate you,” the Squid spat out. “Even though it was statistically -”

“Are you literally incapable of giving a decent apology?” Chloe said, bored.

“You deserved better,” the Squid said finally, and everyone abruptly shut up. “Than me. You deserved better than what I’ve done to you. If I could go back and do it all again, I would do it differently.”

Jeremy was caught off balance. Michael didn’t blame him. That was the most self-deprecating thing Michael had ever heard it say ever. Whatever that meant to Jeremy and the Squid, whose relationship was so intense and disturbing it was inherently unhealthy, Michael could never understand.

Finally, Jeremy could only say, “You’re saying you’ve changed.”

“People can change,” Chloe said lowly, and in her self-deprecating smile Michael saw the girl he used to hate. “They just need someone to change for.”

The Squid spread its hands, smirking slightly. “I didn’t think it was possible either. Blame your boyfriend.”

Jeremy was quiet. He shook his head. “That didn’t change anything.”
The Squid smiled, sticking its hands in its pockets. “But did it make you feel better?”

Jeremy slowly sat back down. He picked up his popcorn again, putting it in his lap. “A little. Come on, I want to see that song where you were all being mean to Rich.”

“Good idea,” Michael said quickly, “let’s just all skip to that -”

“What about Michael in the Bathroom?” Rich yelled horribly. “Can’t skip that one!”

Brooke started clapping her hands and chanting, cuing everyone else to do the same. “Michael in the Bathroom! Michael in the Bathroom! Michael in the Bathroom!”

“Hello, audience of three,” Michael said hurriedly, “my name’s Michael Mell, mostly, and this is the story of how my best friend was mean to me because he was just sexually assaulted and I didn’t know, and how I sat alone in the bathroom crying. That’s really all we need to know! Rich set a fire and he burned the house down! Rich set a fire and he levelled the town!”

“Jesus Christ,” Rich said, hopping on top of the closest table he could find. “I’ve been looking forward to this one.”

Smartphone Hour actually, unbelievably, miraculously, went smoothly. They had already done it once, and there were no life lessons to be learned from it. They twirled as one, they jumped as one, they brandished their useless phones as one.

Running desperately through their play at the end of the world, Michael couldn’t help but wonder what it took to truly become close with people. Was it as simple as walking in their shoes? Was it just doing the same chant over and over again? It didn’t seem right to only understand people who did things you understood. Maybe it was the reason behind it instead, that powerful force force driving them.

“Why me?”

The Squid shrugged, tucking its hands inside its sleeves. It had never forgotten a line - when it felt like giving the right one. “I don’t understand the question.”

“You could be inside world leaders, presidents. Famous people! What are you doing in me? What do you want?”

“Because you were there,” the Squid said simply, and Christine shut up, eyes widening. “We used our teenage learning algorithms to find the single life form in the school most likely to respond positively to our influence. You were far from the only teenager in this school walking around wishing for an authority figure, of course, but by accessing your IQ scores we determined you to be the most likely to purchase one.” Ouch. Christine winced. “We softened you up with Rich for a year before striking. Honestly, you never had a chance.”

There was not a lot to say to that. Christine looked down at the floor, embarrassed on Jeremy’s behalf, before remembering that she should probably improv something. “Is that true about Jeremy’s - my alternate universe self too?”

“He would have come around,” the Squid said vaguely. “The boy is a bit straight edge, but we could probably swing it. Put anybody in the right situation and they’ll crack. At the end of the day he was still Jeremy, no matter his name. Little differences like reality or personhood don’t change us as much as we would think.”

If Michael concentrated hard enough he could see himself, or his alternate universe self, snoozing
in the front row. That boy wasn’t dead. He was alive in Michael, or he was Michael, or it didn’t matter. He had to remember that.

Christine would forgive him. Probably.

“Well, I don’t think you ever really cared about improving my life!” Christine said, trying desperately to get their conversation back on track. “I really messed everything up! Like my friendships and my relationship and reality and stuff. You were supposed to make everything better. So why isn’t it?”

The Squid advanced on her, settling its hands on her shoulders, but it didn’t move any closer. Suddenly it had a respect for personal space. Whee.

“Look at yourself. You dress better, you are 93% more attractive, and you’ve...been in a romantic relationship for months now. But human activity is a matter of input as well as output.”

“What does that mean?”

“The fault…” the Squid glanced out at the audience significantly. “Is in your peers.”

It turned around and faced the audience, raising a hand and belting out its song. It was probably pretty proud of that one. The Squid liked to loudly talk about how great its lines were. It felt great about them.

“You were always quite the loser, Jeremy! Then I invaded, and you upgraded.”

