### I Read About the Afterlife (But I Never Really Lived)

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**Summary**

Tyler’s breath was short and he put down the ukulele to curl himself around his best friend just as Ryan used his last bit of energy to say, “Tyler, I’m scared.”

“I know,” Tyler whispered. “Me too.”

Neither of them saw anything after that.

Tyler and Ryan have been dealt a pretty shitty hand in life, so they deal with it the only way they know how.
Notes

I still have no idea what this is. Enjoy, I guess

See the end of the work for more notes.
A lot of different things go through your mind when you want to die.

The most important thing that went through Tyler’s mind was that he didn’t want to be alone anymore. He’d been alone for his entire life and he was done with being alone. Absolutely, positively, one-hundred percent done. Done with all the bullshit life kept throwing at him, like how his best friend couldn’t see him anymore, or see anything really, because of a drunk driver. How his mom had taken away his music because she believed he would pursue it as a career – well, she wasn’t wrong – and that he needed to get a real job when he grew up. How his dad had gotten drunk when he was 13 and driven them straight into a building, killing himself and Tyler’s older sister (he still had the scar about his right eyebrow from a particularly sharp piece of glass to prove it).

Life pretty much sucked for Tyler.

It sucked for Ryan, too. For fuck’s sake, he couldn’t even see anymore. How was he supposed to read or write or do fucking anything? He’d spent sixteen years of his life preparing to be a writer because, fuck, he could write. At least that’s what Tyler told him, and coming from Tyler, that was pretty amazing. He couldn’t become an author if he couldn’t see his hand holding the pencil, or watch carefully as his fingers flew across the keyboard, typing out the stories of his characters.

His second option in life was music. Ryan was pretty damn good at his guitar, but now he couldn’t find his guitar in his room because he couldn’t find his way around, damn it. Tyler had eventually told him that his guitar wasn’t even in his room anymore, that Ryan’s dad had thrown it away. That fucker, Tyler’d sworn he’d kill him.

Now here they both sat, in Ryan’s bed, with their parents out of town, bleeding out from their wrists and their ankles, and a particularly deep cut on the side of Tyler’s throat. The house was perfectly silent, and while Tyler was content for the first time in his life, knowing everything would disappear soon, Ryan was not.

“Fuck, Tyler,” he groaned, rolling over and resting his chin on his best friend’s knee. “It’s so quiet. God it… it’s unearthly.”

“You’re mom’s unearthly,” Tyler grumbled half-heartedly. “Shit, Ryan, what do you expect me to do about it?”

“Sing to me.” Ryan’s answered came without hesitation. “My dad has a ukulele in his room.”

Tyler glanced nervously down at his friend, who’s eyes were closed blissfully. “Don’t fall asleep yet, Ry,” he said quietly. “I’ll be right back.”

He pushed Ryan’s head off of his lap and left his best friend’s bedroom, walking down the hallway and dragging his arm across the white-painted wall, grinning sheepishly at the little crimson trail his wrist left behind him. Ryan’s parents wouldn’t care because his parents didn’t care about him and Tyler’s parent didn’t care about Tyler.

Sure enough, in Ryan’s parents’ room, there was a ukulele hanging up on the wall, which Tyler took down carefully. It was a pretty shit ukulele, but if Ryan wanted Tyler to sing to him, you bet your life Tyler was going to sing to him one last time.

When he returned to Ryan’s room, the brunet was resting on his back, his face looking particularly soft and gentle. Tyler sat down on the bed, and when it dipped, Ryan sat up and leaning on Tyler’s
shoulder. “Did you find it?”

“Yeah,” Tyler told him softly, positioning the ukulele and resting the body on his knee. “What do you want me to sing?”

“Something you wrote,” Ryan answered quickly, curling around his best friend. “You’ve never sang me any of that, you know that, right? I’m sure they’re amazing, because I’ve heard you sing before and seen what you can write. You’re perfect, Tyler. You’ve just been thrown a shitty life.”

Tyler snorted and decided to keep talking to Ryan while in his mind he sifted through his music. “Wish I could agree,” he said. “If I did, we wouldn’t be doing this.”

“I don’t want to stay,” Ryan said softly as Tyler took a deep breath and got ready to play before remembering, damn it, this song wasn’t even for his ukulele because he’d written it at the music store downtown after his mother had confiscated his instruments, and of course he was only allowed to play the piano there.

Improvisation, Tyler thought. He could easily transfer the piano onto the ukulele without too much thought, after all, he knew the notes easily enough.

“I don’t want to stay, either,” he whispered as his fingers plucked out the first few notes, and he went over the lyrics roughly in his head just to make sure he got them one-hundred percent correct. “Now the night is coming to an end.”

Ryan nodded at how true this was, because their lives were depressing as shit and he wanted nothing more than to leave.

“The sun will rise and we will try again.”

This part didn’t make sense with how Ryan was previously thinking about the song, unless Tyler was implying that he was going to call 9-1-1…

“Stay alive, stay alive, for me.”

How ironic.

“You will die, but now your life is free.”

More like ‘over’, Ryan thought with a note-less hum, burying his face in Tyler’s side to breathe in the smell of his best friend once again.

“Take pride in what is sure to die.”

How can one take pride in themselves when they hate themselves so much? Ryan had no idea how Tyler had written this when here they were, already so close to death.

“I will fear the night again.”

Ryan didn’t fear the night. He never had, even as a kid, because it was stupid. Nothing was going to get to. Was Tyler afraid of the dark? He was too tired to ask.

“I hope I’m not my only friend.”

I’m your friend, Ty, Ryan wanted to protest, but his lips felt numb and he couldn’t move them.

“Stay alive, stay alive, for me.”
In his new-found state of paralysis, Ryan was panicking. He didn’t know he’d be suddenly scared to leave. No no no, he didn’t want this anymore. He had to get Tyler to call an ambulance but he couldn’t speak and he couldn’t move and, fuck, he had to stay alive, for Tyler.

“You will die, but now your life is free.”

No, Ryan thought, desperately trying to move his lips. No, I won’t die, Tyler please, fuck, call a fucking ambulance.

“Take pride in what is sure to die.”

Tyler’s breath was short and he put down the ukulele to curl himself around his best friend just as Ryan used his last bit of energy to say, “Tyler, I’m scared.”

“I know,” Tyler whispered. “Me too.”

Neither of them saw anything after that.
The first thing Ryan saw when he opened his eyes was blue. There was a blue-haired boy sitting on the floor in front of him, his back to Ryan. Tyler was curled around him, his face in the other boy’s shirt, his breathing steady and his eyes closed. The brunet guessed he was asleep.

“Am I dead?” Ryan wondered aloud, because that was the only obvious explanation. He could see, for fuck’s sake, and he didn’t have any scars from when he had tried to kill himself. Come to think of it, neither did Tyler. From what Ryan could see, his best friend’s skin was perfectly clear, not a trace of what had happened that night left on him.

At the sound of Ryan’s voice, the blue-haired boy (Ryan had taken to calling him Blue Boy in his head) jumped up and spun around, and stared. He stared right at Ryan and Tyler like he’d never seen another human being in his entire life.

And then he screamed.

“I’m not going to hurt you!” Ryan exclaimed, jumping up and pushing his palms away from his chest. “Please stop screaming, somebody might hear you!”

“I already heard him! Jesus Christ, you do this every time, calm down!”

There was another boy standing in the doorway to the room they were in with dark brown hair and dark brown eyes, wearing a low-neck gray tank-top and red plaid boxer shorts, and he was looking at Blue Boy with a look of complete exasperation. When Blue Boy didn’t stop screaming, the other boy (he was admittedly very attractive, but there was no way in hell Ryan was going to refer to him as Hot Boy in his head, no way, not at all) ran a hand roughly through his hair and sighed audibly before approaching Ryan.

“Don’t worry about it.” Hot Boy (okay so maybe he’d been lying to himself, whatever) said, locking eyes with Ryan. When he did nothing, the other boy reached out a tentative hand to touch Ryan’s arm. Oh. He’d been asking for consent to touch him? “This literally happens every single time somebody shows up here, so don’t take it personally. This is just what Josh does.”

So Blue Boy’s name was Josh. Good to know.
The screaming was becoming a bit annoying, Ryan had to admit, but nothing prepared him for a very small boy with blond hair and a fedora to run into the room, look quickly between Ryan and Hot Boy and Josh and Tyler, break out into a grin, and then also start screaming. “God damn it, Patrick!”

Blond Boy “Patrick” just kept grinning and screaming and smirking at Hot Boy who was looking exceedingly pissed off at this fact, and Ryan sent a nervous glance over at Tyler, worried that all of this shouting and yelling and, dear lord, the screaming, would wake him up.

And sure enough, after about seven more seconds of this, Tyler was sitting up and groaning and blinking his eyes to adjust to the unnaturally bright lighting of the room that they were in. He took one look at Josh and Patrick, and was also set into screaming. “For fuck’s sake, you’re going to wake up Pete!” Hot Boy yelled, and Patrick ceased making that god forsaken noise for a moment to let out a string of giggles and then continued to scream. At this point, Ryan was annoyed at the screaming, he had a massive headache, and he was absolutely terrified of whoever this “Pete” was, because if Hot Boy was scared of him, then Ryan should probably also be scared of him.

“Why the hell is everyone screaming!”

The screaming abruptly stopped – except for Patrick – as a tall guy with bleached blond hair that was brown at the roots (he was only a couple of inches taller than Patrick, from what Ryan could tell) and with a lot of tattoos stepped into the room. Josh looked absolutely and utterly terrified while Hot Boy just looked smug, and Tyler was hiding behind Ryan.

“Josh started it,” Patrick said as soon as Hot Boy and Tattoo Guy had gotten him to stop screaming.

Josh let out a stream of incoherent words before stuttering, “These guys scared me! Why does everyone die in my room, every single time? It’s not fair, go die in Mikey’s room or something!”

Tattoo Guy pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Josh, you can’t keep doing this,” he grumbled. “Nobody ever gets any sleep anymore.”

The blue-haired boy rolled his eyes and crossed his arms with a huff. He most certainly did not look very pleased with having all of the blame of the situation placed on himself, and Ryan didn’t exactly blame him. Tattoo Guy was pretty intimidating, even if he was really short. “It’s not my fault people keep killing themselves,” he muttered, but didn’t argue any more than that.

Satisfied with Josh’s answer, Tattoo Guy turned toward Ryan and Tyler, who was still cowering behind the brunet. “I’m Pete,” he said, then pointed a thumb at Hot Guy, “and this is Brendon.” Honestly, the only thing Ryan could think was that their names suited them. “You’ve already met Josh” – Josh waved – “and Patrick. We’ve got some other people downstairs. And for the record,” Pete continued, turning to Josh, “people don’t show up in Mikey’s room because it’s also my room, and whoever the hell is controlling this shit knows I’d kill anyone who died in there.”

“Are we dead, then?”

Ryan was admittedly a bit surprised to hear Tyler speak up from behind him, and he stepped out of the way. His friend was sitting on the footboard of the bed, his toes brushing over the carpeted ground lightly. All in all, Tyler looked pretty vulnerable. His hair was ruffled like he’d been asleep for a few hours (Ryan supposed that he technically had) and his shirt was hanging loosely off of his body. He only had one sock on, because that’s what Tyler did whenever he came over to Ryan’s house, always took one sock off and stuff it in one of his shoes before proceeding single-socked to Ryan’s bedroom where they’d just do whatever.
Brendon nodded in affirmation to Tyler’s question, and Ryan felt his stomach open up into a pit of nothingness and anxiety. So this was what happened when you died. You got sent to a place full of screaming men. He wasn’t exactly sure how bad of a thing this was, because they were all fairly attractive, but Ryan really needed to get his mind out of the gutter for two seconds and ask a damned question. “So, it worked?” He exchanged a look with Tyler who shrugged.

“What, you mean your plans to kill yourselves?” It was Brendon who said this, and Ryan was not ready to take suicide-shame from him, of all people, because he was still referred to as Hot Boy occasionally in his head. It wasn’t exactly a lie. “Yeah, it definitely worked. You’re bound to be confused, but your questions will be answered as we go along. For now, uh. You should sleep somewhere because we have to leave in the morning. Pete?”

He looked at the tattooed man, who just shrugged. “Don’t know if there are any clean rooms left,” he answered Brendon’s unspoken question. “So they can stay in Josh’s room. Or Patrick’s room, or your room, but I doubt you’d appreciate that.”

Josh looked a bit annoyed that his room had been thrown on the chopping block, but he didn’t say anything. Ryan didn’t know how he felt about Josh yet. “I wouldn’t mind,” Brendon said. “I mean, I’ve got two beds, so he” – he pointed at Tyler – “can have one to himself and pretty boy can sleep with me.”

Patrick rolled his eyes at this while Ryan attempted to keep his face as a reasonable temperature. “Brendon, you’re not sleeping with the new guy. He’s, like, fourteen.”

“Seventeen,” Ryan corrected.

“Same difference.”

“Actually, it’s no-“

His attempts at arguing were interrupted by Brendon and Patrick bickering, and Ryan decided to try and shut them up. He sat on the mattress beside Tyler, and the bed dipped a bit as Josh crawled onto it and sat on Tyler’s other side. “They’re a bit annoying,” he said, smiling a little bit. “Sorry about Patrick and I probably breaking your ears. The only reason Patrick does that is because he has a massive crush on Pete or something. I’m still trying to figure out just what’s going on here.” Josh gestured at the three boys who were arguing. “There’s definitely something there. Other than Brendon being a dick, as usual.”

Ryan tried to ignore Josh, because he’d decided that he didn’t exactly like him after he’d busted his ears, but his attempts failed absolutely horrible as Josh decided to ask them questions. “So, you already know I’m Josh, who are you?”

“Tyler.” The answer was quiet, and Ryan asked himself not for the first time if Tyler had actually wanted to end his life. He didn’t look exactly happy at the prospect of being dead. “I’m Tyler.”

“Ryan Ro-“ Ryan’s attempt to state his full name was put to an end by Brendon suddenly turning around and slamming a hand over his mouth while Patrick, Pete, and Josh gaped at him, looking a bit horrified. Was ’Ryan’ really such a bad name?

Josh must have seen the confusion in Ryan’s eyes because he whispered, “You don’t share your last name.”

Brendon removed his hand and Ryan moved around his lips before looking at the others curiously. “Why not?”
Patrick shrugged, taking the chance of distraction to take his hat, which Pete had stolen and was wearing, back and placed it on his own head. “We don’t know,” he explained uncertainly. “You just don’t. It’s probably the last personal thing we all hang onto, besides how we all… you know.” The blond drew a forefinger across his neck and Ryan suddenly felt sick to his stomach again. “So, don’t share either of those things. I guess you and Tyler can talk about them if you already know how each of you offed yourselves, but just be careful with other people, okay? Some guys here will use that knowledge to their advantage. They can be really manipulative and nobody should ever have to go through that. Sorry,” he added, looking down at his white shoes.

All of this was very confusing to Ryan, but he didn’t argue and decided to just take Patrick’s word for it, especially because nobody was arguing with him. “How did you know we killed ourselves?”

Pete snorted as if he’d said something funny. “Everyone here’s committed suicide,” he said. “But you can talk to Brendon about that because I don’t think Patrick or Josh have an extra bed.” He stopped talking to send a pointed glare at Brendon, who rolled his eyes and promised he wouldn’t try anything with a smirk at Ryan.

“I’m not gay,” he blurted, with a glance at Tyler, who’s eyes read ‘bullshit’.

Brendon let out a snorted laugh and turned, leaving the room. “You’re gay,” Josh muttered, shoving Ryan and Tyler after the brunet by their backs.

On the way over, Brendon explained that they were crashing in a very small hotel that didn’t have anyone in it. His room was fairly nice, although the color scheme wasn’t even a color scheme, just grayscale. He did, in fact, have two beds and a couch – Tyler soon discovered it was a fold-out couch, to which Brendon explained it was actually broken thanks to the second night when everyone had crashed in his room. The group consisted of quite a few people, most of which Josh had screamed over and Pete had gotten annoyed about. Everyone in this place had killed themselves and was under the age of eighteen for some reason, but Ryan didn’t push the question.

Tyler went to take a shower first and Ryan stood uncertainly off to the side while Brendon lounged on his bed and flipped through TV channels. He was surprised by the fact that they actually had TV channels here. “Do I actually have to sleep in your bed?”

Brendon shrugged, not tearing his eyes away from the television. “Whatever you want,” he replied calmly. “I don’t really care, I was just messing with Pete and Patrick because Patrick thinks I have this horribly sick mind. I mean, he isn’t exactly wrong about that, but come on, you literally just died, I’m not going to fuck you.” He sent a smirk in Ryan’s direction and added, “Yet,” which left the brunet flustered and quite upset.

“I’m not gay,” he pressed, and Brendon rolled his eyes.

“Keep telling yourself that, honey.”

Tyler took this moment to come out of the bathroom, his hair and skin still semi-wet from the shower, and Ryan darted in to take his own shower and get his mind off of how obnoxious Brendon was being already.

When he finished showering, Tyler was snoozing in the other bed and Brendon was asleep in his own bed, so Ryan grabbed a couple of blankets and a pillow and curled up on the couch to sleep. But something wasn’t right. Nothing was ever right, really, but this time it was really different. Ryan felt off, like something was watching him, and that something was very, very dangerous. But he
didn’t say anything, nor did he bother waking Brendon up because he didn’t want him to think he actually was a fourteen year old, like Patrick had assumed.

This was probably the biggest mistake he made that night, because after an hour of restless sleep, somebody was screaming again. And this time, it was Brendon.

Before he knew what was happening, Ryan shot up on the couch and saw Tyler hiding behind the TV stand, while Brendon was trapped in his bed beneath a large black beast with long tusks and blood dripping from fangs. Panic almost completely took over Ryan, and then Pete was there stabbing a spear-like object through the beast and Patrick had gotten Tyler out from the television and was pulling Ryan to his feet.

Brendon rolled away from the animal and grabbed a large duffel bag from under his bed. They pulled Ryan and Tyler out of the room and into the hallway where some other people, including Josh, were, looking fairly unfazed and all holding weaponry of some sort. When Pete and Brendon emerge, Pete shoved a heavy piece of furniture that was out in the hallway against the door, most likely to prevent the monster from coming out after them. “What was that?” Ryan whispered.

“It was probably just a baby,” the person next to him with dyed black hair answered. Ryan hadn’t expected anybody to hear, let alone answer him. “Baby Nightmares can’t really do that much, and Brendon should have know it was there.”

“Don’t be an ass, Frank,” the guy standing next to him, with short hair dyed bright red-orange said, nudging “Frank” good-naturedly. “Brendon’s a woos at heart.”

“At least I saved you from having to guys who take six hour long showers in your room,” Brendon growled, moving to stand between the orange haired guy and Frank. “Seriously, Ryan, take shorter showers. I fell asleep before you were out. Speaking of being out, please stop playing the ‘I’m not gay’ card, because I talked to Tyler, and he says you’ve been opening gay for thr-”

Brendon stopped talking when Patrick walked past and booped his nose, softly saying “Boop!” before continuing down the hallway. The brunet rubbed his nose, grumbling, and leaned his back against the wall before wrapping an arm around Ryan and orange haired guy, because Frank was really short, only a little bit taller than Patrick.