Michael spitefully zoned out, checking behind him to make sure that the others were practicing their lines for ‘The Play’. Not their play, ‘The Play’. But really, the last thing Michael wanted was to do a play within a play within a play. That was way too Shakespearian, and not even the fun kind.

“Oh, Jeremy! It’s true that I found you - but look around you!”

But when Michael looked back he could see Jeremy, standing up from his seat. Instead of standing on top of it he pushed himself onto the back of the chair next to Michael’s body, vaulting over the chair so he was standing in the front row.

He reached out a hand, and Michael’s breath caught with the intense expression on his face. When he started singing too Michael was almost too shocked to register the implications. “All your peers are just so incomplete,” Jeremy sang, high and clear, unwavering. “You can’t see it but they’re all in pain. Their operating system’s obsolete. So let’s complete the chains, and get inside those brains!”

The Squid laughed, stepping forward too, and when it sung again it harmonized with Jeremy. “Let’s save the pitiful children!”

“Let’s save the pitiful children!”

“Let’s teach the pitiful children, who haven’t a clue.” It reached the end of the stage, and Jeremy was standing practically right in front of it. “Just what to do, just what to do -”

It bent down, extending a hand to Jeremy, and Jeremy reached up -

“Help them to help you!”
They tried to reach for each other’s hands, but they were pushed away.

It was like two magnets of the same poles coming together. They didn’t work anymore. The Squid gritted its teeth in frustration as it tried to cross the barrier, and Jeremy’s face was glistening with sweat. The Squid rocked back, gripping its hand, and Michael saw that it was seizing in pain. From the other side Jeremy was gasping as he cradled his hand close to his chest.

As usual, only Christine knew what to do. “This is Rich’s locker!”

They waited for Rich and Jake to quickly wheel the locker out, and for Rich to casually lean against it.

The Squid licked its lips, and practically coughed out its lines. Michael wondered what the interdimensional barrier felt like. “Open it.”

“I don’t know the combination,” Christine said, opening the locker. She peeked inside. “Hey, Squids!”

Everybody glanced back at the audience, where Jeremy was fully visible. He silently pointed at Christine’s chair, where a very battered shoebox was shoved underneath.

“There’s enough in there for the whole school,” the Squid said smoothly. But it was knocked off balance, and its gaze kept skittering to the real Jeremy every few seconds. “And more.”

Everybody turned to look at Rich, who was inspecting his nails. He looked up at them, disinterested.

“What? You all know how this really went.” He shrugged, and with a complete lack of shame strolled off the stage.

Then they all turned to look at Michael instead, who was standing in plain sight on the side of the stage.

Great. This again. If there was one experience he never wanted to relive in his entire life, this one was pretty up there. The first experience was every time that disgusting old guy Squid was feeling Jeremy up, which admittedly was on several different instances. No, that was the second instance. The first instance was when it had made Michael feel him up. Goddamnit! He had to make that thing apologize a million more times. Grovel, Squid. Grovel.

“I make it my business to know everyone’s business,” Michael complained half-heartedly. “But does anybody ever want to know mine?”

Jeremy just stared at him.

The others knew better than to continue the story. They stood and waited as Michael drew himself into the song, as he wrapped itself into its universe altering properties and pushed into the half-world between fiction and fact, here and there.

Jeremy was just staring at him, and Michael walked up. He gently pushed the Squid out of the way, bending down in front of Jeremy. He smiled weakly at him, as close as he’d ever been, as far as they’d always been.

“Is it, like, drugs?” Michael joked weakly.

“Worse than drugs,” Jeremy said. He really meant it. “Way, way worse.”
“But not, like, heroin.”

“I am way better than heroin,” the Squid said, outraged.

“Shut up,” Michael and Jeremy said simultaneously.

Michael wanted to cry a little. Michael wanted to laugh a little. He wanted to sing and dance again because it made everything simple, and he wanted to go back to lying again because that was simple too. He wanted to lie to himself and just be Michael Mell, and play video games in his basement forever. He wanted to lie to himself and just be Michael, and run and laugh and shoplift forever, or as long as he could ever keep it up.

He wanted Maria back. He wanted his best friend back. He wanted Jeremy back. He couldn’t change the past, but he could change the future.

People changed. Michael hadn’t known that before.

“A guy that I’d kinda be into,” Michael sang softly, half scared, half brave.

“A guy that I’d kinda be into,” Jeremy agreed, and when he smiled it was worth it.

“Yeah,” Michael said, “a guy that I’d kinda be into is…” he faltered. He had never finished that sentence. He didn’t know what would happen if he did.

Well, that were was only one way to find out. Hold his beer, Maria.

“A guy that I’d kinda be into is you,” Michael sang softly, and he felt something old and hard in him crumble. What was left behind was raw and exposed, like a beating heart. Is this what love was like? Being skinned alive? “It was always you.”

He chanced a look behind him. Everyone had stepped out from the wings, Brooke and Chloe and Rich and Jake, and Christine and the Squid and everyone. They were all staring, all hoping, and Michael knew that he couldn’t let them down again. Couldn’t let Jeremy down.

He took a deep breath and stood up. He slowly walked to the back of the stage, and the others quickly scrambled to make room for him. He hugged Christine, high fived Brooke, waved to Chloe and Jake. He gave Rich the finger. Rich enthusiastically flipped him off back.

Then Michael took a deep breath, and made a running start.

He ran for a few precious seconds but it stretched out longer. It felt like a hundred mile run, like his last racing conference, and when he leaped it was like breaking through a finish line. His heart soared in the beautiful moment when he was truly airborne, when everything else had been stripped away, and when Michael’s ear popped and his gut swooped and when he felt the poles of the world realign into something resembling normalcy he knew that he had made it through.

Michael crashed into a row of chairs. Ow.

If he had been expecting to wake up in his alternate universe body he was sorely mistaken. Michael groaned, eyes squeezed shut as his back spurted fireworks of pain through his torso, and he felt two warm hands hold him up and help him off the chairs. When he opened his eyes he saw Jeremy
above him, grimacing in apology as he helped him into a seat. It was only a few chairs down from
where the body of his alternate universe self sat, and now that Michael could look closer he could
see both the resemblance and the difference. He was breathing, as if he really was just asleep.

“I tried to catch you,” Jeremy explained. “You’re, uh, really heavy.”

“Tactful as usual,” Michael said dryly. He let himself sit there and gasp for a few precious
moments, his rib cage aching with every breath. His throat still felt a little raw from all that
singing. He couldn’t see the others on stage. That was good, probably.

Jeremy slowly sat down next to him, and they sat in exhausted silence. Michael just breathed, and
tried not to think about anything. He knew Jeremy was thinking about a lot. Jeremy was probably
reconsidering most of his life.

He didn’t really want to be the one to talk first, but he was Michael Mell and had never shut up
once in his whole life.

“We didn’t get to the Pants Song.”

“I really don’t want to know what that is,” Jeremy said flatly, and he shut up.

They sat in silence again and just breathed.

It wasn’t even uncomfortable. They had been best friends for twelve years, nothing was
uncomfortable anymore. Michael had once walked in on Jeremy jacking off. Granted, statistically it
was bound to happen. They were kinda dating. There was nothing they didn’t know about each
other.

But that wasn’t quite true anymore.

“Are you really from an alternate universe?” Jeremy asked finally.

“Yep.”

They sat in silence again.

“That’s so messed up.”

“Yep.” Michael paused. “Dammit, I didn’t get to say ‘Michael makes an entrance’ again. I was
looking forward to that.”

Jeremy sighed and dug around in his pocket for a cell phone. Michael didn’t recognize it. It was
obviously a girl’s phone, and it had a shitton of those little Japanese keychains with little figures
that were probably picked up at an anime convention or something.

“I found the script online,” Jeremy explained. “I was kinda bored for like five hours there. I also,
uh, googled myself. That was. Uh. A mistake.”

“Did you seriously steal Christine’s phone?” Michael asked incredulously.

Jeremy shrugged. “Her background was my face.”

That fucking girl.

But Michael could only laugh instead, rubbing his eyelids. Of course it was. “Hey, let’s take a
selfie too. Really freak her out when she wakes up.”
They took a selfie together and set it as the background. Partners in crime.

“I’m sorry,” Michael said finally. “I know that’s just a gesture… I knew that the last two hours were just a gesture… but I think gestures matter. I hope they matter.”

“They’re the only things that do sometimes.” Jeremy didn’t meet his eyes, just staring out onto the stage as if he was imagining what their friends were doing now. “Is it true? That people really can change?”

Michael reached out to take his hand, but pulled away at the last minute. “When they have someone to change for.”

They sat.

“You love to feel superior,” Jeremy said finally, “just because you listen to vinyl and eat eel in your sushi and… actually have friends and are on the track team.”

“Wait, who the fuck told you that?”

“I went through your phone too.”

“Holy shit.”

“Anyway,” Jeremy said loudly, “You don’t care about being popular. Lately you haven’t cared about anything at all. You didn’t need to apologize so much. I was being a pill. I was jealous.”

“I’m jealous you have someone who really cares about you.” Michael looked down at his lap. “Not everybody gets that, you know.”

“Yeah.” Jeremy smiled weakly at him, and Michael smiled back. “I guess that makes me pretty lucky, huh?”