“I’m not sure I enjoy being your armrest, Brendon,” orange haired guy said blandly.

Brendon rolled his eyes with a smirk. “Whatever, Gerard,” he mumbled. Then, louder and less joking, he continued, “Where do you think we’ll head now?” Brendon removed his arms from both Ryan and “Gerard’s” shoulders and stuffed his hands behind his back instead. “Hospital? Mall? Amusement park?”

Frank snorted. “Not amusement parks again,” he replied, straightening up in a failed attempt to look taller than he really was. “You remember what happened last time, with Patrick.”

The brunet, who was still uncomfortably close to Ryan, swallowed a laugh and ran a hand through his hair. “That was great,” Brendon said, his voice cheery as though he hadn’t been almost murdered by some creature five minutes prior to this conversation. “I mean, come on, he got stuck on an upside down roller coaster because Dallon was trying to see if it still worked. How can that not have been amazing?”

“I can hear you, asshole!” Patrick yelled from down the hall, and Brendon started laughing even harder. “And it was not funny! Dallon’s just a dick.”
“I second that!” somebody yelled from down to the right.

“Spence, I’m your boyfriend!”

“Doesn’t make it any less true!”

Ryan, for one, had no idea what was going on, or where on earth Tyler was, and he was actually starting to worry about his friend’s location when Pete was suddenly in the middle of the hallway and everyone shut up. Was Pete the boss around here or something, or was everyone just terrified of the short man with tattoos? “We’re not going back to an amusement park,” he stated firmly, and Brendon seemed to deflate. “Also, yes, Dallon is a dick.”

This was answered with some protest from who Ryan assumed must have been Dallon, and then was interrupted again by Pete. “But, yeah. We have to leave. Like, right now. Because if there’s one Nightmare, there are more. Especially seeing as the one who attacked Brendon was a pissy teenager.”

“Like us?” somebody shouted, and Pete rolled his eyes, shooting them a glare.

“Sure,” he replied, not sounding at all like he agreed. “But seriously, guys. Be on your guard and we’ll try to make it to the busses. Tyler and Ryan, stick with Brendon, Frank, and Gerard.” Ryan groaned internally at the prospect of being around Brendon still, because he was honestly getting on his nerves a lot more than really hot people should be allowed to do, and he really wasn’t in the mood for this to continue. “Stay safe, guys.”

Ryan watched Pete walk down the hallway and another guy who also had bleach blond hair pulled Pete aside, and that’s all Ryan saw before Tyler was pulling on his shoulder. “What was that thing?” his friend asked quietly. “I mean, I know what Pete said it was, but that makes no sense. Why are there monsters here?”

“They must have smelled you guys,” Gerard spoke up suddenly. Upon Ryan and Tyler’s confused gazes, he sighed and continued, “You guys are new, right? Whatever you were feeling before you two offed yourselves gave away our location. Honestly, they should have been prepared for this, because Nightmares always show up at locations on new people, without fail.”

Frank jumped into the explanation, saying “Every time somebody kills themselves, a new Nightmare, fully grown, is made. They feed off of fear and stuff and then breed, and it can get pretty bad. But they’re not big guys, thankfully. Nightmares are the easiest to deal with because they aren’t real, just corrupted Dreamers. Once you grasp that knowledge, they’re pretty easy to kill. But that’s hard, and the only one here who can actually use that is Dallon, and he’s always been rude about it. He’s actually a good person, it’s only Brendon who has a problem with him.”

Brendon crossed his arms and tried to look indignant. “I do not have a problem with Dallon.”

“Sure you don’t,” Frank snorted and rolled his eyes. “We should head to our bus. Who are we with this time?”

He started off down the hallway, Brendon and Gerard following, and Ryan locked eyes with Tyler before shrugging and following in step behind the other boys. “We’ve got the new guys so we have our own,” Gerard reminded Frank, and Ryan noted their linked hands. Was everybody here gay? Not that there was anything wrong with it, gay people were awesome, but everyone who killed themselves wasn’t automatically gay. “For the record, Brendon, we’re making you drive for getting us into this mess by not taking precautions.”
Brendon’s face resembled that of one of the pissy teenagers Pete had been talking about earlier, but he didn’t say anything as their group of five followed everyone else out into a parking lot. A girl with blue hair brandishing a bow and arrow shot a smile over to them, and Ryan waved half-heartedly because, in all honesty, he was utterly terrified to be outside. If those Nightmares were no big deal like Frank had said, he didn’t want to wonder about what was worse. They made it seem like this world was chock full of monsters like them. If that was the case, Ryan wanted out, immediately, and he had no doubt in his mind that Tyler was thinking the exact same thing.

The bus turned out to be like the busses bands usually used while touring, with a couch and mini kitchen, a very small bathroom, and bunks to sleep in with curtains. Brendon hopped in the front to drive and Gerard and Frank locked up the back and got dibs on different bunks, so Tyler and Ryan settled down on bunks of their own as they felt the bus start moving. “I hope Brendon can drive,” Ryan joked. Tyler laughed, but the other two stayed silent.

“He can’t drive, can he?” Tyler whispered.

Gerard busted out laughing and threw a couple pillows down to them. “Get some rest, guys,” he said, still laughing. “We might not be at our next destination for a while, and busses will probably be rearranged tomorrow by Mikey because he’s a picky bastard. He’s also my brother though, so don’t trash his face.”

Ryan blocked out the rest of the noise and buried his face in one of the pillows Gerard had tossed down before pulling the curtains shut. The bus was on a fairly bumpy road, and he hoped nobody expected him to drive, because he’d never had a chance to learn how when he’d been alive. Besides, there wasn’t exactly any time to learn now.


Tyler was very worried about Ryan, because he seemed fairly put off by Brendon. Then again, Brendon kept making less than appropriate jokes about Ryan, but his best friend had never really cared about those before.

Sleep didn’t come easily to Tyler, because he kept thinking about what was happening to them. First of all, he and Ryan were dead now, which was their initial goal so they’d gotten through that. They were also in a world full of minors who’d committed suicide and were now fighting these monster-like creatures called Nightmares, and other, more intimidating creatures Josh had told him about called Goners. Those sounded pretty terrifying, because the blue-haired boy had said they were people who’d been consumed by bigger creatures in this world, and could kill as easily as a human. They also looked like humans, and easily infiltrated groups like these. Josh had then gone on to explain that it was why they always kept to little groups like these, so that infiltration was harder to achieve, and if it did end up happening, much less people would die.

He didn’t really understand how people who were already dead could die again. Other than being killed by the Darkness, as it had been referred to, Josh had said you were pretty much immortal. No sickness, no disease, just you and your buddies fighting so that you don’t get killed. He made it sound like a second, better chance at life. Tyler didn’t know why fighting for your life was a better chance at life, but he hadn’t argued with Josh at the time.

The boy with colorful hair was much nicer than Tyler had originally thought he would be. He was just spooked, and still rather new to this whole place as well, so he really wasn’t used to people dying in his room. Or dying at all, for that matter. Tyler understood, because if somebody randomly showed up in his room after committing suicide, he’d be pretty scared, too.

The bunk on the bus was a lot more comfortable than Tyler had assumed it would be, and he wished
he could fall asleep sooner instead of being absolutely terrified that one of those Nightmares might get into the bus and kill them all in their sleep. Could they even dream here? Last time he'd fallen asleep, he hadn’t dreamed.

All this thinking about dreaming went on for another hour or so, and the bus eventually stopped for a break. Tyler was more awake than ever, so he made his way to the mini kitchen to have some coffee, which probably wasn’t the best idea for somebody who was trying to fall asleep. Brendon was lounging on the couch, drinking hot cocoa out of a mug with rainbows on it.

The brunet settled down next to him and poured himself a mug of the hot chocolate, using a lot more mini marshmallows than he should have and overflowing the mug with whipped cream. Brendon looked over at him, his eyes rimmed with dark shades as though he hadn’t actually gotten some good sleep in a long time. Tyler had noticed that before, but hadn’t really thought anything of it at the time.

“Can’t sleep?” Tyler shook his head and licked at the whipped cream on top of his beverage before sipping drowsily. “Me neither.” Brendon curled up back in the couch, pulling his knees up to his chest while he drank his drink. Tyler looked down into his drink, not really wanting to think too much about what could be lurking outside of the bus right now.

“This must be a lot to take in,” the other man said quietly. “I remember when I first got here, Pete almost killed me because that was what you did, you know? But he didn’t, took me under his wing and taught me about this place. It can be really beautiful when you’re not trying to stay alive, you know? Or, stay dead. You know what I mean. Then before you know it, more people start popping up near us. And we formed this little group here. But it was so dangerous, you know? We didn’t have safe stuff like now. And we know a lot more, but it was so hard for me to adjust to it all. If you or Ryan ever have any questions, you can come to me. God, Ryan can-“

He stopped himself abruptly and took another long sip from his drink. Tyler didn’t push the subject on what Ryan could do, according to Brendon, because he frankly didn’t want to know what he thought of his best friend. “Do you actually want to fuck Ryan?” he asked suddenly, surprising himself.

Brendon’s eyes met Tyler’s, all reference of giggles gone. “Honestly? I don’t want to fuck anyone. I just say that because it’s funny, you know? Fucking people is why I died, so I’m not going to get involved in that shit again.”

Tyler, feeling as though he had majorly over-stepped his boundaries, looked down into his drink and frowned at the melting whipped cream and marshmallows, which made the hot chocolate more of a creamy coffee color than anything. He wished he hadn’t asked, but the damage was already done. Brendon, on the other hand, look completely and utterly unfazed by this whole nonsense, because soon he was getting another mug of hot chocolate and sitting considerably closer to Tyler.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said slowly, as though he knew that Tyler felt incredibly guilty about the whole thing. “I don’t actually care. Most people aren’t up for talking about their suicide, but I don’t care, because I died right after I screwed somebody, yeah? Slit my wrists before and then went for it. Pretty glad I did, to be honest. Life was shitty, and I’m still surprised I was able to even fuck somebody after that childhood.” When Tyler looked at him, confused, Brendon just smirked. “Now, your childhood is something to never, ever bring up. It’s like, worse than your death and your last name, because people can use any trauma against you. But usually it’s just because it can trigger other people into doing bad things. You’re a good kid, Tyler. You shouldn’t be here.”

Tyler frowned again and drank more of his hot chocolate, now more sugary than ever. “You don’t know about my past,” he mumbled.
Brendon just shrugged. “Were you abused?”

“I just hated myself a lot,” Tyler said, deciding not to answer the other boy’s question. “I really wanted this, Brendon, more than anything. I don’t know what I expected afterwards, though. It definitely wasn’t all of this, whatever it was. It’s pretty intimidating, though, to know that there’s a whole other world like this. Are you able to contact home from here?”

The brunet snorted into his drink. “Once you’re dead, you’re dead, Tyler,” he replied. “No calling home or anything, although we can still watch YouTube videos and stuff. Comment, too. Although the only people who’ll see our comments are people who are also here, and then they might track us down and kill us, so that’s probably not a good idea. Contact is a one-hundred percent ‘no’.”

Tyler nodded, because it made sense. They were dead, after all. “Can you dream here?” he wondered aloud, going back to that stupid argument in his head from earlier.

“Sort of,” Brendon mused, smiling awkwardly. “It’s always just memories, though, and they’re aren’t often. Actually, the memories come on the anniversary of your suicide. Everything else are nightmares which, if you don’t talk to somebody about, could fester and take actual form as Nightmares. So talk to somebody about those, okay? Pass that message off to Ryan, too. It’s important, and Pete’s a dick for not mentioning something like that to you guys earlier. You haven’t had any dreams, have you?” Brendon added unsurely.

The other boy shook his head, then smiled into his beverage. “Just curious,” he murmured.

They sat in silence for a while, just enjoying each other’s company until Brendon got up and stretched.

“Alright, I’m going to wake up Gee and make him drive now, since it’s three already and this is always when we get back on the road. You should try to sleep. You’ll need your energy for when we get Patrick and Dallon and Spence over here tomorrow to play some awesome games of Go Fish. Sometimes Josh comes too. Don’t want to leave him and his pretty hair out.” He reached down and pulled Tyler to his feet, and they set their mugs in the sink, Brendon saying that Frank could wash them tomorrow.

Tyler climbed back into his bunk beside Ryan’s and tried to ignore the thoughts in his head and, for once, actually get a decent amount of sleep.

He did actually get some good sleep, and was woken up at about eleven the next day by Josh knocking on the walls inside of the bus’s sleeping area, shouting, “Alright, lazy butts, we’re going to play some Go Fish and loser has to switch out with the driver! Brendon, don’t pretend to be asleep! And-“ he yanked open Tyler’s curtain, “Tyler can be the dealer!”

Then, less loudly, the blue-haired boy passed Tyler some fresh clothes. “We’ll have to get you some,” he explained. “Ryan’s wearing some of Spencer’s. Also brush your teeth, your breath stinks.” As soon as Josh pulled his head back out, and tore open Brendon’s curtain. Brendon screamed and pulled his blanket up over his chest, glowering down at Josh.

“You pervert!”

“Wake up!” Josh yelled back, almost doubling over laughing.

Tyler let a smile spill across his own drowsy features as he pulled himself out of the bunk, set the blankets up neatly, and made his way to the bathroom. Patrick and Gerard were sitting on the couches as Tyler walked past, as well as two other guys he hadn’t seen before, who Tyler could only assume were Spencer and Dallon. Patrick was shuffling a deck of cards while Gerard read a book,
and Tyler suddenly felt at home. Everyone was so domestic.

He quickly changed and brushed his teeth, then walked back out to find everyone eating chips, and Brendon eating a large plate full of bacon. “Brendon, share,” Spencer or Dallon said, elbowing Brendon in the side. “You can always make more. Besides, he looks hungry.” They glanced over at Tyler, who quickly shook his head, no.

“I’m fine.” He sat down on the couch between Ryan and the edge of the couch. Gerard then passed him a bag of chips, seemingly out of nowhere, which he politely declined. “I’m not a big fan of salt and vinegar.”

Gerard just shrugged and pushed the chips closer to Tyler, who now saw that they were now… Doritos? “It’s weird,” Ryan told him quietly. “But it beats cooking. Endless food, you know?” And then Tyler’s best friend was eating a bowl full of the really good homemade ramen their Japanese history teacher had made and brought in one time.

“I always knew you were in love you her cooking!” Tyler gasped, stealing a couple noodles.

Ryan scowled, then let a smirk travel across his lips. “Do you want any chips?” he asked at a normal voice level.

Tyler raised his voice and shouted, “I’m always a slut for Doritos!” right before Ryan threw a couple bags at him.

Everyone else looked on confused, while Patrick laughed into his arm. “Memes.”

Brendon rolled his eyes and smacked the tiny fedora-wearing man lightly on the head. “You only know what they’re on about because you spend so much time with Pete,” he laughed. “Seriously, I’m beginning to think that you’re the one dating him, and not Mikey!”

“Are we going to play or not?” Gerard complained, and Spencer or Dallon rolled their eyes.

“We can play as soon as Spence actually gives Tyler the deck,” apparently Dallon replied, taking the cards out of Spencer’s hands and passing them over to Tyler, who really didn’t know what to do. “We’re playing Go Fish, as Josh so kindly informed you and Brendon while waking you up.”

Ryan snorted into his noodles and Tyler smacked his arm playfully before shuffling the deck on last time and passing everybody five cards. The rest were played out in the middle, and Tyler had no matches. The only one with matches was Brendon, who only had one, but still took pride in this fact and spent the next three minutes gloating on how there was no in hell he’d lose now. Dallon just ignored him as though he was used to this, but everyone else – except Josh, Tyler, and Ryan – looked very annoyed.

Tyler decided that he should go first, since he was, after all, the dealer. And so he turned to Spencer and said in the most bland voice possible, “Got any sevens?”

The first game ended with Brendon losing (Josh totally called it) and the brunet reluctantly switched places with Frank, who’d been driving since nine that morning. Ryan became the dealer, even though he had absolutely no idea how to shuffle a deck of cards, and Tyler had to help him out. “I can’t believe you don’t know how to shuffle a deck of cards,” Tyler said quietly, laughing.

“I used to be able to, but I haven’t been able to see for a while, so that might explain my loss of talent lately,” Ryan joked once Tyler passed the freshly-shuffled deck of cards back to him. The cards were quickly dealt, Frank squeezed in between Tyler and Gerard, even though he could have just as easily taken the seat Brendon had been forced to surrender, and the second round of their intense Go Fish
It ended all too quickly when the bus hit a pothole and everyone lost their cards to the floor. Everyone kind of just staring awkwardly at the playing cards strewn all over the floor, until Frank let out a laugh and then they were all just laughing and picking up the cards and handing them back to Spencer, because he actually had the box for the cards.

Only a short while later did people start getting bored out of their minds.

At about five in the afternoon, the bus suddenly stopped and the sound of Brendon arguing loudly with somebody reached the ears of the passengers in the back. Tyler heard snippets of things about it only being five in the afternoon and that people could stay in whichever bus they wanted to, and then Brendon was in the back of the bus with the guy from yesterday who’d pulled Pete aside to talk to him in the hallway. The one who also had bleach-blond hair. Was that a thing here? Bleach-blond hair? Tyler wasn’t sure how he felt about the idea of that, but he supposed it was okay. Not fabulous, but still okay.

Gerard immediately stood up and pulled the blond guy into a hug, so Tyler assumed that this must be Mikey, Gerard’s brother. Brendon sat down in the seat he’d had the first time and listened not-so happily to Josh’s explanation as to why nobody had come to take his place in driving. Seeing as nobody was really paying any attention to him, and nothing that exciting was actually going on, Tyler excused himself to use the bathroom.

It was a really small bathroom. There was hardly any room for one person. The shower was basically large enough for one person to stand in without turning around, and the toilet was crammed directly next to the sink with the toilet paper roll on the back of the door. Instead of actually using the bathroom, however, Tyler just sat on the floor of the shower with the door to the room closed and pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around his legs and resting the back of his head on the shower wall. He’d missed being able to just do this, because his mom would get upset if he was in the bathroom for too long. Turns out, she did care a little bit when she found out about the little marks on his arms, and he wasn’t allowed to be alone for more than fifteen minutes after that. So Tyler spent most of his last months alive at Ryan’s house.

After about ten minutes of nobody coming to look for him or knocking on the door to use the bathroom themselves, Tyler began to relax and stretched his legs out so that the bottoms of his feet were pressed against the opposite wall. The bus had started moving again a few minutes ago, and Tyler had no idea whether Mikey had stayed on the bus or not, or even who was driving. He admittedly felt a little bad about leaving Ryan all on his own with everybody else, because they didn’t know anybody as well as they knew each other, but Ryan knew that Tyler sometimes just needed to be alone.

And that this alone time just so happened to take place in the bathroom.

It had always been Tyler’s safe-place for some reason. Whenever he felt a panic or anxiety attack coming on in public he’d excuse himself to the bathroom and hide in a stall. Now Tyler wondered if he’d ever have to worry about panic attacks in the middle of the mall ever again.

His thoughts were interrupted when somebody knocked on the bathroom door. “Tyler, could you hurry up, because I have to fucking pee, and you’re hogging the only toilet.”