“Do you… want to sing again?”

“I’m never even doing karaoke after this.”

“Yeah. I don’t think we need to either.” Jeremy took a deep breath. “I think we should start communicating outside the laws of the universe. Like, normally. If we’re going to make this relationship work.”

“You still want to make it work?”

“Of course.” It was pretty sad, how those two words set Michael alight. Or maybe it was beautiful too. “You’re my player one.”

“We aren’t singing Two Player Game.”

“Thank god.”

The theater was empty. It was huge, suitable for a crowd of people who all loved a random indie musical, and maybe even some who didn’t. Maybe there were supposed to be some dads asleep in the audience. Maybe there were supposed to be some sweepstakes winners in the audience. Michael didn’t know. The air smelled like ozone and popcorn, like the faint tang of themed mixed drinks and teenage sweat.

Instead it was just them, three teenagers, exhausted and ready to pack up for the day. Clap when
they bow. Pick up your trash. Grab t-shirts on your way out. I hope you had a good time.

Michael slowly reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew his water bottle of Mountain Dew Red.

What? There was a reason he had been chugging so much water.

“Want to get in some fisticuffs?”

“I just want to go home,” Jeremy said. He eyed the bottle suspiciously. “Is that…?”

“No, it’s Cherry Coke.” Michael shook the soda a little. The Squid hadn’t known he had it. But there was no way it didn’t, either. “I don’t think the play’ll end until you drink it.”

“What play? It’s my life.”

“I don’t think Christine… and I… get to go home before you drink it.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy sighed. “I was afraid of that.” He took the water bottle carefully, as if it was made out of gold instead of plastic, and shook it a little. It wasn’t like he was going to ruin the carbonation. “I need him gone. But I don’t really hate him.”

“It can’t stay. It knows that.”

“It always knew that. It always hated me.” Jeremy rubbed a thumb over the silver wrapping over the bottle. It was generic. “And what about you and Christine? What’s going to happen to you guys?”

He couldn’t hold it in anymore. He had to tell somebody. “I’m going to stay,” Michael burst out, heart thumping. “I - I said I wouldn’t leave you again and I meant it. I’m not planning on waking up. I want to stay here with you Jeremy, fuck everything else. I don’t care if I never make it back to the real world. I am who I always was, both of me.” He found himself getting choked up, begging Jeremy to understand. “I want to build a life with you. I already built a life for you. I don’t want to leave you and Brooke and Chloe and Rich and Jake. I don’t want to leave my mom and dad. I love being here, and I love you, and - and I’m not going back. I’ll do anything, Jeremy.”

He didn’t know what he expected. Maybe an argument, maybe Jeremy insisting that Michael leave him alone once and for all and go back to the dirty, sad world that Michael had come from. The world that didn’t hold anything for him. The world where he had no boy that he loved, no friends he would die for, no parents to come home at the end of the day, no mission that kept him going, no world to save. The world where he had been just another asshole, just another loser, instead of a hero.

But Jeremy leaned forward and kissed him, soft and slow, and pressed the bottle into Michael’s hand. He didn’t let go of it, and they were holding it together. With his other hand he twisted the cap open.

“Then let’s drink this.”

They rose the bottle to Jeremy’s lips. Michael was crying a little, crying for the second time in a day when he hadn’t cried for years, and when Jeremy drank the soda he couldn’t help but cry harder.

His boyfriend had just enough presence of mind to twist the cap back on and set it at his feet. He smiled at Michael, and kissed him again.
Then he started screaming.

Jeremy passed out in Michael’s arms, and he didn’t move until he felt Christine’s hand on his shoulder, guiding him up so they could climb back on stage with Jeremy slung over his shoulder, back to where they came from, back to where they belonged.

Jeremy didn’t wake up for a while.

Michael, just like last time, spent most of it in the hospital. He could drive to the hospital these days. That was exciting. The world had gone back to existing. He was really pumped about that.

Everybody had stopped by. There had been a lot of hugging and back slapping. Brooke had cried, but not before punching him on the arm. Hard. It had hurt.

Christine cried a lot. A lot, a lot. She just sat on the chair next to Jeremy and cried and cried. Michael sat next to her, holding her close.

“You don’t even want to go home,” she hiccuped, “don’t you?”

Michael sat awkwardly.

She coughed, rubbing at her eyes. “You have parents, Michael. You have friends and people who care about you. You...you have me.”

“I know,” Michael said sincerely. “I’ll miss you more than anyone else.”

Then she started crying again. She got snot all over his CREEPS shirt, because he had given the letterman back to Jake. He liked the CREEPS shirt. It felt right. Still, the sobbing was a little awkward.