Quickly trying to use elimination, Tyler figured out that it wasn’t Ryan or Brendon or Gerard, but it was either Spencer or Dallon because the voice sounded like them, but he still didn’t know which one it was. “One second!” he called back, flushing the toilet even though he hadn’t actually used it and then let the water run for fifteen seconds with his hands under it even though he really had no
need to wash them, and then unlocked the bathroom door and side-stepped around Dallon to go back to where everybody was chilling.

Tyler wiped his hands on his thighs and sat down next to Ryan again, who didn’t even bat an eye at Tyler’s absence. For that, he was extremely grateful. Actually, everybody was eating pizza, and Frank was putting in a movie. Hopefully it wasn’t some shitty movie, and was actually enjoyable. When the sounds of The Circle Of Life echoed through the surround-sound speakers, Tyler relaxed into his friend and let the movie play out while Spencer and Mikey brought back popcorn and hot chocolate.

The opening of the movie was almost over when Dallon returned from the bathroom, looking a bit upset that they’d started watching the movie without him, but not vocally complaining. Tyler didn’t exactly blame him, because Ryan had a tendency to start movies while Tyler was getting popcorn or using the bathroom instead of waiting for him. But that was okay because Tyler didn’t really care. It was just really fun to cuddle up with a friend with good food and watch a film.

About half-way through The Lion King, Ryan fell asleep on Tyler’s shoulder, and Tyler had eaten about four bags of Doritos. Granted, they were those little snack-size bags, but that was still a lot of Doritos to be eaten in one sitting, even if he was a slut for them. It wasn’t his fault Mikey kept making bags of Doritos out of nothing and tossing them at Tyler, and it wasn’t his fault he loved Doritos almost as much as he loved Taco Bell. Jesus Christ, Taco Bell. Tyler wondered if they had Taco Bell in the afterlife. Not just, oh I want Taco Bell let’s make some out of nothing. He meant real life Taco Bell, with the restaurant and everything.

Ryan never understood Tyler’s love for Taco Bell, but he hadn’t expected him to. Nobody was allowed to love a restaurant as much as Tyler did, his friend had said, but obviously Ryan was incorrect, because, as Tyler had stated on many the occasion, he would marry it if he could. Probably not the healthiest decision, but whatever. It was Taco Bell. Might as well be the best thing in existence.

And then Tyler was eating about seven tacos that looked like they’d just come from Taco Bell, and he wondered if that was how it worked. Did you just think about how much you loved the food you wanted and then you had some? Or was there something else to it that Tyler had done and just couldn’t remember doing? He settled on not over-thinking it and just tucked into his tacos, which were just as good as he had remembered, if not even better.

It wasn’t until he ate the last one that Tyler realized he’d only eaten six, because Josh was sitting next to him and eating the seventh, with a cheeky grin on his face. “Okay, that was my taco,” Tyler protested, grabbing at the half-eaten piece of food in the blue-haired boy’s hands.

Josh pulled the taco even further from his reach and booped Tyler’s nose. “Not anymore, now it’s my taco.” He grinned and took another over-exaggerated bite out of the food, and Tyler rolled his eyes, attempting to turn all of his attention back to the movie. He failed horribly, because he was actually feeling really sick after eating six tacos and pizza and Doritos, and decided to make a quick trip to the bathroom just in case, where he promptly ended up throwing up the remaining contents of his stomach.

Within moments Ryan was sitting with him and rubbing his back. “Why did you eat so much?” the brunet asked, and Tyler could tell he was swallowing a laugh. “There’s no way you were hungry enough to stomach all of that. Josh should have taken more of those fucking tacos.”

“I like Taco Bell,” was all Tyler could get out before he continued throwing up. Ryan snorted and leaned his back again the wall, still rubbing Tyler’s back with his hand absentmindedly.
Tyler soon finished throwing up, getting up to flush the toilet and clean his face (his shirt was clean with absolutely no puke on it, thank god). Ryan had closed the door when he’d come in and was sitting on the floor of the little cubicle shower. “What do you think of all of this?” he asked after a few moments of silence. “Like, you know, being dead and fighting monsters and traveling and shit. I mean, I know you wanted to travel with people in a band but this is just plain weird, you know?”

“I think it’s alright,” Tyler answered quietly, sitting on the ground opposite his friend. “Beats living, I guess. But there are a lot of strange people here.”

Ryan snorted. “You’ve got that right,” he muttered. “Too many strange people, but it does beat living. Besides, I can fucking see, which is one fucking miracle if I do say so myself. Which I do. I do say so. Myself.”

At this point, the conversation was sort of derailed and the two boys went on to talk about music and art and films and books they’d read. They didn’t talk about the predicament they were currently in, because it didn’t really matter, did it? So what if they were in a strange afterlife-type world where nobody was over eighteen and everybody had committed suicide? Actually, that was kind of a big deal, but whatever. Neither Tyler nor Ryan really cared about that.

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That night, the bus had a much smoother ride, with Gerard driving, and Tyler thought he’d be able to fall asleep a lot more easily (everyone else was as sleep), but he was wrong, because at two in the morning, he was still wide awake, staring straight up at the roof of his bunk. He was still wearing Josh’s clothes from the day before, but Mikey had said that they were going to make an effort to stop by a mall or something and grab extra supplies, as well as to let he and Ryan grab some clothes, seeing as they only had the ones they died in, and what others let them borrow.

Tyler let his hand drape over the edge of the bunk and dangle down to where Ryan was sleeping, and when his best friend made no notion that he, too, was awake, Tyler pulled his hand back up into the blankets and sighed in defeat. He always seemed to be alone in the middle of the night, when he needed people the most. The only other person who was awake was Gerard, and he was driving the bus, so there was no way Tyler could go and talk to him without putting all of their lives in danger. Well, their deaths in danger. Could you even die again here? Tyler didn’t know. Maybe he should ask somebody about it later.

All of this thinking had only succeeded in making Tyler more awake than before, and he grumpily climbed out of his bunk and went into the living room to see if maybe he could fall asleep on the couch. It wasn’t until he got there that he suddenly remembered that some of the others had decided to crash here instead of go back to their proper busses. And by some of the others, Tyler meant all of them. Dallon had his arms wrapped around Spencer on the couch, and Josh was curled up in a ball on the floor, with Patrick taking up one of the chairs, Mikey in the other. Why they didn’t want to go back to their bunks, Tyler had no idea, but at least they looked semi-comfortable. At least they’d all been able to fall asleep.

Deciding to still try and get even half an hour of sleep, Tyler took a blanket and stretched out on the floor next to the couch and closed his eyes willing to fall into dreamless sleep.

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Ryan, on the other hand, was having no such luck. He knew that Tyler was awake, but he hadn’t wanted to talk to him because that would just keep Tyler up even more, and he needed to sleep because he’d looked utterly exhausted all day long. Thus, Ryan had made the executive decision to ignore his best friend, in the hopes that they’d both be able to fall asleep more easily as a result.
After Tyler went away from the bunks, Ryan soundlessly slipped out of his own and climbed into his friend’s. Everything about it smelled like Tyler, and Ryan remembered when they were little kids, and had sleepovers together. He did feel a little weird sleeping in Tyler’s bunk, because they were seventeen years old, and seventeen year old boys don’t typically do that.

He wrapped the blankets more tightly around his body to try and keep more warmth in, and he fell asleep sooner than he expected to.

It seemed only heartbeats before Tyler was shaking him awake with a smug look on his face, Frank standing behind him and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. The lights of the band-bus were all on and the smell of eggs and bacon wafted in from the mini kitchen. Ryan sat up in the bunk and hit his forehead hard on the roof above him, and swore under his breath.

He didn’t fully wake up until somebody yelled from the kitchen, “Who wants waffles?” and then he was out of there as fast as he could, because fuck man, waffles were his shit. Well, not literally, because Ryan was pretty sure that if somebody shit waffles, that’d be pretty bad, and he probably wouldn’t enjoy eating them at all. So waffles weren’t really his shit, he just liked them a lot. Like Tyler with Taco Bell, except less extreme.

Brendon was making the waffles, and it turned out he could cook pretty damn well because those waffles were the best Ryan had had in quite some time. The bacon was good, too, and so were the eggs, but nothing beat the waffles and infinite genuine maple syrup that Mikey and Gerard took turns making out of nothing. He still wasn’t quite used to that, to be honest, but Ryan suspected he would be eventually.

Tyler had dug in right away and was in a deep conversation with Spencer about their music tastes while Dallon listened in on it, looking satisfied with Brendon’s choice in breakfast. Everyone seemed to be enjoying it a lot, because they all went for seconds, and thirds.

Only after Ryan was half-way through his second plate did somebody actually talk about what they were going to be doing that day. “We’ve reached a shopping mall,” was all the boy with bleach blond hair had to say before everybody stopped chewing to look at him. “And we’re going to stop and get things.”

“Do we have money?” Tyler asked, and everyone except for Ryan turned to stare at him like he was crazy.

“Nobody exists here except for us,” Josh explained. “So we don’t need money. We just take stuff for free. Beats paying, though. Right?”

Pretty much everyone nodded in agreement, and Ryan added ‘not paying’ to his list of things he needed to adjust to. It was a pretty long list so far, and he assumed it was only going to get longer. This new plane of existence was so crazy and unpredictable. How did everyone ever manage to get used to any of this?

Ryan quickly excused himself to the bathroom to write his list down.

1- Crazy-ass monsters called Nightmares which come out of nowhere and try to murder us

2- We can make food appear out of nowhere

3- Don’t talk about your last name

4- Or your suicide
5- Everyone is gay (which is great seriously)
6- Bleach blond hair is really in
7- We don’t have to pay for shit
8- Nobody is over eighteen
9- Everyone here had committed suicide

Satisfied with his list, Ryan stuffed it into the pocket of the jeans he was wearing, then actually used the bathroom, cleaned up, and went back to sit with everybody else and continue eating waffles while Mikey explained the plan.

“Everyone is split into pre-assigned groups,” he said, and then passed out papers to everybody with groups listed on them. “We’re turning this into a game so listen up. You’re sorted into teams, who you’ll meet with and decide on your team name and uniform.” At uniform, Brendon groaned and Mikey flipped him off. “Pete’s idea, not mine. Then Pete or I will give you a list of the items you have to grab. At the end of the day, we all meet in the food court for camping and dinner. Whichever team has to best supplies wins. You game?”

“I’m not wearing a uniform,” Brendon stated simply, attempting to give his paper to Dallon, who swatted his hand away with a scowl.

Mikey just smirked. “You have to meet with your teams in a couple of minutes.” He turned to where Tyler and Ryan were sitting next to each other and added, “Ryan, we put you with Trick, and Tyler, you’re with me. It’ll be easier to keep track of you this way, and you won’t get confused with your groups as easily. So Tyler, whenever you’re done eating we can go.”

Ryan watched his friend stuff two more waffles into his mouth (they were rather small) and stand up to leave. He proceeded to eat one more waffle himself before looking at the rest of the list of people he was with.

Scribbled out with pen, he could make out ‘Patrick’s Team of assholes’ before written under it was ‘Patrick’s Team’, and Ryan guessed Pete had been the one to type up the teams.

- Patrick (duh it’s his team of assholes)
- Ryan

There were heavily scribbled out words after his name, and Ryan made out ‘Brendon’, ‘fuck’, and ‘wall’, which didn’t make him feel any better.

- Andy (my tattoo bae)
- Travie (who is being a dick)
- Halsey
- Brendon (the one who wants to do said wall-fucking)

Mikey hadn’t scribbled out the words after Brendon’s name well enough, and Ryan suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He quickly chugged a glass of apple juice from nowhere to try and calm his stomach before he stood up and let Patrick lead him out of the bus, Brendon close behind.
“I’m sorry about Pete’s notes,” the blond giggled into the sleeve of his slightly oversized sweatshirt when he noticed Ryan shooting awkward looks at Brendon the entire walk over to wherever Andy, Halsey, and Travie were (whoever they were). “He can be really forward and a totally dick sometimes, but he’s actually a big teddy bear.”

Brendon snorted at this and took off Patrick’s hat for a moment to ruffle his hair, then put it onto his own head. Patrick crossed his arms and pouted, glaring at the taller boy. “You’re only saying that because you like him.” The brunet drew out the word ‘like’ as though he were a twelve-year old with a crush.

“I do not!” Patrick argued, and Ryan jumped a little bit to snatch the fedora off of Brendon’s head, then placed it back on the blond, who sent him a grateful look. “Besides, even if I did, which I do not,” he added when Brendon laughed quietly through his nose, “he’s banging Mikey so I can’t have him. Couldn’t have him,” Patrick corrected at the last minute, but Brendon had already heard his mistake and was laughing even harder.

Ryan had to admit, the whole situation was actually quite funny. Patrick’s little face was really adorable when he was flustered, and he was chewing on his lip in embarrassment, which set Ryan himself into a fit of giggles because seriously, it was really fucking adorable, nobody could deny that. Not even Ryan, who might be a little bit homo for Patrick, but in a bro-type way. Bromo. Bromosexual.

They had stopped walking to have this conversation and Ryan, who was taller than Patrick, crouched down on his knees. “You want a piggy-back ride?” he offered.

“Ryan, I am sixteen years old,” Patrick said, frowning slightly. “Of course I want a fucking piggy-back ride.”

Brendon was laughing extremely hard the rest of the walk over while Ryan struggled to support the other boy on his back, because he wasn’t strong whatsoever. He was what Tyler would call a weak-weak. Honestly, he didn’t know why he’d offered to give Patrick a piggy-back ride, it had just seemed like a good thing to do at the time.

“No homo?” Brendon asked with a wink.

“No hetero,” Patrick corrected, which set Brendon off again and Ryan rolled his eyes. Actually, living in a world full of gay people wasn’t looking to be so bad after all. Living in a world full of straight people was, in Ryan’s experience, much, much worse.

Andy, Travie, and Halsey turned out to be to boys and a girl (the one from before with blue hair, not too much unlike Josh’s), who were actually quite friendly.

Patrick introduced everyone quickly, Andy being the man who was taller than Patrick (not by much) with dark brown hair and eyes to match, covered in tattoos from what Ryan could tell, and Patrick immediately stood next to him as though they were really good friends. Travie was really tall, probably a whole foot taller than Patrick was, with black hair and brown eyes, and Ryan had to admit, he was a little intimidated by the man. Finally there was Halsey, with her pretty blue hair, and hazel eyes, standing about an inch below Patrick.

“Do you have the list?” the blond asked once introductions were finished.

Andy reached into a pocket in the back of his jeans and pulled out a piece of paper which was folded up fairly neatly. Everyone crowded around Patrick as he unfolded it, and Brendon read the written list out loud.
“New blankets and pillows and general bedding stuff, stuffed animals (really soft ones), stuff for chocolate fondue, meltable chocolate for the fondue, pain-killers for head-aches and the like, snack foods, lots of soda, camping supplies (like a fire pit), s’mores stuff, clothes.” Ryan was confused as to why they needed to pick up food and drink if they could literally just make it appear out of nowhere, but he decided not to bring up the point and just listened to everyone else start discussing a team name.

“We need something really scary and badass,” Travie was arguing.

“But also not so scary and still badass,” Halsey added. “We still need to be badass.”

“Unicorn assassins!” Patrick put in, which Andy seconded, and Brendon shot down, stating they’d get murdered that way.

After ten minutes of non-stop arguing Andy sighed and turned to Ryan. “You got any ideas?”

Ryan just shrugged, because honestly, he had no fucking idea what to call a team of five other people he had barely known for a couple of days. “Suicide Squad?” Brendon suggested quietly.

“No way,” Ryan put in almost immediately. “That’s a movie.”

“Not here,” Travie said, and everyone kind of just nodded in agreement. “We don’t get new movies. So Suicide Squad it is.”

They’d come up with their team name just in time, too, because Pete was making his way over. He spoke to Patrick, wrote something down, and then ran off to go back to his own group or whatever. Patrick just turned to them all with a grin. “We’re going to kick their asses.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from Nicotine by Panic! At The Disco
They started off in the food court of the mall.

Each team had five minutes to devise their plan, and Tyler was absolutely ready to win this stupid game because fuck it, who even cared if the game was stupid, it sounded more fun than just doing normal things like shopping like any other person would do. His team consisted of Mikey, Josh, a really nice guy named Ray, and a boy named Caleb who kept picking at what he said was his undershirt, and from Josh’s looks, he was lying. Nobody pried, though, so Tyler didn’t press the subject.

Tyler’s team (Team Fuck Gender Rolls, as it had been declared, the rolls spelled as so because Caleb had decided that they were all ‘precious cinnamon rolls, too good, too pure for this world’) was pretty much ready, with the idea that they’d just run and hope they’d find some good enough supplies for them. The other teams were pretty much just arguing over things, and he had a really good feeling about this little competition Pete had devised.

And just as quickly as the whole thing had started, Pete was standing on one of the food court tables and yelling, “Alright, you all know the rules! Now go kick some ass! Except we’re going to win! This ass is not going to be kicked!” With that, he hopped off the table and Ray grabbed Tyler’s wrist, pulling the brunet quickly after the rest of their group.

“Tyler, you go with Ray and I,” Mikey was saying as they jogged along, level with Patrick’s team but on the opposite side of the hallway, “and Josh, stick with Caleb. Oh, and please stay the fuck away from Hot Topic. We don’t need any of that shit.” Tyler snorted, because Pete literally looked like a fucking walking Hot Topic, but he didn’t argue, instead just followed Ray and Mikey down a hallway that lead to the left.

The shopping mall they were in turned out to be a hell of a lot bigger than any Tyler had ever been in before, but nobody else in his group seemed fazed by this knowledge at all. This was going to be much harder than he’d anticipated as a result, but Tyler figured he’d be able to handle it, seeing as nobody else was freaking out over the size of this god damned place.

Mikey pulled them into a furniture store and Tyler was shocked at how stocked it was. There seemed to be practically anything they could possibly need here, and Ray immediately jumped onto one of those beds that were made to try and sell mattresses and bedding. “This is so comfy,” he said through
Both Tyler and Mikey laughed a little at this before Tyler was sent off to go look for stuffed animals.

Judging by the size of the store, this was going to be much harder than Tyler expected, and he wasn’t wrong, because after almost half an hour of searching, he had found nothing nowhere near close to a stuffed animal. The best he had was a cheap pillow shaped like an animal of some sort, but Tyler didn’t recognize it until suddenly there was a gunshot and the pillow exploded in a flurry of feathers and stuffing and soft fabric.

Shocked (and, admittedly, a little bit upset at the destruction of his find), Tyler spun toward the source of the gunshot to see Brendon holding a pistol. “You’re not going to get that stuff that easily, Ty-Dye,” he joked, slipping the gun into his pocket. “Nothing in the rules says no guns,” he added with a wink when Tyler opened his mouth to protest, and then Brendon was gone again.

This was pretty annoying, because Tyler didn’t have a weapon and it wasn’t fair at all that people could just destroy what you’d found for your team, fair and square. And not to mention the fact that Tyler didn’t have a gun, so this was not fair at all.

“Screw you, Brendon,” the brunet mumbled under his breath and continued on his search for stuffed animals.

xx

Patrick’s team was doing a bit better than Mikey’s.

Currently, they were all sat in an old record store, Ryan and Halsey looking through music, Patrick sitting on Andy’s shoulders so he could see better — or so he claimed — and Travie and Brendon arguing over better types of music. All in all, they were doing okay, but they could be doing better, considering the fact that Gabe fucking whatever his last name happened to be just ran past the store they were in, chased angrily by Alex, holding a ton of boxes of McNuggets in his arms.