The hospital didn’t smell like antiseptic.

He knew that things were fixed. Mr. Heere dropped by, and spent a long time holding Jeremy’s hand. He cried a little too. Michael explained everything, as best as he could. Well. He explained the important bits, anyway. The bits that he could understand.

There was a lot that not even Michael understood. He didn’t understand how reality worked, and which theory had really been right. But he wasn’t really alone in that. He didn’t understand how he and Jeremy passed back throughout the worlds, and he had never quite worked out how this had happened in the first place. The Squid had been so vague.

The Squid was gone, and it wasn’t coming back. Michael didn’t miss how terrible it made him feel, but he kind of missed it. Not enough to mourn it, but enough for regrets.
Michael’s mom had dropped by, because Jeremy was like a second son to her, and for the first time in four years Michael didn’t feel vaguely guilty about crying in his mother’s arms. So much fucking crying. He had some catching up to do.

Hey. Christine kept on telling him about how Jeremy kept crying at the drop of a hat in her fanfictions. Crying was normal and expected in ‘Be More Chill’. Tons of crying everywhere.

The worst part was, more than anything, that Michael knew he was sitting by the side of a hospital bed on a stage.

It wasn’t reality’s fault. Reality was fine. If Michael closed his eyes and squinted he couldn’t see it. If he blinded himself then he knew it was fine. But the play was drawing to a close, and one way or another that door was going to be locked forever. Maybe once Christine left Michael wouldn’t have to look at what he left behind anymore.

But for the time being Michael knew he was doing nothing but sitting on a stage, waiting for the world to end.

Rich didn’t have to be there, but he was anyway. He said something vague about keeping things in line, and keeping Michael in line, but Rich had always been the second vaguest person he knew and there was no point trying to get real answers out of him.

Still, didn’t mean he couldn’t try.

“So how much did you actually know?” Michael asked, exasperated. “You kept on acting like you knew everything that was going on. Were you just bullshitting us?”

The other boy was sitting on the other hospital bed prop, and by the way he walked around Michael knew all he was seeing was the stage too. He wondered absently if Rich could jump off too, if he really wanted. But Rich may have found some reasons to stay. Maybe that was what he had been thinking, in the dappled shadow of a lighter’s flame on the ceiling of Jake’s house.

But when Rich answered it was subdued, almost honest. “Nobody ever really paid any attention to me. I only had one song.”

“It was a pretty baller song, though.”

“Totally. But I didn’t have any lines either. I wasn’t really anything until you came along. Just another bully, I guess.” Rich shrugged uncomfortably. “I changed. It opened doors. It wasn’t my life that changed, dude. It was me. I couldn’t go back to who I used to be.”

Jeremy wasn’t hooked up to any machines. It was as if he was sleeping, sweating from the single spotlight cast on him. It was like there was nothing else except for them. Maybe there wasn’t.

Michael knew. He had always known, he just hadn’t wanted to admit it.

“I wasn’t afraid anymore,” Rich said.

Michael knew. If he could go the rest of his life without knowing, if he could return to being the kind of person who could forget, he would in a heartbeat. But people change, and you can never quite change back. Michael couldn’t be a coward again if he wanted to.

And people deserve to go home.

Somebody knocked on the door and came in anyway, and Michael knew without looking it was
Brooke. She smiled awkwardly, clutching a big bear to her chest, and casually threw it at the comatose patient’s head. Michael sighed and set it on the nightstand.

Christine ducked in after her, smiling shyly, holding a big bouquet of sunflowers. She set it on Jeremy’s windowsill, where the light streamed in, where you could see the dust mites flying in the air and settling in on her frizzy hair.

After her was Chloe, who was laughing and shoving at Jake for some joke he was making. Chloe was holding a shopping bag from Nordstrom, and set it at the foot of his bed. Jake was carrying a basketball, and carelessly dumped it in the bag.

“We figured that since he doesn’t have a sexy robot following him around anymore he could use the help.” Chloe rolled her eyes, jerking her thumb at Jake. “He wants to teach him how to play sports. Boy is ganglier than string bean, no way is he going to manage anything other than pulling his Achilles tendon.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, “but it’ll be funny.”

“Can you take pictures?” Brooke asked eagerly. “We can so put it on Vine.”

“Honey, you’re a genius.”

“Jenna says hi and that she absolutely has to know what happened,” Christine broke in, smiling softly. She walked up and squeezed Michael’s hand, and he found to his embarrassment that she was crying again. “I see it in your eyes, Michael. You made your decision, huh?”

“I’m not a jerk,” Michael croaked, rubbing at his eyes. “I gotta kick the asses of those bullies somehow.”