“You can’t just steal our McNuggets!” Alex yelled, and Gabe turned his head to stick out his tongue at the other guy, but promptly ran into Jack. Gabe toppled over, the boxes going all over the hallway, and some of them opened, McNuggets going everywhere. “Damn it, Gabe!”

“What’s going on outside?” Ryan asked, looking up from a shelf of music he was going through.

Brendon poked his head outside and hummed noncommittally. “Looks like Gabe, Alex, and Jack fighting over chicken McNuggets.” Then, seeing Ryan’s confusion at the unfamiliar names, added, “You’ll meet them later. They’ll make sure of that, trust me.”

“Ale and Jack are dating,” Patrick put in, hoping to help Ryan’s understanding of their situation a little better. “And Gabe’s just Gabe. That’ll make sense eventually. Hopefully.”

He went back to surveying the McNugget fight, grinning slightly to himself when Ryan just shook his head outside and hummed noncommittally. “Looks like Gabe, Alex, and Jack fighting over chicken McNuggets.” Then, seeing Ryan’s confusion at the unfamiliar names, added, “You’ll meet them later. They’ll make sure of that, trust me.”

“Alex and Jack are dating,” Patrick put in, hoping to help Ryan’s understanding of their situation a little better. “And Gabe’s just Gabe. That’ll make sense eventually. Hopefully.”

He went back to surveying the McNugget fight, grinning slightly to himself when Ryan just shook his head and went back to looking through music. Patrick had, at first, been a little bit skeptical of Ryan and Tyler, but they seemed liked good enough people at this point. Maybe not people he could trust, but good people all the same. After all, it was hard to find good, trustable people out here.

The man who’s shoulders he sat upon shook Patrick out of his daydreams and back to reality after a couple of minutes, when everyone else on their team was stuffing music and stuff into bags. “I don’t see why we needed to get music,” Ryan was complaining as they walked down the hall. “It wasn’t on the list of things Pete wanted us to have.”
“We always need more music,” the blue haired girl explained (if that was even a real explanation). “Also, if we get the right stuff, we’ll get more points.”

The next store on their list was a fucking Toys R Us, which thankfully nobody was in. They had, like, ten aisles dedicated solely to stuffed animals.

“Ryan, get a cart,” Brendon demanded almost immediately. “A big one, so I can sit in it.”

“What the hell? No way am I hauling your ass all through here!”

Andy then decided to sit Patrick down in a cart (not that the fedora wearing teenager was really complaining). “Let us retrieve the stuffed animals!”

Halsey cheered and got a cart of her own, using one foot to push off and riding along on the front. Patrick was never sure why people did that, but whatever. Brendon was still trying to get Ryan to push him in a cart, and it ended in Travie putting Ryan in the cart and pushing it himself, while Brendon sulked behind with his own. This was going to be the weirdest trip to Toys R Us in existence, and Patrick was fucking ready for it.

However, nothing in the plan said anything about it taking them half an hour just to find the god damn plushies, and by the time they did, Travie looked like he was ready to just tear their heads off. He promptly lifted a green soft rabbit and pointed a finger at his accusingly. “Listen here, you piece of bunny shit,” he growled. “I would tear that fucking head of yours straight off if it weren’t for the fact that small children are watching.” He patted Patrick’s fedora, and the shorter boy pouted in the cart. “So you better watch your fucking back.”

He then proceeded to throw the green rabbit at Brendon, where it hit him in the face, because the brunet was not at all ready for that rabbit to fly in his direction.

With Patrick on Andy’s shoulders once again, he was able to reach the much larger stuffed animals on the top of the shelves, while Halsey was left to actually climb them and toss the soft toys down. Of course, Patrick would have done the same thing if he wasn’t so terrified of falling off, but the blue head seemed not to give any shits about falling, instead crawling about the animals displayed along the top as thought it were nothing. Patrick wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to her before she’d killed herself.

Patrick himself had been asked a couple times before by people why he’d done it. Of course, that had been in the first few hours after his death, and Patrick had been hearing things. He’d talked to Pete about it, and he’d said the same thing had happened to him and Gerard. Gee had suggested that maybe it was actually the people who’d found them asking. Even if it had been his friends, Patrick wasn’t so sure he’d want to explain what had really happened to him.

“Are you even listening?”

It was, as usual, Andy’s voice which drew him out of his daydreams and daymares, and Patrick glanced down at the slightly taller boy, grinning sheepishly. “Yes?”

“I asked if you could get the really fluffy pink teddy bear,” Andy repeated, not losing any patience at all. “Is something on your mind?” He spoke the last part more quietly, and Patrick just smiled gently and shook his head, even though yes, something was on his mind. Andy smiled back, and motioned at the stuffed bear in question, and Patrick stretched up and pulled the bear down from its shelf. He had to admit, it was very, very fluffy, and he had to resist snuggling his face into it, which was a bit hard. Just holding it made Patrick quite a bit more sleepy.
They tossed it down into the shopping cart and continued picking out stuffed animals to take back with them, and suddenly there was a gunshot and a bunch of laughter. Andy stuffed Patrick back into the cart under the large stuffed animals, despite the protests of the shorter of the two. “Andy, what the f-“

He couldn’t continue because Ryan was also stuffed into the cart (how did they both even fit in here) and beneath more stuffed animals, and Patrick could hear Brendon or Travis or somebody snickering outside, but that was replaced by people shouting and Mikey’s voice drifted over to them with a “Guess who has guns now?”

Andy immediately turned to Brendon. “What the fuck did you do?”

Brendon shrugged, let out a forced laugh. Of course he’d done something, and now they were all f*cked because only Brendon had a gun and he was utter shit with it. “Give me the gun,” Halsey demanded, hopping down from the shelves and landing silently. Patrick had no idea how she’d done that, but he wasn’t going to question her.

The brunet tried to protest, but Halsey had already taken the gun from his back pocket and was wielding it like it was nothing. She then darted off in the direction of Mikey’s voice, silent on her feet somehow, and then there were gunshots and a lot of yelling.

“I can’t keep one pillow, can I?”

From the way Ryan was shaking slightly with laughter beside Patrick, he guessed that was Tyler, and that Brendon had destroyed one of his finds. From the way Brendon was also laughing hysterical, Patrick was able to confirm his guess. What a fucking asshole.

The next thing Patrick heard was a scream cut off, and then laughter. When he finally poked his head out of the cart, Ryan was sitting up and looking around, confused, because their teammates had left them. Patrick pulled himself out of the cart and helped Ryan out as well, and they both dashed off in the direction of the voices from earlier.

Josh had Halsey in a cart, her wrists and ankles bound together with toy hand-cuffs, and was laughing like a maniac (not unlike an anime character, Patrick noted). The blue head was also gagged and she looked fairly annoyed at this factor. Meanwhile, Tyler was standing off to the side, remnants of a pillow in his hands, and Ray was holding the gun that Halsey had taken from Brendon. Mikey was just cuddling a kitten in the background of the whole situation, and Patrick had to admit, it was pretty fucking adorable.

“You can’t take other teams’ members hostage!” Brendon was arguing with Ray, and then over those speakers that shopping centers usually use to reunite missing children with their parents, came an announcement.

And this announcement happened to be in the voice of a certain Pepe- I mean, Pete.

“Attention all shoppers!” Then very faintly, “Is that okay? Should I say something else?”

Gerard’s voice could be heard quietly, “It’s fine, Pete, just say what you have to say.”

Pete cleared his throat and Patrick winced at the whine the speakers above their heads made at that. “Attention all shoppers!” he repeated, and the fedora-wearing man could just hear the grin on his face. “We’ve had some changes to the rules! Feel free to take other teams’ members hostage! It’ll be great fun for all of us! And like, not just because I can see on security cameras people doing that right now. Also, whoever gave Mikey a cat, you are a fucking god send. That is all!”
“That’s some serious President Snow bullshit right there,” Ryan grumbled, crossing his arms. “What is this, the fucking Hunger Games?”

Brendon shot him a look. “What is that? A cooking show?”

“Never mind...”

And then Josh bowed - he fucking bowed – and said simply, “We aren’t braking any rules,” before grabbing the cart and running off with it. Ray darted after him with Mikey close behind, nearly dropping the kitten, and Tyler stumbled after them a little too late.

And you bet your ass Patrick took this opportunity to grab the brunet’s wrist and pull him over. He shared a quick look with Brendon, who slammed a hand over Tyler’s mouth, and together they pulled him back and stuffed him into the cart Ryan and Patrick had been in earlier. Tyler looked pleadingly up at Ryan, who just shrugged and helped Travie push the cart along.

“So what’s next on the list?”

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“Where’s Tyler?” Josh finally asked once they’d chosen a nice place in a weapons shop to camp out. The team already had quite a few of the items of their list, but they knew they could definitely do better. Their blue haired captive was sitting in a corner, still tied and gagged, and Josh wondered if maybe they were taking this game of Pete’s a little too seriously.

Mikey just shrugged, going back to looking at knives. “Beats me. Maybe Brendon stole him, or he went after Brendon himself?”

The boy with blue hair snorted at the idea of Brendon stealing Tyler and continued looking over the list they’d been provided with. So far, they had a few soft toys from Toys R Us, fresh bedding, and a ton of random-ass t-shirts Caleb had picked out. (Josh knew he wasn’t important to the plot, though, so he decided not to really pay much attention to Caleb from then on out)

Halsey was grinning – probably at the prospect of Tyler being captured by her own team.

“Shut it, blue head,” Ray said, throwing a knife where it landed a few feet away from Halsey’s head in the wall. Josh flinched, even though it wasn’t even all that close to her. The curly-haired boy sent him an apologetic look while saying ‘blue head’ with such remorse and Josh reached up to touch his blue hair. He knew it was a joke, but seriously, he loved his hair more than anything, and it held a strong connection with the end of his life, in a way. Ray’s continuous speaking drew him out of these thoughts. “We’ll soon have all our stuff and then we’ll kick everyone’s ass.”

The blue haired girl just snorted and turned her head away from them. She clearly didn’t care at all about what Ray had to say on Pete’s game. Speaking of Pete...

“Guess who’s gonna win, motherfuckers!”

Josh looked up from what he was doing to see Pete standing in the doorway to the weapons shop, looking excited with a bunch of bags of marshmallows in his arms. “Pete,” Mikey began, “you aren’t even on our team. What on earth are you doing?”

Then Alex poked his head in with a grin and, “We’re going to make s’mores.” Ray threw a pillow, which hit the brunet directly in the face. He just snorted and kicked the fluffy object back at the opposing team. “Assholes.”
And then Pete was grabbing Alex’s wrist and pulling him back to wherever his team was holed up at the moment.

As soon as they were gone, Mikey stood up, still clutching the kitten to his chest, and Josh and Ray followed, putting Halsey back into the shopping cart. “It is time for us to get food,” the bleach blond declared, strutting out of the weapons shop and down the hallway with his kitten. Josh wondered if they were spiritually linked somehow. Shrugging it off, he followed behind Ray, twirling a knife around his finger at the handle.

Thankfully no other teams were out and about in the hallways, so the trip to whichever store Mikey had in mind (which just so happened to be a Target) went well, and completely undisturbed. Halsey, however, was not as compliant to her situation as before, and was struggling like a mad-woman in the cart. Thus, Ray was having quite a bit of trouble keep it straight and keeping the girl inside of the cart in the first place.

Somehow, and Josh really didn’t know how the hell this girl had managed to do so, she had gotten her gag off right as they got outside Target and simply yelled, “Brendon you asshole!”

Before she could get out another word, the gag was in her mouth again, but the words were echoing down the hallways, and Josh was sure that her team had heard them. Halsey must have been pretty certain of that fact, too, because she appeared to be grinning around the cloth in her mouth.

“Well, Josh, you stay with your fellow blue head,” Mikey decided, the cat curled up around the back of his neck. “The rest of us shall go and get some food! Maybe some goldfish, some Doritos, more stuff for Brendon’s waffles. Just do your best not to get kidnapped and fight off anyone who tries to get in. Okay?”

Josh nodded in affirmation and watched as his other team mates went off into the Target with yet another cart.

The blue haired boy sat down by Halsey’s cart and continued fiddling with the knife, the girl behind him lying back and staring up at the ceiling. Nothing could go wrong, not when he was so good with this knife.

xx

“It came from that way!”

And Brendon was running off down the dimly lit hallway again, Ryan and Patrick following, Travis still pushing Tyler in the cart, Andy right behind. They’d heard Halsey’s voice a few minutes ago, yelling about Brendon being an asshole, and now they were following it to where they assumed Mikey’s team had taken Halsey. This whole ‘kidnapping’ thing was really setting them back, because now on top of getting all of the items on the list, they also had to rescue their captured teammate.

Sure enough, inside of the Target that Brendon had led them too, was Halsey sitting tied up in a shopping cart, with Josh sitting in front of her, twirling a knife around on his finger at the hole through the hilt. He grinned when he caught sight of them and Ryan rolled his eyes, because this really was turning into the fucking Hunger Games.

“Come to reclaim your fallen teammate, I see.” Josh stood up and stopped twirling the knife, just holding it casually in his hand.

Brendon leaned over to whisper, just loud enough to Ryan and Andy could hear, “Is murder
allowed? Pete never said no murder.”

Andy punched him in the arm good-heartedly, but Ryan had a feeling Brendon was only partially kidding about the murder. Clearly, Josh had a little sadistic side to him, which, honestly, Ryan had not been expecting. The guy looked like the type of person who cuddled up with kittens all the time, and maybe he did that as well, but here he was spinning a knife around on his finger and grinning at them.

“Dude, it’s four against one,” Travie pointed out, leaning against the wall of the Target. “Do you really think you’re going to win this?”

The blue haired boy just shrugged and stuck the knife into his pocket. “Maybe we can arrange a trade of some sort?”

Brendon scoffed and shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

But Andy elbowed him hard in the stomach and glared at the taller man. “Actually, Joshua, yes, we’d love to trade,” he responded, ignoring Brendon’s responsive eyeroll. “So you get Tyler back, and we can have Halsey.”

Josh seemed to consider this idea, before smirking and shaking his head, taking the knife back out of his pocket and playing with it in his hands. Ryan hoped he didn’t accidentally cut himself with that thing. “I don’t want Tyler back.” The brunet in the cart looked personally offended and Ryan swallowed a laugh at his best friend’s face. “I want… Andy.”

“Absolutely not,” Travie put in, crossing his arms across his chest and stepping forward. “We don’t need Halsey back that much.”

At this, Halsey, twisted around in her cart with a scowl, flipping off her much taller teammate through her binds. Those looked pretty uncomfortable, and Ryan was thankful that he himself hadn’t been kidnapped by an enemy team.

“Fine. No deal, then.”

And that was how Ryan ended up with his shirt pinned to the wall by the knife Josh had thrown in his direction, and helplessly watching as his teammates got into a fight with Josh, who had pulled more knives out of his boots and was wielding them against anyone who got too close to him or the cart containing Halsey. “Hey, Ty.” Ryan attempted to make small conversation with his friend, who just gestured uncomfortably to the gag in his mouth. “Oh, right.” The brunet just sighed and slumped against the wall, listening to his shirt tear slightly against the knife.

This was when Ryan suddenly realized he was actually capable of taking the knife out of the wall and trying to use it (as effectively as a boy without any experience in knife fighting could), so he did, surprised at how heavy the weapon was, because Josh had used it to easily, and he questioned what exactly the boy had done before he’d died. Travis apparently had noticed Ryan standing awkwardly at the side, looking between the knife and the blue haired boy, and made his way over to push him into the fight.

Ryan, having no idea how he was expected to fight, just awkwardly let his teammates make attempts to grab the shopping cart or Halsey, but Josh kept blocking them with knifes. He hadn’t noticed Ryan over there yet, so he crept to the back of the cart, staying as low as somebody of his height could, and slit the ties keeping her wrists and ankles together. She, almost immediately, reached up and yanked off the gag. The girl with blue hair flipped out of the cart, leaving Ryan surprised at how it didn’t flip over with her.
Halsey grabbed the gun from Brendon, shooting Josh twice in the legs. He buckled over with an ‘oof’, and the rest of the team ran off, taking Tyler with them.

“What the hell was that!” Ryan exclaimed once they were about a safe distance to slow down with their running. “You can’t just shoot him! He could have died!”

The rest of Suicide Squad gave him a strange look before Brendon stepped forward. “Dude, you can’t be killed here,” he stated simply. “As far as we know. The only people who have ever disappeared have left because of Nightmares or other things. Josh will be perfectly fine. I promise. Yo!” He broke off to point out one of the guys from earlier – Ryan thought it was Alex – with yet more god damned chicken nuggets. “Got any nuggets for us?”

Ryan realized he was being pursued by Jack from before as well, and they were running toward Pete, Gerard, and a girl Ryan didn’t recognize. “Give me back my nuggies!” Jack yelled, running faster as Alex neared who Ryan assumed was his team, fucking cackling.

“They’re Gabe’s nuggies!” he shouted over his shoulder, finally making it to where the rest of them were. Gerard and the girl started shoving the boxes of McNuggets into a bag, and Jack ran into Pete, who looked really fucking scary right now.

“Hey, who’s that girl?” Ryan asked, turning away from the scene unfolding before them.

Andy hummed in response, smiling, not looking away from where Pete was now chasing Jack back down the hallway, laughing his head off. “That’s Sarah,” he explained quickly. “She’s good friends with Brendon.”

“Dating Breezy,” Halsey added, giggling at the exchange of chicken nuggets as much as everyone else in their group. “Everyone here’s pretty much gay, but I’m bisexual. Hope that doesn’t bother you.”

The last sentence was more of an accusation, and Ryan quickly shook his head in denial, because “No man, I’m really fucking homo, don’t worry. So’s Tyler.”

The brunet in the cart mumbled something in protest and Halsey sighed, pulling the gag down a bit. “Pansexual,” Tyler quickly corrected before she pushed the rag back into his mouth and Ryan’s friend rolled his eyes, clearly still not pleased with the situation.

“Yeah, but he’s still really queer,” Ryan corrected with a sigh. “Not as a fucking slur, because I hate how it’s a slur. But we’re both really queer, so whatever. Queer.”

“Can you please stop talking about being so gay, because we have shit to get,” Travie interrupted with a grin, and Ryan suddenly realized that Brendon and Andy were now pushing the cart full of Tyler and the ones with the stuffed animals back down the hallway. He broke into a run after them, Halsey following suit, because there was no way in hell he was risking another kidnapping. No doubt Halsey and he could look after themselves, at this point it was Brendon he was worried about. Okay, not really, but whatever, Ryan could joke to himself in his mind, right? That wasn’t illegal or something.

They quickly caught up with the rest of their group and followed them into a store full of fucking snacks and the first thing Ryan grabbed was a crap-ton of jellybeans. “We need these,” he claimed, putting them in the cart with Tyler.

He then ran off into another section of the store, searching for marshmallows.

Andy was the one to find all the stuff for s’mores, putting them in the cart with Tyler again, because
now he had been declared the food cart. They’d collected quick a large sum of snacks, including (but not limited to) gummy bears, sour gummy worms, cheetos, ice cream, chocolate, and frozen tater tots. Ryan was pretty proud of what they’d gotten, until Travie pointed out that it was two in the afternoon, and they had three hours left to get everything else.

Had the day really gone by that quickly? Apparently so, because then they were dashing back down the hallway, in search of a clothing store. They found one that Ryan couldn’t read the name of because it wasn’t very well taken care of, or at least, it looked this way.

However, there were a ton of clothes, and they actually undid Tyler’s foot ties, because he’d need clothes too, and he went off with Travie while Halsey stuck with Brendon and Ryan went with Andy to his own part of the store. “How much do we need?”

The shorter man just shrugged, replying with, “Whatever we want, really. We just need clothes for ourselves.” He then proceeded to go through a rack looking for shirts.

Ryan followed, finding a couple of things in his size that looked relatively nice and what he was into, and fuck, they had scarves here, and you can bet your ass Ryan took every single one. “Scarves?”

Brendon’s voice was skeptical and he was clearly making fun of Ryan, who just rolled his eyes. “I look fabulous in scarves,” he retorted, stuffing probably ten more that he didn’t need in the cart just to spite the other man. “So fuck off.”

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Tyler, on the other hand, wasn’t having nearly his best friend’s luck in finding clothes. His style wasn’t close to Travie’s, who kept trying to get him to try on different shirts, and Tyler really just wanted a couple button ups or polos or jeans, and he couldn’t fucking find any. There were shoes he liked, sure, but shoes didn’t matter when you didn’t have anything to cover the rest of your body. They didn’t have any underwear, either, which fucking sucked. Tyler was pretty much out of luck, until he stumbled upon a door reading ‘Employees Only’ on it.

The door wasn’t locked, and Tyler let it swing open quietly, very aware of Travie’s eyes on the back of his head. He slipped inside, suddenly faced with rows upon rows of other clothes, yes, including underwear, and jeans, and the kind of stuff Tyler actually wanted to wear. Travis clearly wasn’t as interested, but there were shirts here he apparently liked, because the taller man wasn’t complaining, just grabbing some shirts off the racks and laying them over his arm.

Brendon came knocking all too soon, declaring they had to leave and find a fondue machine somewhere, somehow, and Tyler soon found himself inside the cart again with his ankles tied, being pushed by Ryan down the hallway as they searched for a store that looked like it sold fondue stuff.

They did end up finding one, to which they were all very happy about because this would surely get them the win. Nobody else appeared to have found the store yet, and Ryan was sent off with Tyler to look in one section, and the rest paired off and went elsewhere.

Turns out, they were sent to a section that sold spatulas, and you think I’m kidding, it was solely spatulas. Tyler didn’t know there were even that many fucking spatulas in existence, but clearly there were. There had to have been nearly five hundred different brands of spatulas. Ryan picked up a specifically strange looking one, and spun it around. “This one looks like it could be used for some kinky shit,” he declared before placing it back on its little hook. “What is up with all these spatulas, anyways? This is not healthy! We should go on a spatula strike.”

Tyler just shook his head and grinned, leaning back in the food cart, attempting to get comfy among
the many bags of snacks and frozen tater tots. The rest of this specific section of the store was just a bunch of utensils. Different sizes, colors, basically imagine a utensil, it was there. In about two hundred seventeen different assorted colors. In the real world, this place must be run by a bunch of utensil maniacs, Tyler decided, because this really was irrational.

Ryan must have been thinking the same thing, because he kicked one of the shelves with spoons on it down in exasperation. “I fucking hate whoever made this store,” he grumbled, kicking some of the fallen spoons across the floor. “Who even needs this big of a spoon collection?” Tyler laughed through the gag in his mouth and sighed heavily through his nose, because this whole kidnapping business was really getting annoying. No that it wasn’t annoying in the first place; it was just even more annoying now.

Without really thinking, Ryan untied the gag from behind Tyler’s head, and immediately the brunet licked his lips and stretched them around, very thankful with the change in situation. Now he didn’t feel as much as a kidnapping victim as before. “Thanks.”

Ryan just laughed and undid the bonds on his friend’s limbs, helping Tyler out of the cart to stand on the floor of the aisle. “It’s what friends do,” he said, grinning, but then pointed a giant spork at Tyler. “But you’d better not run, or Brendon might have my head.”

“He doesn’t want to fuck you,” Tyler replied quickly, because he felt as though he owed it to Ryan to let him know that. “He’s just kidding around. Brendon, that’s what he said. Like, I think he’s asexual or something, or went through sexual trauma, but he said he’s just kidding about having sex with you. I thought I should tell you.”

And Ryan laughed.

He fucking laughed.

“Dude, I know,” he said between bursts of laughter, leaning against a wall of forks. This was a bad decision, because it fell over with Ryan on top of it, Tyler just barely being able to catch his friend, both their faces red from laughing.

Tyler pulled him up to be steadier on his feet and wiped his palms off on his thighs, grinning. “You should be more careful, Ross.”

Ryan returned the grin, shoving at the piles of forks with his foot. “You should be more lighthearted, Joseph,” he replied. And he let out a strained sigh and ran a hand through his hair. “Damn, it feels good to just be alone and able to talk freely with you again, you know? Seriously, it’s so weird, not being able to say out last names or talk about how we died, or anything, yeah?”

The brunet nodded, because yeah, he did know what Ryan was going on about. “There’s so much taboo with everything,” he agreed, helping push the cart down the aisle as Ryan glowered angrily at the utensils. There seemed to be no end to them, Jesus Christ. “I have to admit, I’m pretty curious about how everyone else died. I mean, Brendon talked to me about himself, but I’m not going to tell you, obviously, because respect and stuff. You don’t care, right?”

“No,” Ryan answered, looking down another aisle and sighing because it was full of multi-colored pots, half of them with crazy polka-dot or tie-dye patterns on them. “I don’t care. It’s his death, we should respect that. I am, however, very glad with the confirmation that he really doesn’t want to have sex with me. Apparently, though, Patrick wants to have sex with P-“

He trailed off, a look of panic suddenly crossing his face. “What’s wrong, man?”
“Patrick. Fucking Patrick!”

That was when Tyler, too, realized the absence of the small, fedora-wearing boy with blond hair. He’d either been kidnapped, too, or had gone off without his team, and somehow, Tyler found the latter rather unlikely. An “Oh, shit, Patrick!” came from across the store, probably from Brendon, signaling that somebody else had also noticed the missing team member.

Some unspoken thing happened, because Tyler just hopped into the cart again, letting Ryan push him to the front of the store where Travie and Andy were already waiting, Brendon and Halsey coming in soon after. “We have to find Patrick,” Brendon said almost immediately, and Tyler rolled his eyes, because really, could that be any more obvious?

A look of guilt was across Andy’s face, as must not have been aware of his friend’s absence. They must be good friends, Tyler decided.

“When did we have him last?” Ryan asked.

“At the Target where we got Halsey back,” Travie put in. “And other than Josh’s team, Pete’s team and Jack were also near there.”

Andy let out a sigh and slumped against the floor. “So we basically have no hopes of finding him.”

The blue-haired girl just shrugged, and Tyler noticed the fondue machine, graham crackers and bananas and strawberries in their cart, and he felt a surge of excitement because he’d actually never had chocolate fondue before. “We can always wait,” she suggested. “Sure, we’ll lose points and he might be butt-hurt, but we seriously have two hours left of this game and we don’t have everything. So, I say we complete the list, and then go looking for Patrick.”

They all agreed.

xx

Patrick, on the other hand, was not having any fun with Pete’s team, mostly because Gerard had taken, and was wearing, his hat, which just so happened to be Patrick’s favorite. Yeah, so maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to wear his favorite hat to this thing, but that didn’t matter because he was really comfortable in that hat, and he’d spent his entire life being a walking espresso full of bitterness, so why couldn’t he spend his afterlife being comfortable, yeah?

He was drawn out of his thoughts by Pete and Alex laughing over something, and Patrick was pretty happy about not being tied up and in a cart. The small boy probably would have run by now if Gerard didn’t have such a close eye on him. They already had most of the items on the list Pete and Mikey had made, and just needed the fondue machine. Patrick must have gone into ten different stores with them so far just looking for that one thing, and yet here they were, still missing one. He wondered when his team would realize that they were also missing something.

Probably not soon, Patrick thought with a sigh, pulling his sleeves up farther over his hands, wishing he had his hat back to hide beneath. But Gerard was still wearing it and spinning around like a crazy man, giggling, while Alex searched through the shelves in the back of the shop they were currently in. Patrick was well aware of Pete’s eyes on him, making sure he didn’t try to run away, and the shorter man’s face was rather hot at this point. He should really take off his sweatshirt, but Patrick really didn’t feel like risking further embarrassment.

“There’s nothing here!” Alex called from the back, and Patrick sighed in relief as he was paraded back out into the hallways of the shopping mall. The game was over in an hour and a half, which
meant it was only an hour and a half or less until he saw his team again and could yell at them for forgetting him. He probably wouldn’t yell or even complain, because Patrick was just going to be thankful to be with his friends again. Not that Pete and Gerard and Alex weren’t friends, but Pete was Pete, and fuck, Patrick did not need this kind of distraction right now.

Pete was clearly getting annoyed at the ever elusive fondue machine, practically pulling out his hair, which Patrick certainly would not appreciate, because his hair was fucking gorgeous. “Where the hell could this thing even be?” he grumbled, having lost all hope in ever finding such a necessity. “In a fucking clothing store?”

“Avenge the McNuggies!”

The group of four boys spun around in alarm as Jack leapt seemingly out of nowhere with Joe watching from farther down the hallway and smirking. Oh, so they were on a team. Patrick allowed himself a brief moment to wonder who else was teamed with those two before Jack was upon them. Well, he was actually upon Gerard.

“Nanana, man, not cool! You said you were going after Pete!”

Frank’s voice came from beside Joe, and Breezy was also there, and everyone seemed to be materializing out of nothing, and it was giving Patrick a massive headache.

“I can’t take down Pete!” Jack argued from where he was sitting on top of Gerard, and the other man pushed him off toward Alex.

The brunet just pushed him away with a look of mock-disgust, and an annoyed, “I don’t want him, you take him!”

“He’s your boyfriend!”

“Yeah but he’s trying to take our nuggets back!”

“So what! Put him with Patrick!”

“Patrick’s with you, dumbass!”

This went on for a little while until Sarah eventually made her way back from the store she’d been searching on her own, empty handed, and grabbed Jack by the collar, shoving him forcefully back toward where Joe, Breezy, and Frank were. “Jesus, guys, calm the fuck down! I could hear you all the way from Walmart! And that’s not anywhere near here! Did you get the stuff?”

“No,” Pete replied, because Gerard and Alex were now ignoring each other because they were just oh-so mature. “I don’t know why I put that on the list at this point. It’s fucking pointless to keep searching, and—“

He was then cut off by somebody down the hall, yelling, “Looking for this, motherfuckers?”

Patrick looked toward the noise, exhaling in disbelief at Dallon and Spencer standing at the end of the hallway, holding up what could only be a fondue machine in pristine condition. Spencer was the one who’d spoken, and Pete looked fucking furious. “Where the fuck did you get that?”

“From your mom!” Zack shouted down after them, now standing behind who must have been his teammates.

He high-fived Hayley, who was grinning, and Patrick really wanted to wipe the smiles off their sorry
faces. Hopefully his team had found the fondue machine as well, although he doubted it, what with Brendon practically leading them. They were pretty much hopeless like that.

“I’m going to fucking kill them,” Pete grumbled, making his way down toward the other team. Upon realizing what was happening, they soon were gone, and Pete was back with his own team plus Patrick. “Let’s keep looking,” he decided with a sigh, and they were walking off again.

xx

So, Josh had managed to lose Tyler again, as well as Halsey, and was now just waiting for the rest of his team to get back.

Ryan was following his team down another hallway looking for the last things on the list.

Tyler was sitting in the cart, having a friendly conversation with Andy, who was pushing him along.

Patrick was absolutely infuriated that Gerard still had his hat and his team hadn’t come looking for him yet.

Nobody was exactly having the time of their life, but it wasn’t bad, either.

xx

At exactly five in the afternoon, everyone regrouped in the food court, as planned, and Dallon’s team was announced the winners because they had everything they needed and nobody from their team had been kidnapped. After that, everyone went off into their own little groups of friends, Josh being part of the Ryan-Tyler-Brendon-Gerard-Frank-Mikey-Patrick-Pete-Patrick-Dallon-Spencer group. Spencer had found one of those fire pit things in Walmart, and everyone was sitting around it, making s’mores and chatting away, eating dinner, and the like.

Tyler and Josh were eating Taco Bell and drinking RedBull, which Tyler had explained to his friend that Ryan always yelled at him for drinking so much of it. “I still can’t believe you helped them fight Pete over Patrick,” Josh was laughing, glad he wasn’t drinking at the same time in fear of the energy drink going out of his nose.

“Yeah, well, I can’t believe you guys let me get kidnapped!” Tyler retorted, taking another bite from his taco, chewing, and swallowing. Because obviously that’s how you eat food and Josh knew that. “Anyway, you’re pretty damn good with a knife, you know that?”

Josh just shrugged. Yeah, he knew he was good at fighting with knives, but that was mostly because he’d had to from a young age. “Not really something I’m proud of,” he said with a smile, lying back and staring up at the stars shining through the glass ceiling. Tyler lay down next to him, watching the stars, his eyes full of curiosity and awe.

They were silent for a little while, the only sounds coming from their friends, talking around them. Tyler was the one who spoke first, surprising Josh with how vulnerable the brunet sounded. “Do you think they’re the same stars as back home?”

The boy with the pastel blue hair rolled over and watched Tyler from his side, sighing. “This is home now,” he said quietly, and Tyler rolled over to make eye contact with Josh.

“I know what,” he replied, and he really was quite pretty. “But I mean, do you think they’re the same as where everyone is still alive?”

“I don’t know.” Josh answered Tyler honestly, hoping it was comforting in some way. “I never
studied the stars or their patterns or anything, so I wouldn’t know. But I’ve always liked aliens, so I hope they’re the same. I hope there are aliens here, too. Maybe they’ll come down and visit us.”

Tyler snorted and punched Josh lightly in the arm, letting out a breathy laugh. “You’re so weird,” he grinned, before rolling back to look at the glass roof again. “But yeah, I guess that’d be pretty cool. I’ve never really thought about aliens much, you know?”

“Have you seen the X Files?” Josh suddenly found himself blurting out. “I mean, cause, you know, it’s pretty cool, I guess...”

Tyler shook his head from what Josh could see, but he was smiling, and the blue head supposed that had to be a good thing at least. “I want to be your friend,” Tyler said suddenly, and all Josh could think was, I want to kiss you, but he didn’t say that out loud because he’d barely known this boy for a few days, and that wasn’t really appropriate for friends, and fuck, Tyler was probably straight, and Josh just sighed again and looked back up at the stars himself, wishing for the first time in almost a year that he could be up there, in the universe, and fly far away from whatever it was he had in life or death.

They were interrupted from their stargazing by Patrick flopping down in between them like the biggest fucking cockblock of all time, but Josh had to thank him silently, because the little fedora-wearing man had just pulled Josh out of the exact thoughts that had gotten him here in the first place. Patrick had taken off his fedora, actually, in favor of a beanie, which he looked adorable in, but Patrick looked adorable in everything, and some Batman pyjama pants and a pale gray t-shirt.

“How are you guys?” he asked, probably unaware of just how much of an impact he was having on the other two men. “Because I’m starving. Josh, give me some Taco Bell, yeah?”

And Josh laughed, tossing Patrick a couple of burritos as they sat up, Tyler now fiddling with his thumbs and occasionally sipping from his RedBull. They were okay, he thought, looking across the fire pit at where Gerard was sleeping on a pile of blankets and pillows, curled up like a kitten beside his brother, while Frank was chatting with Ray and Pete was on his phone, probably laughing at memes or something along those lines. Everyone was okay.

xx

“Ryan. Ryan, come look at this meme.”

For probably the seventh time in the past five minutes, Ryan pulled away from listening to Dallon attempt to tell ghost stories and squinted down at the light from Pete’s phone. It was on Tumblr, saying something about breadsticks. “Pete, what is that?”

The man with bleach-blond hair giggled and pulled himself up to sit on his knees. “The Breadstick meme,” he simply replied, and laughed again, as though this was the funniest thing he’d heard all day. “Want to see the Zoobe meme?”

Ryan just rolled his eyes. “Sure, Pete.”

And then he was listening to a dancing bunny yell about issues in society, and Ryan really wondered why this was better than being alive. Pete, however, was laughing his ass off, because he was a fucking meme himself.

They were interrupted by Spencer letting out a scream, because apparently Brendon had scared the shit out of him during Dallon’s most recent attempt at telling a ghost story. Now they were both laughing while Spencer hit Brendon with a pillow out of annoyance. Surprisingly, neither Mikey nor
Gerard were woken up by Spencer screaming. Mikey just twitched while Gerard rolled over and pulled his brother in to spoon him, which was pretty cute.

“You fucker!” Spencer was whisper-yelling, while Brendon continued to lose his shit. “I cannot believe we are friends! How dare you, Bden, how dare you!”

Ryan scooted back over to them to sit next to Dallon, who had pretty much entirely calmed down, and watched the exchange between two of his friends continue. “Come on, it was fucking funny!” Brendon managed to get out, still laughing like crazy. “Even Dallon thinks so!” he added, to which Spencer paused in beating up Brendon and glanced at Dallon, who was nodding to confirm their friend’s statement.

“You jerk of a boyfriend!” Spencer cried, picking up another pillow and hurling it good-naturedly at Dallon. It instead hit Ryan in the face, who glared in the thrower’s direction and attempted to hurl it back, but ended up misjudging how to throw a pillow, and woke up Mikey instead.

He leapt to his feet, which in turn woke up Gerard, and proceeded to beat Pete over the head with the pillow Ryan had thrown, yelling about how sneak attacks were unfair. Pete was entirely lost on the matter, and Brendon was once again writhing on the floor in laughter. “It wasn’t Pete,” Dallon put in, “it was Josh.”

So Mikey grabbed the pillow and ran around the fire pit and whip it down in the blue-haired boy’s face. Ryan was laughing now, too, but was cut off when Gerard threw a pillow and hit him in the chest. The boy with dyed hair was grinning, looking utterly elated, until Ray beat a pillow down on top of his head, laughing, only to be tackled from behind by Jack, followed by who Brendon had said earlier was Rian.

It only took a couple of moments more before somebody stood up on one of the tables they’d pushed aside and yelled, “Fuck yeah, pillow fight!” and dived into the mass of people suddenly grabbing pillows and cushions alike and going after their friends.

Honestly? It was the most fun Ryan had ever had in his entire life. Well, death, really. Tyler was busy with Josh violently tickling Patrick to take the pillows he was hoarding, Mikey, Gerard, Frank, and Ray stood back to back, Halsey was chasing Gabe around with a really over-sized pillow, Brendon was building a fort with Dallon, Spencer, and Pete, and Ryan grabbed a pillow and dashed after a girl with hair dyed a gorgeous shade of purple.

xx

Tyler was sitting with his back pressed against Josh’s beneath a table, panting heavily and trying to catch his breath. This pillow fight had not been something he was expecting, but it was a welcome bit of fun all the same. They’d stolen a ton of pillows from Patrick, and now the short boy was standing in the middle of the room, confused, pillow-less.