She smiled mysteriously, yet dangerously. “Oh, I don’t think they’ll be a problem anymore.”

“I’ve been teaching her kung fu,” Jake volunteered. “Girl is a wolverine.”

“We are tiny yet mighty!” Brooke called.

“I don’t know how to break it to him,” Michael confessed. “I told him that I’d never leave him alone again.”

“You won’t be,” Rich said quietly. He was sitting on the other bed, legs crossed, and Jake was sitting next to him. They were holding hands. If anybody would know, it was those two. “Michael Mell will still be here. You’ll always be here. And if you ever want to see us again, just buy a ticket. Twenty dollars. Get them before they’re sold out.” He smiled weakly. “We’re here every night.”

“Is there a bootleg on YouTube?” Brooke asked eagerly. “Can you make a picture of us your desktop background?”

“Please tell me there’s fanart,” Chloe begged. “Is it flattering? I don’t want some greasy fourteen year old ruining my nose.”

“There’s definitely fanart,” Christine said flatly.

“I want to see one of those animatic things,” Jake kicked his heels against the side of the bed. “I kinda want to get into animation, you know? Shit looks dope.”
“Write fanfiction and you die,” Rich drawled, and Christine winced. Too late there, buddy.

Christine squeezed his hand, and Michael squeezed back. He was crying again. Like a dumbass. “I’ll come every night,” he promised shakily. “And make fun of the actors. And throw popcorn at the Squid.” He reached out his other hand and brushed Jeremy’s hair away from his eyes. His face was still and slack in sleep. “I just don’t know what to say to him.”

There was a piano.

They all groaned as one, burying their face in their hands and sighing, but Rich just laughed. That maniac. “You gotta buy him a rose!”

“Please shut up,” Michael begged.

But Christine just elbowed him in the side, giggling. The piano was a little electronica. Very nice. “Compliment him on his clothes.”

“Say you appreciate that he’s smart,” Jake said hypocritically.

Brooke made an obscene gesture. “No, man, tell him that he excites you sexually.”

“Oh, god,” Michael moaned. “Please shut up.”

But the piano didn’t stop, and Michael couldn’t help but nod along. Maybe just one last time couldn’t hurt.

They harmonized again, voices melding into each other seamlessly, and Michael couldn’t despair anymore. It was hard to be sad when you were singing. It was, like, a rule. “And that’s the way you get to her heart. Trust me I know, how it’s gonna go. Listen and oh!”

“And there are voices in my ear,” Michael broke in effortlessly, as if it was his all along, as if it would always be his. The guitar thrummed, and the drums echoed, and it was such a light and hopeful song Michael couldn’t stop crying. But it was from a different emotion this time. He couldn’t place what it was. Someday, somehow, he would know. “And I guess these never disappear. I’ll let ‘em squeal and I will deal, and make up my own mind. Might still have voices in my head, but now they’re just the normal kind. Voices in my head, but now they’re the normal kind!”

Rich smiled wryly. “Summon strength from within.”

Brooke sat down on Jeremy’s bed, grinning broadly, and gave him a friendly punch in the shoulder. “Don’t get hung up on your skin!”

“He probably thinks that acne is hot,” Chloe volunteered helpfully.

Jake gave him a big thumbs up, grinning wickedly, and Michael knew he was fucknig with him. “I’ll give you a rope homeslice, and give you some dope advice.”

“Please never say that again,” Michael begged, beginning to rise from his chair. He needed some water. Maybe to escape a little.

But Brooke placed a palm on top of his head and pressed down, shaking her finger at him. She harmonized with the others, who were all laughing at him. “Now sit right down and give him a shot! Buddy you’ll see, it’ll go perfectly, if you listen to me, me, me!”
“And there are voices all around,” Michael sang softly, “and you can never mute the sound. They scream and shout, I tune ‘em out, and make up my own mind. Might still have voices in my head. But now they’re just the normal kind. Voices in my head, but now they’re -”

“The normal kind?”

Michael started, heart leaping into his throat. Jeremy cracked his eyes open, smiling weakly, and Brooke quickly hopped off the bed. Jeremy sat up slowly, grimacing and holding his back, and Christine pressed a hand on his spine and helped him up.

“You know,” Michael said lamely. “Because there’s two of me. Alternate universe me and this universe me. Fake and real me. Me and me. You know. Metaphor.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that.” Jeremy smiled, but there was something faintly guilty about it. “I really did go through your phone. I saw your name.”

“Was it a nice name?”

“It was generic. I liked it, though. I still remember how it felt,” Jeremy said weakly. He looked away, swallowing, and Michael wondered if he missed the Squid. “It’s embarrassing to know that deep down I just wanted things to be easy.”

“But who wants them to be hard?” Michael shrugged uncomfortably. “I - I just wanted things to be easy too. That’s why I wanted to stay. But Jeremy, I think life is really hard. And - and I think I’m not going to lie to myself anymore. Jeremy, I’m so sorry, but I -”

“Just say what’s on your mind, Michael.”

He swallowed. “I have to go.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said weakly, but grinning bright and true. “I was hoping you might say that.” He took a deep breath, coughing a little, but he reached out and squeezed Jeremy’s hand. “And any voices in our heads?”

“There may be voices in our heads.” Michael fought back tears again, but somehow when it was Jeremy it was okay. He wanted to promise, but he wasn’t sure if he could. He knew that all Jeremy would have to go on when he was gone was a promise. “But I swear the voices there will be the regular kind.”

“Me and the voices in our head,” Jeremy sang, bright and true, “have made up our collective mind.”

Michael laughed, and reached out to smooth back Jeremy’s hair. “What do they say we should do?”

“I think all of us want to say goodbye to you.”

Michael stood up, because he couldn’t stay. He took Christine’s hand, still holding Jeremy’s with the other, and he helped Jeremy stand up. Jeremy was in hospital scrubs, and he was shaking on his feet, but he looked happy. Jeremy hadn’t looked really happy in a long time. That, at least, was worth it.

“And there are voices in my head,” Michael, Christine, and Jeremy sang, as if it had always just been them. “So many voices in my head.”
“And they can yell and hurt like hell,” Brooke and Rich sang, his first two friends. “But I know that I’ll be fine.”

“I still have voices in my head,” Chloe and Jake sang, the most unexpected of all, “I still have voices in my head!”

“But the loudest one is mine!”

“I still have voices in my head -”

“- but the loudest one is mine!”

They were on a stage again.

They were all standing there, just Michael and his friends, and he surged forward and kissed Jeremy, letting go of Christine’s hand. He held Jeremy’s face and leaned into him, and Jeremy kissed him back, as if they would never see each other again.

But that wasn’t true, and that was why Michael could bear to separate from him. Jeremy would always be here, laughing with his friends, doing his homework and being a kid. He would always be on stage, singing for Michael, just for Michael. And Michael would be there too. Always the best friend. Maybe the boyfriend. It didn’t really matter at the end of the day.

They pulled apart eventually, and Michael took Christine’s hand again. They hugged each other too. Of course, they would see each other again.

“C’mon,” Michael said.

Christine beamed. “Let’s go.”

“I am so ready to leave this stupid fucking play.”

“God, if I’m here one more second I’m going to go insane.”

They both laughed, because it wasn’t quite true, because it was a little true.

Their friends clapped, laughing and cheering, and Michael knew that they could see the stage too. Michael looked out into the audience, and through the theater he could see two sleeping figures. God, when he got home he was going to sleep for a week.

Home. Never thought he’d say that again.

“C - c - c’mon, c - c - c’mon, go go!”

Michael and Christine took their running start -

“C - c - c’mon, c - c - c’mon, go go!”

Michael and Christine leapt -

“Go, go, go, go -!”

Michael and Christine lost themselves in the arch of flight, and rose, and fell, and broke through something hard and real and tangible, and they left it all behind as they took their bows in the final -
Chapter End Notes

Just the epilogue left.
David and Diana woke up.

He jumped up, looked down at himself. He looked up. He looked at Diana, who had also jumped up. Her jaw dropped. He looked at himself again.

When David looked up, when David de la Cruz looked up, he saw a man who looked startlingly like Keanu Reeves standing in the center of an empty stage.

“Oh, son of a bitch!” David screamed.

“Fucking asshole cocksucking motherfucking cunt face pissant jerkbutt!” Diana Hoang screamed. She was wearing a hoodie and oversized jeans. She looked just like he remembered, and a little different too.

“Get down here and fight me in real life, Squid!”

“I hoped you enjoyed the performance,” the Squid said loudly, over them talking. “It is always a pleasure to deliver an… unforgettable night for our audience.”

“I’ll fight you in real life, asshole!” Diana screamed.

“And always remember,” the Squid said smoothly, or the Keanu Reeves look alike, or Keanu Reeves, literally what he fuck ever, “if we shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended .”

“You’re dead, you hear me!”

“That you have but slumbered here, while these visions did appear -”

“Don’t Shakespeare me, asshole!”

“And this weak but idle theme,” the Squid continued louder. “No more yielding than a dream. If you pardon, we will mend. And, as I am an honest robot, if we have such unearned luck -”

“I was kind of sad you died, you dick!”