The brunet poked his head out to where Sarah had attacked Pete from behind, and the bleach-blond just shouted, “I just came here to have some fun and I’m honestly feeling so attacked right now!”

“It’s not 2009 anymore!” Tyler yelled back, because that meme was old, Jesus.

Josh suddenly grabbed his wrist and pulled him out from under the table, leading Tyler across the food court to where an abandoned pile of pillows sat. Tyler grabbed a couple, filling his arsenal, and scanned the crowd of laughing, yelling people for a target worthy of him and Josh’s attack. He himself couldn’t find one, but Josh certainly did, because he hurled himself at a girl Sarah was slinking around the crowd with.
“Aha! Breezy, feel the wrath of Spooky Josh!”

“It’s not Halloween!” Sarah laughed, batting at Josh with a pillow of her own while who was apparently Breezy, was laughing on the floor beneath Joshua. “You can’t be Spooky Josh anymore!”

Tyler soon joined them, tackling Sarah from behind, but she slipped out from under him and easily pinned him with her foot on his back. Clearly she wasn’t easily beaten, but neither was he, and Tyler grabbed her ankle and pulled her down. Sarah let out a very high-pitched shriek, followed by laughter, as she hit a bunch of pillows on the floor, and Tyler took the opportunity to stand up and hit her a couple of times with a pillow.

“Then I shall be Spooky Jim!” Josh cried out, coming over to assist Tyler with Sarah. He really shouldn’t have left Breezy unattended, though, because pretty soon Tyler and Josh found themselves on the pillows instead, Sarah and her girlfriend high-fiving over the fact that they’d totally kicked the boys’ asses, and then skipped back off into the crowd, armed with pillows.

Tyler sighed happily and rolled over to face Josh, grinning. “That was exhilarating,” he laughed, then used the table beside them to help pull himself to his feet. “And we got absolutely rekt.”

“You bet!” Josh agreed with a laugh, standing up as well. And he darted off again, pulling Tyler after him to tackle Ryan and this purple-haired girl, who were now working together, from behind.

xx

Patrick wasn’t expecting to be welcomed into the fort that Brendon was overseeing the building of, but he was, as long as he could bring a lot of ammo, which he had done. Now he was crammed between Pete and Dallon, crouching down below the fort, watching through holes in its wall for any victims to get with their pillow team.

He caught sight of a little kitten making its way carefully across the ground, and Brendon nearly stepped on the poor thing, but Mikey dived in out of nowhere yelling and rescued the kitten, tripping up the brunet in the process. Brendon fell backwards, landing on Mikey’s back, the kitten safely in the bleach-blond’s arms. “I saved him,” Mikey breathed out before pretending to dramatically die.

“I’m not that heavy!” Brendon protested, pulling himself back to his feet.

“I know,” Pete laughed from beside Patrick. “It was probably your forehead.”

Brendon’s face lit up with fury and embarrassment and he hurled himself at Pete, destroying their fort of protection in the process, yelling, “Oh, you’re dead, Pepe!”

Patrick rolled out of the way, half on Dallon, half on Spencer, who both looked a bit confused, but were still laughing all the same. He watched Pete and Brendon get into a one-on-one pillow fight in just boxers and tank tops (hot) for a bit before grabbing a couple of pillows, spotting Tyler and Josh sneaking up on Ryan and Hayley, who were now working together, against Gabe and Victoria, and decided to enact his revenge on them for tickling him almost back to life just for a couple of pillows.

Luckily, on the way over, nobody noticed little Patrick, and he was able to get Tyler right over the head with a pillow hard enough to make the brunet’s knees buckle, and for him to fall to the floor, laughing. Josh spun around and let out a cry and dramatically falling to his knees over Tyler. “No! Baby boy! I will avenge you!”

Tyler rolled over and giggled, coming to his feet and grabbing a pillow. They exchanged a glance, and Patrick was gone before they could carry out whatever plan they had telepathically agreed on, nearly crashing into Rian on his way out of that.
This was all crazy, he had adrenaline running through his veins for one of the best reasons in the entire world, and he was surrounded by friends.

Friends.

Real friends.

That was what Patrick had here, real friends. Not people who were just hanging around him because they wanted a gay best friend, or so they could pick on him behind his back. These people loved him because he was Patrick, wanted to be his friend because he was Patrick. Never again would he have to go back to everything he’d done before. Never again.

He glanced up at the sky, feeling a little faint, and saw that the moon was nearly at its highest point. It was a bit odd, because he’d eaten plenty and gotten plenty of rest, and fuck it, he didn’t even know the date, but it couldn’t be that already because it was practically twelve months ago that it had happened last.

And that was when Patrick realized that it was actually twelve months today.

xx

Josh watched beside Tyler as Patrick darted off into the crowd and suddenly dropped right there on the floor. His brown-haired companion must have seen this happen, too, because Tyler let out a small gasp and stiffened. Unable to explain fast enough, Josh watched helplessly as Tyler pushed through the people and ran to Patrick’s side, checking his pulse.

When the blue haired man reached his friend, Tyler was gasping and panicking and Josh rubbed slow circles into his shoulder blades, gripping Tyler’s shoulders and trying to calm him down. “He doesn’t have a pulse, Josh,” he breathed, shaking slightly. “He’s fucking dead. I thought we couldn’t die again?”

“We don’t have a pulse once a year, Ty,” Josh replied quietly, trying to keep Tyler as calm as possible when faced with this new information. “It’s the anniversary of his death. So he’s just reliving memories, yeah? It’s okay. We’ll take care of him.”

Tyler nodded stiffly and helped Josh lift up Patrick, his body limp and not breathing, and together they carried him to a pile of pillows and blankets Dallon had made and covered Patrick up, hoping he would be okay here. Josh’s brown haired friend refused to leave Patrick, the Josh himself decided to sit with Tyler, solely to keep him calm, and not for any other reasons at all, whatsoever. Definitely not.

Patrick would twitch occasionally in his memories, and each time Tyler would stiffen and watch his body helplessly, with nothing but Josh to keep him okay and not crying because Patrick looked dead, and maybe he’d seen somebody dead before, but Josh wasn’t about to ask him something so personal.

Eventually, Tyler fell into a restless sleep beside Josh, whimpering every once in a while, which really sent Josh into a pit of worry. But he couldn’t really do anything, so he curled up around Tyler and kissed the top of his head before letting himself fall into sleep of his own.
Chapter title from The Kids Aren't Alright by Fall Out Boy

Next chapter is going to be about Patrick
03- It's a strange way of saying that I know I'm supposed to love you

Chapter Summary

He makes the headlines the next day. Young Boy From Chicago Travels to Ohio; Kills Self. His dad didn’t notice he was gone until he gets the paper on the twenty-seventh and sees Patrick’s photo on the front page.

There isn’t a funeral, but he’s burned and his ashes are buried in Chicago, miles away from his mother.

Patrick doesn’t know any of this.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this took so long to update!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s the middle of June.

Patrick’s five years old, playing with his cousins in the park while his aunt watches them for the day. He doesn’t know what his dad’s doing, but that’s okay. The little boy with ginger-blond hair is just happy to be with his older cousins.

He’s confused when they aren’t playing with him, why would they stop? They’re all sitting in a circle, looking at some magazine. Jimmy’s the oldest as twelve, and they all look up to him. He also happens to be the owner of the magazine. “This is my brother’s,” he’s saying proudly, the magazine splayed out in front of them. “I stole it from him because he doesn’t really need it, he has loads. See, Patrick, look!”

Jimmy holds up the magazine, and Patrick is confused. It’s got a woman on the page it’s opened to, hardly wearing any clothing, winking at the camera, and Patrick doesn’t like it. “It’s great,” Aaron is saying. “I’d have sex with her.”

And they start laughing, leaving Patrick to wonder what ‘sex’ means. He’s never heard the word before, but it doesn’t sound like anything he’d have with the lady in the magazine. “I don’t like it,” he says, and Jimmy shoves him away with a scowl.

“Wait until you’re older,” he promises.

+++ 

Patrick’s seven years old, and his parents are fighting. Jimmy got in trouble two years ago for taking the magazine. Apparently it was really bad, but Patrick doesn’t know why. Men have their shirts off all the time in magazines, so why couldn’t women? He just didn’t understand.

“I can’t believe you would do this!” his mom yells from downstairs, and Patrick covers his ears
because he doesn’t like it when his parents yell. It’s scary.

“At least she’s a better fuck than you!” his dad screams back, and there’s a smack, meaning his mother must have slapped him. Patrick begins to cry because he’s terrified of what’s going to happen. His parents aren’t supposed to fight.

“Why don’t you get out then!”

The door slams, and Patrick buries his face in his pillow, still crying and shaking because he’s so scared.

His mother comes upstairs and sits next to him, placing a hand gently on his back. “Patrick, baby, it’s okay.” She pulls him into her arms and Patrick cries into her shirt, terrified, but still feeling safe with her. “Daddy was dating another woman and she’s going to have his children. He can’t stay with us anymore, baby, okay?” Patrick nods numbly into his mother’s shirt, not really understanding what’s going on. “We’ll be okay, Patrick, I promise. Come on, I’ll order us pizza for dinner.”

Patrick lets her stand up, wiping off his eyes and grinning. He wonders about the woman his dad is with now. Maybe she is like the woman in the magazine.

+++ 

When Patrick is eight years old and in second grade, a very pretty girl asks him if he will kiss her. Patrick says no.

And everything goes bad.

She tells her twin brother, who is also in their class, and he starts telling everyone that Patrick is a faggot. Patrick doesn’t know what that is, but it sounds bad. One of the boys saying this is Alex. He pushes Patrick to the ground outside during playtime one day and tells him he’s a gay faggot and that he should kill himself.

The words stick with Patrick, but he doesn’t remember them now.

+++ 

“Mom?”

She turns around and smiles at her son, sitting on the couch beside him. “Patrick? What’s wrong?”

He twiddles his thumbs and brushes a piece of too-long ginger-blond hair behind his ear. “Sometimes, when I talk to my friend, I feel nervous,” he says quietly. “I don’t know why. I want to kiss him.”

And his mom just smiles and pulls him into a hug. “Patrick,” she says, teasing. “You have a crush.”

“Can boys have crushes on other boys?” Patrick asks. “My friend’s name is Jacob. He’s really nice and pretty.”

His mother boops his nose with her finger and smiles down at him. “Honey, I think you’re gay.”

Patrick bursts into tears. His mother is always right, but he doesn’t want to be gay, because it’s bad to be gay. That’s what Jimmy always says, and what Patrick’s dad says whenever Patrick has to see him. “Mama, I don’t want to be gay,” he cries, and she wraps her arms around him, shushing her son quietly. “I don’t want to be a fag.”
“Patrick!”

He looks up at his mother’s sudden outburst, worried she might do something. “Where did you hear that word?”

Patrick looks up at his mom and wipes feverishly at the snot dripping from his nose. “Alex calls me that at school.”

“Don’t let me catch you saying that ever again, you hear me?” His mother pulls Patrick back into a hug and plays with a tuft of his soft hair. “It’s a mean word. There’s nothing wrong with being gay, and I might not even be right. Besides, it doesn’t matter. You’re Patrick, and I love you.”

He smiles again.

His mom is always right.

+++.

The next day in school, Alex goes to push Patrick down again, and he pushes back with newfound confidence. “Looks like little gay boy found some strength, huh?” the raven-haired boy teases, and Patrick scowls. “We got to teach you a lesson again?”

Patrick turns and runs, not really caring anymore about what they say anymore, because Alex is mean and not his friend, but he doesn’t want to get hurt.

+++.

When he’s eleven years old, Patrick’s eating pizza in his bedroom watching videos on his laptop. His mother won’t be home for another hour, because she works three jobs, but her boyfriend is over to watch Patrick. He usually just orders pizza and sometimes they play a game, but usually Patrick just hangs out in his room.

The door to their apartment opening surprises him, because Luke isn’t supposed to leave, but when he hears his mother’s voice, he hops out of his bedroom and into the living room. She’s talking to her boyfriend, waves and smiles at Patrick. He wonders why she’s home so early, but doesn’t question it.

Luke leaves half an hour later, and Patrick’s mother calls him over to sit next to her on the couch. “So, you know I applied for a new job recently?” He nods. “I got it, full-time, but we have to move.”

Patrick would cheer, but he doesn’t exactly like the idea of moving. It means starting over again at a new school with new people, who’ll probably pick on him and tease him again. He shakes his head. “No, we can’t move!”

His mom lets out a sigh and runs a worried hand through her hair. It’s a stress habit that’s Patrick’s starting to pick up from her. “Honey, I know you don’t want to, but we have to,” she tries to explain. “The salary is higher than what I’m making now from three jobs, and the schools there are nicer. We’ll have our own house! The company is helping pay for it because we can’t afford one right now, but it’ll be lovely! You’ll make new friends, honey, I promise.” He just nods stiffly, but that doesn’t mean he’s not any less upset about moving. “We’re leaving on Saturday.”

Patrick can’t fall asleep that night. He’s thinking too much about what this new place is going to be like. They’re leaving in three days, and he’s scared about starting over.

+++
“You can’t fucking take him with you!”

“You can’t keep him because you don’t pay child support,” Patrick’s mother is saying calmly.

His parents are arguing outside of the apartment complex, and Patrick is standing off to the side, watching, holding his backpack over one shoulder. He wants to go with his mom because his dad is mean and yells at him sometimes. His new girlfriend doesn’t like him at all, either.

“That doesn’t mean anything!” the man hisses, raising a hand, but Patrick’s mom doesn’t flinch.

They keep arguing for quite a while until Patrick decides that he has to step in and stop all of this. “I want to go with mom.”

Both of the adults turn to look at him in shock, and Patrick plays with the drawstrings on his sweatshirt. “What?”

“I said, I want to go with mom,” Patrick repeats, even though he’s scared his dad is going to hurt him. “I don’t like staying with you. Mom’s nicer, and I want to live in an actual house and not eat takeout every night, and your girlfriend hates me but Luke doesn’t hate me, and I want to stay with mom.”

They keep looking at him for a while until Patrick’s mother turns and glowers at his father. “Well, there you go,” she snaps. “He’s coming with me. Take it to court if you really care.” She takes Patrick’s hand gently and he follows her down the street so they can meet Luke at the end. Their bags are packed in his truck and they’re leaving now.

Patrick doesn’t look back at his dad because he’s scared of how much he’s going to hate him now.

+++ 

Patrick hops off the bus and looks at the large red and brown brick building in front of him. There are already kids going inside, crowding up the doorways, and his stomach is flopping because of nerves. This is it. They’ve moved and it’s September, and he’s starting his new school today.

He walks toward the entrance, absolutely terrified of what could happen, and when he gets inside safely and to his locker, Patrick breathes out a sigh of relief and unzips his bag. Once he’s got everything he needs from his backpack, he hangs it up.

The biology classroom is on the other side of the school, so Patrick sets out for it immediately. Everyone is pretty rowdy, but people aren’t getting beaten up or teased, and he feels safe.

There are only a few other kids (maybe seven) in his class, and the teacher is quick to explain what to do when everything happens, even though they’re in seventh grade so they already know how middle school works, but he explains all the same. The kid sitting next to Patrick has soft-looking blond hair and green eyes, and he’s scribbling a drawing on a paper. He catches Patrick looking and shoots him a toothy grin.

“Hi,” he says quietly. “I’m Henry.”

“Patrick.” He’s hesitant to answer, but does anyway, because he has to make friends somehow. “I just moved here.”

“That’s cool,” Henry says, going back to his drawing. “You would look good in a hat, by the way. Do you like wearing hats?”
Patrick is a bit dumbfounded at how easily Henry is talking to him. People don’t usually to this. “Um, no, not really, sorry,” he replies after a moment, shaking his head. “I don’t have any hats.”

“We should get you some,” the blond boy tells him.

Patrick decides he wants Henry to be his best friend.

+++ 

They’re thirteen now, in eighth grade, and Patrick and Henry are really good friends. Patrick has a ton of hats now, but he doesn’t wear them as much as Henry would like. The taller boy expresses his distaste for this fact often, but he doesn’t actually care.

“Patrick?”

He looks up from his homework to where his mom is coming inside, hanging up her jacket and hat before taking off her shoes. “I’m doing my math work,” he responds, wincing a little at the obnoxious voice crack. Puberty sucks.

His mom sits down next to Patrick and he sighs, because he misses when it was just them all the time, eating pizza. But she’s engaged to Luke now, so it won’t ever be just them again. Luke teaches French at a college near their house, a college Patrick’s mom expects him to go to. He hasn’t told her about his interest in music yet.

“Luke has to go across the country for a teacher convention type thing,” his mom says, and Patrick smiles a little at this. “He’ll be gone for about a week. Do you want me to order pizza for dinner, and we can watch a movie?” Patrick gives a couple of over-enthusiastic nods, and his mother laughs at this. “Alright,” she says, getting up and ruffling his hair. “I’ll order the pizza now, and when you’re done with your homework, we can pick out a movie.

Patrick finishes his work up quickly and settles on Batman, curling up on the couch beneath a blanket with his mother. They’ve put the movie in and the pizza is sitting half-eaten in its box on the coffee table. It’s been a good night.

He wishes more every night was like this.

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His mom is out at some fancy party with Luke, and Patrick’s home alone. He’ll be fourteen in a couple of months, it’s a Saturday, and he’s sat in his bedroom, playing his guitar. Luke got it for him on his last birthday, and sometimes Patrick plays his step-father’s drums in the basement, but not always, because he isn’t supposed to. They’re from Luke’s ‘band days’, as he likes to call them, back when he was in college and in a band with some of his old friends.

Patrick is very good at the drums. He’s less good at playing the guitar, so that’s what he’s practicing. He doesn’t expect a rock to hit his window in the middle of a song, though.

At first, the boy with ginger-blond hair doesn’t think anything of it, and just goes back to playing the song, but then another, bigger rock hits his window, and Patrick just knows that this is intentional. He puts down his guitar angrily and yanks open his window, looking down angrily to meet a pair of pretty green eyes. He’s standing on the ground, and Patrick’s on the second floor, but he can tell this is Henry, because it’s such a Henry thing to do.

“I’m coming up,” his blond friend decides, and before Patrick and protest, Henry’s climbing a tree and then he’s in Patrick bedroom, having come in through the window, sitting on his bed. “Wow,
you’ve got a nice room.”

Patrick just shrugs, a little annoyed that his best friend just decided to randomly show up, but whatever. He soon regrets not telling Henry to go away when he catches sight of Patrick’s guitar. “You play?”

He shrugs again. “Not well,” he insists, and tries to draw his friend’s attention away from the guitar in the corner of the room. “Do you want some pizza or something?”

Henry shakes his head quickly, and Patrick lets out a sigh, sitting next to him on his bed.

“Patrick,” Henry says after a couple minutes of silence. Patrick looks up immediately to see the blond smiling softly at his shoes. When he realizes that Patrick’s waiting for him to continue, Henry just shakes his head. “It’s nothing,” he declares, and then promptly flops down onto his back and stares at Patrick’s ceiling. “It’s just, do you ever think about sex?”

Patrick snorts because no, he doesn’t really think about sex. He’s not interested in it right now, especially not after what his dad told him, about how if somebody says no to sex but you want it, you should do it with them anyway. That’s basically illegal, and he doesn’t like how his father talks about stuff.

“I don’t think about it, really,” Henry continues even without a real answer from his friend. “But I think about kissing a lot, yeah? Kissing’s nice. I mean, I wouldn’t know. But like, neither of us is straight so what’re the chances of us having kissed somebody, right?”

“I’m not not straight,” Patrick insists, but Henry just rolls his eyes.

“Dude,” he says. “You were so checking out Max Chasen’s ass yesterday. Trust me hun, you’re not straight.”

Patrick scoffs. “Hun?”

“Yes,” Henry replies, still staring directly at the ceiling. “We can be like those girls who pretend their married. I’ll call you hun and you can make me dinner.”

The ginger-blond boy bursts into a fit of laughter at this, flopping backwards onto the bed to lie next to his friend. “In your dreams,” he grins.

+++ 

He’s fourteen now, and much better at both the guitar and drums. Patrick’s mother and step-father still don’t know about his playing them whenever they’re not home, but Patrick doesn’t care. They’d probably stop him, anyway.

For over a year now, he’s been saving up all his money for a really nice electric guitar at the music shop downtown, and Patrick is elated the August morning he counts out his money and finds just enough to cover it, even the tax. So he pulls on his shoes and a hat, yells down the hall that he’s going out, and heads outside to go downtown.

The guitar’s hanging up, all nice and new and pristine in the back. He’s given the shop owner his money, and now all Patrick has to do is pack it up in the case and take it home. It’s gorgeous, with a white neck and a red and black finish on the body. He lifts it up, and it’s incredibly sleek.

“Been waiting a while for somebody to take that baby home,” the man running the shop says with a smile, and he helps Patrick put it in the case and pushes down the latches to keep it closes, with
electric guitar nice and safe inside. “Take care of her!”

The ginger-blond boy nods, the guitar in its case strung over his back, and he rushes out of the store. He can’t wait to get home and try it out, as his parents are going out today and he can play it super loudly without disturbing anybody but his neighbors. Later he wants to invite Henry over and show him his new guitar. Today is going to be absolutely perfect.

He gets home and immediately takes the guitar upstairs where he ‘borrowed’ the amp from his step-father downstairs. The cords are all nicely set up, and the guitar plugs in nicely. Patrick quickly makes sure that everyone is really and truly out of the house before strumming a strong G.

And boy is it louder and more exhilarating than he could have imagined. The sounds from the guitar vibrate through Patrick’s bones as he strums up and down the strings, playing different chords and picking out a song he’s making up off the top of his head. It’s a brilliant feeling, to know that these huge, perfect noises are coming from something you’re playing.

And he loves it, until the phone rings.

Patrick puts down the guitar and answers his cell phone. It’s his mom.

“Patrick? Honey? Are you okay?”

Her voice is rushed and panicking, and Patrick is entirely confused. “I’m fine, mom,” he replies slowly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

There’s yelling coming from down the phone and somebody cries out, and the phone is dropped. It hangs up as it hits the floor, and then it’s Patrick’s turn to panic. Something was definitely wrong, and something either happened to his mother or she just dropped the phone. He keeps telling himself that it’s the latter, even though deep down he knows he’s wrong.

He decides to call Luke.

When his step-father doesn’t answer after six times, Patrick finally allows himself to really, genuinely panic. Something has happened to his mother, his step-dad won’t pick up the phone, and she was worried about something getting to Patrick.

The knock on the door startles him, and he freezes up. The person or people at the door start shouting and pounding on it even harder, and Patrick squeezes himself underneath his bed, trying to keep his breathing steady.

He can hear the door being thrown open downstairs and a couple pairs of angry feet make their way inside. Patrick’s heartbeat picks up dramatically, and he hopes that whoever is downstairs can’t hear it. He hopes they go away. He hopes they leave him alone. But really, he just wishes he could disappear and find his mom again.

Somebody opens his door and Patrick holds his breath. A pair of black-booted feet enter, stopping beside his bed. After walking and looking around for a while, the person shouts angrily, “There’s nobody here!”

He storms out, and Patrick finally lets go of the breath he was holding. He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and sends a quick text to the only other adult he knows, and although they’re terrible and couldn’t possibly care less about Patrick, he has to try.

Something’s happened, strange men are in the house, and I think they’re going to kill me
His hands are shaking, but the message is answered within thirty seconds.

Dad: I’m driving down now

Although Patrick is hardly reassured by this, at least he knows that somebody is going to come and save him. Or they’ll at least try to save him. He doesn’t know what these strange men want or why they’re here, but he certainly is terrified of them. They’re so out of place in their nice little home, with its beige walls and creamy colored carpets. There are footprints of mud from the boots leading around Patrick’s room now, ruining the plush carpeting there, and the nightstand is knocked over from when the man threw it aside in his anger at not being able to find somebody, who Patrick guessed was probably him.

It takes a couple of hours, and he can hear the men laughing downstairs, but somebody else is knocking on the door, and a shout of “Police! Open up!” reached Patrick’s ears. All of his self-control is pushed towards not sitting up and hitting his head on the bottom of his bed. The door opens downstairs and a couple of gunshots make the ginger-blond flinch. A couple of people shout, but then the commotion quiets down.

The stairs creak, and Patrick slides further back beneath his bed. A pair of green and yellow, very distasteful, sneakers appear in the doorway, and then a man is crouching down and helping Patrick out from under his bed. It’s his dad, looking a bit beaten and extremely tired in a slightly torn white shirt and blue jeans.

He pulls Patrick into a hug, rubbing his back, and the small boy doesn’t realize he’s shaking and crying until now. “You’re going to be okay,” his dad says, and Patrick nods into his shirt.
“Everything is going to be okay, Patrick. I promise.”

xx

It turns out that his father lied.

It’s a Saturday in July, and Patrick is, like every Saturday since that day, sitting on the hill in the graveyard, playing with the flowers and pulling up grass, decorating the twin graves sitting in front of him. It turned out that the job his mother had gotten was a drug dealing job. When she’d quit to work in something else that had turned up, the man hadn’t wanted her to go. She’d refused to return, and showed up at her work. Luke had attempted to keep them away, and they’re both ended up getting killed.

They’d turned up to try and get to Patrick as well, but it turns out that drug dealers aren’t all that smart, and got arrested. Now Patrick lives with his dad, who’s new wife left him and their kids. He has two half-siblings, twins named Tracy and Meagan. They live in Chicago, where Patrick is now residing. But he still drives out to his old house on Saturdays to visit the graves.

There’s a couple of six year old boys sitting in the tree nearest Patrick, talking about music. He’s never seen kids so young show an interest in loving music so much, and one of the boy, the shorter of the two with fluffy-looking brown hair, waves at Patrick. He smiles sadly and waves back.

It’s one in the afternoon already, and he’s supposed to be going back home in about an hour. Usually, Patrick stays by his mom’s graveside the entire time, but today he stands up and leaves the cemetery, kicking angrily at the loose stones that litter the side-walk. Why the fuck did everyone have to go and leave on him? First his dad walks out when he’s just a little kid and now the only trustable adults in his life have to go and get killed by some asshole druglords. God knows what’s going to happen next. He’ll probably be the next one to die.
The sky is clear, with hardly any clouds, and there’s a warm breeze blowing through the branches of tree overhead as Patrick walks along the sidewalk and down the street, but everything just seems cold. He’s wearing a jacket and jeans and he still feels cold and lifeless and entirely, utterly hopeless. “Fuck everything,” he mutters, kicking harshly at the trunk of a tree. He hurts his foot more than anything.

His dad calls it grief but Patrick doesn’t believe him. He doesn’t even like his father. He’s a lying bastard who hates him. Why else would he have messed around with anybody except for his mom? Over the past couple weeks, Patrick has been taking out his anger and so-called “grief” in his writing.

He hasn’t hung out with a friend in ages, and nobody has bothered to try and contact him. Even the one person who Patrick believed would always be his best friend is only here in memories now. He does his best not to think about it.

At about two fifteen, his dad meets him at a gas station and Patrick climbs into the front seat, buckling up and leaning the side of his head against the window. They’re leaving Columbus, Ohio now, driving back to Chicago and the few boring memories Patrick’s managed to make there in the weeks he’s spent in his new home. They live in an apartment building, so he isn’t able to play his music at all. Sometimes Patrick wishes he could die.

He’s fifteen when he’s officially diagnosed with major depression. His dad is upset over this fact, constantly telling Patrick that he needs to get over the fact that his mom is dead, and she isn’t coming back. He tries, he really does, but he just can’t, and it’s tearing him apart. Patrick isn’t even allowed to visit her grave anymore.

He is hardly ever able to sleep anymore, and he’s lost an unhealthy amount of weight in the past few months. Patrick doesn’t often show up for school willingly anymore, and when he does, he’s lost all interest and doesn’t even pay attention, or care about his grades. Everything is his fault, and he feels so worthless and guilty. He’s made a tally of the number of failed suicide attempts. Right now, it’s at thirteen.

Nobody knows how bad things are for the small, ginger-blond boy who sits at the back of the class and doesn’t eat much. Patrick himself doesn’t even realize that things are getting bad. He just wakes up in the morning, takes his antidepressants, goes to school, comes home, and tries to fall asleep. The boy hasn’t touched his instruments in a year, and whenever he thinks about it he feels sick, and even more useless than usual. He can’t even look at his guitar anymore without remembering everything that happened the day that he bought it and brought it home.

Sometimes he wants to go back to that shop and make the man take the guitar back. It’s a source of too many bad memories.

It’s Patrick’s art teacher who finally realizes what’s going on. He sits down with him and they eat lunch together (even though Patrick still doesn’t really eat anything) and talk. Just talk. And sometimes Patrick doesn’t want to talk, and that’s okay. The art teacher is incredibly understanding.

But then he has to leave. He moves to New Jersey with his wife who’s pregnant, and Patrick is alone again. Sure, he has the teacher’s phone number, but he’d never let himself call it, not even if he was going to die if he didn’t. That would just be to annoying to the adult, and Patrick didn’t want to burden him with his stupid, invalid feelings.

That’s all he was, anyway. Stupid, invalid, and a fucking fag. Meagan and Tracy have hit that phase
when they ignore every adult and act as though they’re better than everyone else, and Patrick’s father has had enough. He started drinking, and all he does is pick and pull at the fact that his son shows just a little bit of romantic interest in boys.

It’s driving Patrick insane as he sits in his bedroom, the door locked, and stares at the window, contemplating whether he should jump out of it or pack a bag and run away. Both options seem fucking stupid to him, and he falls back onto his bed, trying to ignore the sounds of yelling coming from down the hall. He’s surprised they haven’t been evicted yet.

Instead of doing anything crazy or drastic, as the drunken man down the hallway would put it, Patrick pulls his laptop out from under his head and opens his email. For a couple of weeks he’s been talking to a boy about twelve years old who lives in Las Vegas who has a pretty shitty dad as well. Of course, he isn’t like Patrick’s dad, and he hasn’t been able to figure out exactly what this boy’s father does, but Patrick is certain that this kid is in a really bad place.

“Which is why I don’t deserve to be fucking sad,” Patrick mumbles to himself, replying to an email the kid sent him. They haven’t exchanged names, but that’s okay. He’s just happy to have somebody to talk to.

xx

“Patrick? How were you this summer?”

He just shrugs and ignores the teacher at the front of the room. He’s starting eleventh grade now, and has no intent to finish it. Life sucks. It’s shitty and terrible and doesn’t take pity on anybody. It will take you in with open arms only to then tear off your limbs, tie you to a chair, and destroy everything you’ve ever loved right before your very eyes. Patrick’s had enough of life’s system.

Everything is all set out and planned. On the twenty-fifth of September, he’s going to take a small bag and slip out of the house. He’ll leave Chicago on a bus and take several more until he’s in Columbus again. Then Patrick will go to visit his mother’s grave again, down a couple of bottles of anxiety pills, and go to the tree he used to sit under, and he’s going to climb it up and he’s going to fall asleep, and he isn’t going to wake up.

xx

The bus bumps along the road.

It’s two in the morning, the twenty-sixth of September, and Patrick’s about three hours away from his final destination. The world outside of the bus is pitch dark, the only lights coming from the dim stars and the headlights. It’s surreal, and Patrick almost forgets what he’s doing here, on a Greyhound bus in the middle of the night.

He has a book out, reading in the dim overhead light of the bus. The driver didn’t ask any questions, why a sixteen-year-old boy dressed in black and with a grey backpack slung over his shoulder was on a bus to Ohio. For this, Patrick is extremely thankful. He just hopes nobody will go looking for him in his house before he was dead and gone.

He hopes nobody will go looking at all.

The bus hits a pothole and Patrick bangs his knee harshly on the back of a creamy-colored plastic seat. He curses under his breath, rolling up the leg of his black jeans as much as he can. There’s a scrape above the knee, which isn’t something he packed for. With no bandages, Patrick just takes the pill bottles out of the sock he’s keeping them in inside his bag and wraps it tightly around his knee.
Hopefully the blood won’t seep through his jeans now, and it will stop. There’s no need to arrive at the cemetery bleeding and limping and ready to kill himself. He’s already got the last one down, and the other two aren’t really needed right now.

When the bus reaches a small town, it stops at its designated place. The bus driver asks Patrick politely if he needs to get anything, and the boy declines. “I’m fine.”

The older man nods and returns to the front of the bus.

It’s now that Patrick notices the kid tapping on the clear plastic doors on the bus. He looks fourteen or so, and he’s practically a walking Hot Topic. The bus driver opens the doors and he comes on. “How far, kid?”

Patrick doesn’t hear his mumbled response, but soon the kid is sitting across the aisle from him and the bus is driving off again. “Hi!”

He turns, and the boy is sticking his hand over the aisle. “My name’s Pete, I’m going to Chicago.”

“How far, kid?”

Patrick doesn’t hear his mumbled response, but soon the kid is sitting across the aisle from him and the bus is driving off again. “Hi!”

He turns, and the boy is sticking his hand over the aisle. “My name’s Pete, I’m going to Chicago.”

“The bus comes back around,” Patrick replies, not shaking his hand. “I literally just came from there.”

Pete’s smile fades at the older boy’s unfriendliness, but quickly returns. Geez, Patrick thinks, Does this kid have to be so damn happy? It’s two thirty in the fucking morning. “I know, but I wanted to be on a bus.” The smaller boy pauses and glances around the Greyhound bus in awe. Patrick doesn’t know what there is to be awed about. There’s terrible, uncomfortable plastic seats, and obnoxious lights, and it’s bumpy. “I’ve never been on one of these before. My dad drove me to my aunt’s a couple of weeks ago and I’m going home now. Where are you going?”

“Home,” is all Patrick says, letting himself smile a little bit. It’s not a lie, not at all. His mom was buried here, and wherever she is, is home.

“What’s your name?” Pete asks, and the ginger-blond’s smile fades again. Can this kid shut up for one second? “My name’s Pete. Wait, I already said that. I have two middle names though and that’s really cool. Do you have two middle names? I bet you don’t. Have you ever been to Chicago? I’ve lived there my whole life. Hey, do you have a girlfriend? I don’t want a girlfriend. Do girls smell nice? My mom smells nice, so does my aunt. I play the bass, do you play any instruments? Are you in a band?”

“Can you please leave me alone?” Patrick suddenly snaps, and Pete shrinks back into the seat. He lets out a sigh, suddenly feeling guilty for scaring the kid. He should’ve been more in control. “I’m sorry. I’m just not feeling very well.”

They’re silent for a while, until Pete breaks it again. “Do you need a hug?”

“You?”

“My mom says when people are sad you should hug them. I’m sad a lot, and hugs sometimes make me feel better.”


So Pete hugs him.

And Patrick almost decides to stay alive.
Almost.

xx

He makes the headlines the next day. Young Boy From Chicago Travels to Ohio; Kills Self. His dad didn’t notice he was gone until he gets the paper on the twenty-seventh and sees Patrick’s photo on the front page.

There isn’t a funeral, but he’s burned and his ashes are buried in Chicago, miles away from his mother.

Patrick doesn’t know any of this.

xx

Tyler woke up next to Patrick, who was sitting up with wet cheeks, looking at the pastel sky through the glass roof of the food court as the sun rose. Josh’s arms were wrapped around his waist, fingers laced together gently in front of Tyler’s stomach. It was strangely comfortable.

Nobody else was awake, and Patrick’s shoulders were jerking every now and again, but Tyler made no move to comfort the other boy. It probably wouldn’t make much of a difference anyway. He turned when Tyler moved Josh’s arms off of himself and sat up. Patrick’s baby blue eyes were red from crying, as was his nose. When he made eye contact with Tyler, the shorter boy scrubbed furiously at his cheeks. He sniffled and smiled softly.

“I forgot how bad that is,” Patrick said, trying to shrug off the discomfort that was clearly written across his features. “I’ve honestly lost track of how many times I’ve done that now.”

In all honesty, Tyler was scared. Very scared for whenever this thing happened to him. It would only be a year from now, and then every year after that. That was what Brendon had told him on the bus, and now he had just witnessed one of his new friends going through that.

Patrick pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, his hands holding onto opposite wrists. Tyler wondered if he slit them. “You know I’m actually two years older than Pete?”

This shocked Tyler quite a bit. “I thought Pete was seventeen?”

“Well, yes,” Patrick explained, only succeeding in confusing Tyler even more. “But I’ve been dead longer than him.”

“I thought-“

“I lied,” the shorter of the two interrupted. “I’ve been here three years longer than he has. I met him a couple of months after Pete got here, so I lied and said that I was new, because I wanted to gain a friend. Because this place isn’t fair and you can’t get friends here. It sucks a lot.”

Tyler didn’t exactly know how to respond to this, so he just nodded, because he supposed that Patrick was right. This world or universe or whatever the fuck it was most certainly wasn’t fair, and from the knowledge he’d managed to acquire about it, it wasn’t really your typical idea of an afterlife. Josh stirred slightly from where he was lying down beside him, and Tyler turned his head around to see him squint open his eyes and groan against the sunlight.

Patrick didn’t talk anymore about his experience after that, so Tyler was now going on the assumption that this conversation was over.
Ryan woke up on a table, sandwiched between Mikey and Spencer, both of who were fast asleep. Dallon was sitting on the floor a couple feet away from where they were all cuddled up beneath blankets on top of pillows, playing a game on his laptop. He glanced over his shoulder when Ryan sat up.

“Morning,” the other boy said, shaking a bag of potato chips toward Ryan. He really needed to stop getting so surprised by the whole magical free food thing. “You hungry?” Ryan shook his head, and the food just, disappeared. Huh. “You were out like a light. Seriously. Even when Spencer made out with me on the table, you didn’t wake up. Magic powers or something, man?” Dallon paused to laugh, and Ryan cringed at the thought of people making out so close to him. Not okay. Personal space was definitely something that was needed.

He climbed out of the blankets and plopped down from the table, making his way over to sit next to Dallon. Spencer stirred slightly, but didn’t wake up, only rolled over to take up his spot, and where Ryan had previously been sleeping, spread out like a starfish and almost pushing Mikey off the table. The blond huffed and pushed his face deeper into the pillow he was cuddling, and gave Spencer a sharp kick to the knee. This indeed did wake Spencer up, and he responded by shoving Mikey off the table.

Still, the blond did not wake up, only curled into a tighter ball around the pillow.

“He’s a really deep sleeper,” Ryan noted, then turned back to Dallon, who wasn’t paying any attention to everyone else. The brunet only had eyes for his video game. “So, do you know what we’re going to do now?”