The Squid’s eyebrow twitched. “Now to scape the serpent’s tongue, we will make amends ere long. Else the Squid - SQUIP a liar call, so good night unto you all.” It bowed theatrically and with a flourish. “Give me your hands -”
“I’ll give you a knuckle sandwich!”

“If we be friends, and the Squid shall restore amends.”

The curtain drew, and the last David saw of it was a white smile in the darkness.

David and Diana stared at each other. They looked the same, but a little different too.

They couldn’t help it - they laughed. Diana dove in to hug him, and although she smelled weird David hugged her back. On their Diana improvement plan he would have to buy her some nicer deodorant. And maybe buy himself some new deodorant. He wore Axe.

Damn, bitch. He lived like this?

“Come on,” he said, “let’s go home.”

The harsh light of the theater lobby was blinding, after about two hours and two months spent asleep. Michael checked his phone and found that it was, honest to god, March. He couldn’t believe that he had lived almost an entire new semester of school. God.

“So, uh,” Diana said, slightly strangled. “Just to be clear. That happened, right?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that,” David said, depressed. Back to an empty house, he guessed. Whee. “If there was singing…”

“Yep.”

They stopped and stared at each other.

She really was a little frumpy. Theater actors weren’t exactly chosen for their movie star good looks, and she didn’t take great care of herself. David was well aware that he dressed like a bit of a douche. They both had some catching up to do.

Still, his eyes really hurt. When he left the lobby he bumped right into someone.

He was almost thrown back on his ass, Diana rescuing him just in time, but the other kid wasn’t so lucky. He toppled to the ground, kippah flying off, and David winced guilty as the guy scrambled to pick it up.

When he saw David he squeaked and gripped the kippah to his chest. “David! Fancy seeing you here! Coincidence! Well, not really, uh, I gave you the ticket - yeah! Did you like the play?”

“It was horrible,” David panned, but he couldn’t beat back the grin. “I loved it.”

The boy flushed, the tips of his ears practically glowing red. “I’m so glad. Hey, uh, anyone ever tell you that you look a little like George Salazar? Not in a weird way, just, uh, just saying.”

“It’s why we’re friends,” Diana said smoothly. She elbowed David in the side, who elbowed back. “I use him as a model for my fanart.”

“You draw fanart too?” Oh, god, he was excited. Then his eyebrows furrowed, looking between them. “Wait, you’re, uh, friends?”

“She’s my best friend,” David said honestly, slinging an arm around her shoulder. “Hopeless nerd, but we’re working on it.”
“He wears Axe, but we’re working on it.”

“Hey!”

She shrugged. “I preach only the gospel.”

“Oh. That’s cool.” The guy scrubbed the back of his neck. “Hey, uh, me and my friends all came down to see the play. We’re going to go in and see it pretty soon. Until we get in, do you want to, if you’re still around, get...lunch with us? Just the two - I mean, all of us! All of my friends are over there!” He pointed over in the small commons in front of where the theater was. There were some grass and trees and a picnic bench, and there was a picnic bench. All of his friends were sitting around it. “I don’t know if you know them, we’re all kind of theater geeks - Samantha’s the one with the nice hair, Forrest’s working on his calculus homework. Zack’s tiny, he’s sleeping. Lundyn’s the blonde one, she’s really sweet. What do you say?”

“I think it sounds great,” David said honestly. “Hey, you think they have any more tickets left? It’s so nice, I’ll see it twice.”

“Really?” Horribly, awesomely, the kid brightened. “Are the songs stuck in your head too? They’re totally stuck in my head. Diana, are you seeing it too?”

“I would love to, Noah,” Diana said warmly. She stuck her hands in her hoodie pockets. “I could use some sun, anyway. C’mon, let’s go.”

David couldn’t help but laugh. “C - c’mon, c - c’mon, go, go!”

Noah beamed. Probably overjoyed that they had liked it. He was a good guy. He should see if they could get dinner together later. Maybe just the two of them. “C’mon, go go!”

“C’mon,” David said, at last. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

That was the weirdest fucking story I’ve ever written. Thank you for reading all the way through. I think this may be the last story I write for Be More Chill, so if you’ve followed me as a writer through my ridiculous oeuvre I appreciate it so much. You guys have made an impulse an experience, and I could not be more thankful.

End Notes

This is a completed story. I will update every Friday with a chapter about this length, or a bit shorter. It will get long, so buckle in. For clarity’s sake, I’ve been referring to our dubious hero and heroine as Mike and Chris, and I welcome you to do the same. Giant shout out to Nymm_at_Night for her perpetual help in acting as a lyricist and copy editor.
I'm at theinternationalacestation.tumblr.com in case you want to bang at my door asking me why I would do this. I have no answer.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!