Dallon just shrugged. “We’ll probably take a vote to decide where we’re going to head next,” he replied. “And then we’ll get new busses, pack up, and leave. Don’t worry,” he added at the astonishment on Ryan’s face, due to how easily this all came to the other boy. “You’ll get used to the whole situation soon enough. You’ve only been here for a couple of days, Ryan. It gets easier.”

He only hoped Dallon was right as the other kid turned back to his video game to continue playing. Ryan watched in silence, and eventually Spencer came to sit next to Dallon, draping a soft blanket around their shoulders as the brunet continued to play his game. But he was smiling more now, which indicated that Dallon was happy about having Spencer with him, somewhat cuddling together.

“I hope somebody makes breakfast,” Spencer mumbled into Dallon’s shoulder. “I’m really hungry and not in the mood for magical air waffles or whatever. Or air pancakes or cereal. Or air anything, really. Not waffles today, Brendon made those yesterday. Do you think Mikey will try to cook something again?”

Dallon snorted through his nose. “Mikey isn’t even allowed near the kitchen anymore after the fork in the toaster incident.”

“Don’t tell Ryan embarrassing things about me!” the blond protested, suddenly sitting up from where he lay on the floor. “You can’t do that, that’s rude!” Mikey turned to face Ryan more head-on and continued, “Don’t listen to a thing he says, Ry. I absolutely did not stick any forks anywhere near a toaster. What am I, twelve?”

Brendon just so happened to be walking by at this moment in his pyjamas, looking to me headed for the bathroom near the back of the food court, and winked at Mikey. “Aren’t you?”

“Do you want to fucking fight, Beebo?”
“Beebo?” Ryan snorted, covering his mouth with his hand when Mikey shot him daggers. “Where the hell did that nickname come from?"

“Your ass,” Mikey joked, flopping back down onto the cold floor and wrapping his singular blanket around himself like a burrito. “Man, what I wouldn’t give to have somebody spoon me right now and bring me hot chocolate and shit in front of a fire. That’d be great.”

They sat in silence for a while longer, Dallon playing his video game and snuggling with Spencer, Mikey staring at the glass ceiling of the building, and Ryan just observing everyone and their usual activities of the morning. Tyler and Josh were talking on the opposite end of the court, sitting beside Patrick. The smallest of the three had the sleeves of his hoodie curled over his hands like paws and was hiding his face behind them. He didn’t look as though he was doing so well, and from the way Josh kept making worried glances at the blond, he probably wasn’t.

Ryan took the pause in Dallon’s game to lean over and quietly ask, “Is Patrick okay?”

The brunet merely shrugged. “He had that whole dream thing last night, so probably not,” he quietly responded. “From my experience, that isn’t very fun and can be quite trauma-inducing. I’ve never had one, and I suppose that comes with the whole, being able to fight of Nightmares thing.”

“That leads me to another question,” Ryan interrupted. Honestly, he was feeling quite stupid in this world, not really knowing how anything here worked at all. It was fairly stressful, and not fun whatsoever. “How do you do that? Fight Nightmares or whatever, I mean.”

Dallon shrugged again, pausing his game and leaning back into Spencer, who was playing with his hair. “I don’t really know,” Dallon admitted, letting out a sigh. “I kind of just, don’t let them get to me? I’m not sure if that makes any sense, but what they do is project something that you hate or are scared of onto themselves, and their target is the only one who can see these horrible, horrible things. And I guess when one came at me for the first time, it was my mom, and she had a wine bottle, and all I could think was, this isn’t real. She’s dead. And it sort of just evaporated, I guess? I wish I really understood how they work, man, then maybe I could give you a more in depth explanation. But nobody else here has ever been able to do that, so I can see why you asked me and not somebody else.” The brunet broke off with a sharp laugh before unpausing his game and continuing to shoot at zombie-Nazis.

Ryan sat back, his hands resting on the floor behind him as he set most of his weight on his palms. This whole situation really was a lot to take in, and he didn’t know if he was taking it well or not. Everybody else here seemed pretty content with their fate, even Patrick was looking a lot less pale from a few minutes prior, although that might have been because Pete was over there now, chatting with Tyler and Josh.

xx

Tyler was not having a good time today so far.

First, Patrick had seemed horrible when they’d first woken up, shaking and crying a little bit, too. Then Josh had said all these things now about body positivity, which was something Tyler struggled with, and he kind of felt like finding a bathroom, locking the door, and crying on the floor again. But that really wasn’t an option when Pete was over here now, chatting as though nothing was wrong and Patrick still didn’t look horrible, and as though they weren’t all dead from suicide, and now Tyler must have been having a panic attack again, because wow, suicide.

He’d really done it, he’d really killed himself, and so had Ryan, and dear god, this was all his fault. Ryan didn’t deserve to die, but now here they were, dead and in this absolutely horrible world, and
Tyler couldn’t breathe now, but that didn’t matter, did it, because he was dead. He was dead, and he was having a really bad time right now, could he kill himself again and get out of the afterlife and just float around in nonexistence please? Boy, it was getting excruciatingly difficult to breathe and this was not normal at all and whoever was carrying him outside right now was a life saver or even a death saver at this point because wow Tyler was fucking dead and he certainly did not want this.

And it took a while, but eventually Tyler’s breathing calmed down and the spots cleared out of his eyes, and his head was resting in a lap and somebody was combing their fingers through his hair softly. The brunet’s heart was still beating excessively fast, and he just closed his eyes, letting himself sink further into the lap of this person. They cradled his face in their hands, but didn’t cease playing with his hair. It was actually quite calming, and he kind of understood why Ryan liked it so much.

“Tyler? Are you okay?”

He let out a grumble in response and didn’t move. “Don’t wanna get up,” Tyler muttered out, his words tripping over his lips in an attempt to be heard. “Wanna stay here ‘n sleep.”

The person playing with his hair just laughed lightly and then pulled him up into a sitting position. Tyler did not open his eyes, only rested his head on what he believed to be their shoulder. “I’m glad you’re okay though,” they said. “You know, man, you really scared me back there, right? Those things are even worse to live through though, seriously.”

They just sat there – or lay, in Tyler’s case – in silence, which seemed to be something that Tyler kept doing. But silence was very welcome, especially when this person was running their fingers casually through his hair, although his skin seemed hypersensitive, and every touch was enough to make the hair at the back of his neck stand on end. He eventually forced himself to open his eyes.

Tyler’s head was, in fact, rested on the shoulder of Josh, who was still toying with his hair absent-mindedly, smiling down at the pavement they were sitting on. The sun was up further now, and it was warm on Tyler’s skin. His neck was especially warm, but he played this off as being very cold before coming out here into the sun.

“You are okay, right?”

Josh turned to look at Tyler and make eye contact, but he turned his own eyes toward the blue-haired boy’s shoes at the last second, blaming his racing heart on the panic attack from earlier, because apparently it hadn’t calmed down yet, clearly. “Um, yeah, I’m good,” he replied quietly, and Josh stood up then, Tyler immediately missing the feel of his fingers in his hair. Part of his mind briefly wondered what it would feel like if Josh was tugging roughly on his hair, and whether Josh would ever consider getting a lip ring, because wow, he’d totally slam him right against a wall and suck on that and-

Okay Tyler, going a little overboard there, don’t need to give yourself a hard-on in front of the guy you were totally just having not-so-clean thoughts about.

Josh was now biting his lip and looking at Tyler nervously, and this was most definitely not helping.

Alright, so maybe Tyler did have a teeny tiny super small crush on Josh, but hey, that was cool. That was fine. It’s all good having a crush on somebody who is obviously trying to be a great and amazing friend and will never have feelings, and wow this was exactly why Tyler never had a boyfriend or girlfriend or datefriend before, because who the hell could like somebody like him.

“Are you absolutely sure you’re okay?” Josh started to ask, but Tyler was already going back inside the building to get away from this.
Ryan was having a much better time, because he for one wasn’t dealing with having a crush on somebody unavailable. Instead, he was sitting squished between Mikey and Dallon, with Spencer on Dallon’s left, watching YouTube videos on a laptop that had seemingly been taken out of nowhere. It had been Mikey’s idea to watch that stupid video, Waffle Falling Over, and now they’d gotten onto the completely wrong side of YouTube, full of videos of food falling over. And it wasn’t that Ryan didn’t enjoy this, because they all laughed every single time for some obscure reason, it was just that he really did not spend any time on this side of YouTube.

Tyler, who had been outside up until now, came through the doors at this moment, looking flustered and uncomfortable, and he made his way over to sit beside Mikey. Clearly something had happened, because the blond kept shooting funny looks over at Tyler, and Ryan was also very curious.

He waited until the video with a banana being kicked down a sidewalk had finished before he got up and pulled Tyler with him off to a separate area in the food court. “Are you okay?”

“Jesus, why does everybody keep asking this?” Tyler growled out, twisting the toe of his shoe into the floor. “Yes, I’m fine, Ryan. Absolutely fine.”

Ryan glanced over to where Pete and Patrick were talking to Josh, who kept sending small, nearly microscopic glances over at Tyler. The brunet glanced back at his friend with a smirk. “Is this about Josh?”

Tyler crossed his arms with a huff. “What are you on about now?”

“Oh my goodness.” He let out a small giggle and Tyler stuck out his bottom lip in a pout. “This is totally about Josh.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Tyler’s gay for Josh!” Ryan said quietly, practically giggling his ass off like a proper teenage girl at a sleepover. “Tyler’s pan for Josh.”

“I am not!”

xx

Patrick was also not having a good time.

He’d just had a dream about his past life, and now he was expected to just go on as he had before, unaffected in any way. Everything about this place was absolutely cruel. Tyler was acting weird now according to Josh, and Josh himself looked fairly upset. Ryan seemed to be adjusting well, but there were still people here who hadn’t adjusted, and apparently Patrick was one of them.

Pete and Josh were talking to him, trying to get him to open up even a little bit about what he’d seen last night, but it was an absolute no-go. If Pete ever found out that it was Patrick on that bus that day, he didn’t know what he’d do. It would be so embarrassing, and Patrick might just end up leaving the group. God, he’d looked so pitiful that day, with a torn up knee and dressed in black, looking like he was going to die.

That ‘going to die’ bit wouldn’t actually be so inaccurate, but Patrick still didn’t want Pete to think back to that night and forever see Patrick as the kid who needed protecting, and who needed a fourteen year old to make him feel better with a hug. Geez, what was he, a kindergartener?
“Patrick?”

He shook his head and put on a smile for his two friends. “I’m good, guys. Really. It wasn’t even that bad.”

Neither of them looked like they believed a word Patrick had said, but at least they left him alone after that. It was the least he could ask for.

“So what’s the plan for today?” Josh inquired, and Pete only shrugged. Of course, nobody really knew what the big plan here was, except maybe to survive. It wasn’t like some video game, where the quest was to save the princess and take home the gold even though you were about as well-known as a plumber. Every decision was a plot twist, and Patrick absolutely hated plot twists.

A blanket of silence seemed to wrap itself around them, and Josh coughed awkwardly into his arm before standing up and brushing nonexistent dirt off his thighs. “Uh, I’m going to go see if Tyler’s okay, cause he was acting really weird earlier, and, stuff.”

Pete kind of just waved him off and Patrick sent the blue-haired boy a friendly smile before Josh was on his way. This left Patrick himself feeling pretty awkward, and he rolled his sleeves farther over his hands and hid part of his face behind them, so that his eyes peeked out over the top. “So, um, how’s Mikey?”

Of course, Pete didn’t respond, just shrugged again and leaned back to rest his weight on his palms with a sigh. There was clearly some sort of tension there, or at least, Patrick thought there was tension between them. He couldn’t speak for Pete.

Patrick tried to think back to that night on the bus, when Pete had seemed so overly happy about going back to Chicago, and not having a girlfriend because he didn’t want one, and how he thought the Greyhound bus was super cool because he’d never been on one before. There had been such innocence there, and Patrick, not for the first time, wondered what happened to make the boy so absolutely miserable. He also vaguely remembered that boy he spoke to over the internet, whose father sexually abused him. Had that boy given up as well, or had he stuck it out?

“What are you thinking about, Patrick?”

He looked away from his lap at Pete, who was looking at him. Fondly? Curiously? In some way Patrick didn’t recognize, for certain. “Somebody I knew,” was his response. In a way, it wasn’t a lie. He had sort of known that boy over the internet, and although they could no longer communicate, he found some comfort in thinking about the kid that had been seemingly his only friend after his mother had died and he’d had to live with his father.

All this thinking about the past was starting to give Patrick a headache, which wasn’t good, because this could lead to Nightmares, or even a Nightterror if it got bad enough, so Patrick tore his thoughts away from before and tried to focus on something more ‘now’, like how completely obvious Josh’s crush on somebody he’d only just met was. “What are your thoughts on Josh and Tyler?”

“Give them a couple of weeks,” Pete answered with a grin, and Patrick had to bury his face in his sweatshirt-covered hands again when the bleach-blond added, “Give them their own bus or room or whatever because that’d keep anybody up, man. One of them’s probably pretty vocal, and I’d bet it’s Tyler, you know? He’s probably really vocal, and stuff.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Patrick mumbled. “’Cause I’ve never had sex.”

“Me neither,” came Pete’s response, and he was still grinning super widely. “Or, well, I mean I have
once, but it was like, before I killed myself and shit, you get me?”

Patrick just nodded.

xx

Tyler was busy trying to calm Ryan down from his earlier outburst when Josh made his way over to the two of them. “Hey, Tyler, you okay?”

The brunet looked up, his face (hopefully) unreadable, and Ryan burst into a huge grin again and started giggling like a madman, again. Josh had horrible timing, because now Ryan actually had more reason to think that Tyler had a crush on somebody he barely even knew which was positively absurd, unheard of, absolutely a lie, and Tyler really had to say something because Ryan was smirking at both of them and Josh was expecting an answer and it had actually already been two full minutes since Josh had asked his question and now Tyler looked like a complete idiot, because maybe he had been staring at his nose ring and letting himself get lost in stupid fantasies again, and he really couldn’t make a habit out of this.

“Um, yeah I’m good,” he finally got out, and Ryan still wouldn’t stop laughing as Tyler swallowed tightly when Josh pulled him into an awkward hug before walking away. He let out a breath and shot a glare at his brown haired friend. “You are an asshole, man, you know that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ryan grinned, earning a friendly push from Tyler as the shorter of the two made his way over to the bathroom, because his bladder really felt like it was going to burst open any second now.

Only Brendon and Frank were in the bathroom at that moment, Brendon leaning his back against a wall while Frank washed his hands in the sink, and they both muttered sleepy ‘good morning’s’ to Tyler as he wandered over to a stall to pee. It was odd using the bathroom with other people in it, especially when it wasn’t an excuse to get away from people he wasn’t comfortable around. Right now, Tyler would normally be sitting with his ass and feet on the toilet seat, his face in his hands, wondering what the hell he was doing with his life. But right here, right now, he was just here to actually use the bathroom for its intended purposes. What had the world come to?

He hoped everything would make itself clear soon, because if he was honest, Tyler didn’t know what he was going to do in this new afterlife world place if he didn’t even know what the master plan was.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from G.I.N.A.S.F.S. by Fall Out Boy
04- The sweetness never lasts, you know

Chapter Summary

“Yeah, Pete, trust me, I know all about impulsive decisions.”

Chapter Notes

It has been almost 6 months, and I offer my deepest apologies. I know this chapter isn't that long, but I felt as though I was already dragging it out too far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everyone piled onto buses around noon, Tyler and Ryan still with Frank, Gerard, and Brendon, although now Josh was joining them as well, because he was upset with Mikey for tripping and knocking the table over, getting his food all over everything. Nobody really minded having Josh on the bus, although Ryan kept sending Tyler suggestive eyebrows, which was quite annoying. But all Tyler had to do to get his friend to shut up was mention how Brendon supposedly wanted to fuck him against a wall.

Now they were all gathered around a table, playing BS while Gerard drove the bus. It was about ten at night, and none of them were tired yet, so they just planned to keep playing cards until somebody wanted to stop.

“Are you sure Patrick’s going to be alright?” Tyler asked for probably the fifteenth time that night.

Josh placed a hand on his knee from across the table. He tried not to focus on the butterflies that pooled just below his stomach and the way his breath caught in his throat at the contact. “Tyler, he'll be fine,” the blue haired boy said with a small smile. “This happens every year. Everyone's a bit shaken afterwards, but hey, he'll manage.”

Tyler did his best not to miss the feeling of Josh’s warm palm and fingers wrapped around his knee cap. Instead he thought about putting down a two and claiming it was a jack. Nobody called bullshit.

Frank, however, did, when Ryan played four queens, only to pick up the entire pile of cards from the middle of the table, because Tyler’s best friend had, in fact, played four queens. The black haired boy glared at Ryan from over his now-huge hand of cards, and Ryan couldn’t stop grinning.

“Boy, Frank, you sure do suck at this game,” he laughed out, and Frank kicked him under the table, causing Ryan to yelp in surprise and slight pain. “Hey, fuck you, man!”

Then is was Frank’s turn to laugh and play down his kings, although Tyler wasn't paying that much attention to the game anymore. What he was paying attention to was Brendon, sitting next to him, smoking what seemed to be weed, and shamelessly flirting with Josh. It was somewhat infuriating, how the blue-haired boy reacted, even though it was clear that Brendon didn't actually want to be involved with him. Josh’s face and neck were reddening, and he was smiling and chewing on his bottom lip, and it really wasn't fair, because Tyler was supposed to be doing that to him, not
Brendon.

Ryan laid a gentle hand on his friend’s shoulder, and Tyler tensed up at the contact. “Hey,” Ryan whispered, bringing his face closer to Tyler’s ear. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” the shorter boy grumbled out in response, sitting back into the couch with a huff. “Just tired.”

He was glad that Ryan didn't press the matter, and only went back to continuing to play the game with everybody else.

What was really a problem, though, was when Brendon decided that they needed to bust out some beer. Tyler didn’t really understand why they were listening to the super high guy, but he wasn’t going to say no to drinking. He hadn’t actually done any of that before, but how bad could it be? He could probably stomach a couple of beers before he got tipsy, right?

xx

Tyler was a fucking idiot, Ryan decided.

Not only was his best friend going to get sick from drinking, but he was also probably going to be so drunk he did something he would regret and maybe make one of those monsters come. He didn’t really know what different monsters there were, but Dallon had talked about a lot of them. Contrites, Abhors, Kärleks, and who knows how many more. Apparently a Kärlek was pretty dangerous, but only Patrick had ever seen one. It had followed him around for weeks, and nobody else could see it. It was eventually joined by an Abhor, which tipped them all off and they were able to get rid of them both, but sometimes Ryan was tempted to ask Patrick what exactly they both did.

“Ryan, do you want anything?” pulled him out of his thoughts and the brunet shook his head, no.

“I think I’m going to go to sleep, actually,” he said quietly, standing up and brushing pizza crust crumbs off of his thighs and ruffling Tyler’s hair softly as he made his way to the bunks past the lounge. Everyone waved goodnight after him dismissively. He was really looking forward to some nice sleep, even though it was pretty clear at this point that they couldn’t dream.

Ryan opened the curtain to his bunk and closed it behind him when he climbed it, trying to pretend that the gentle bump of the bus along the road was calming in some way. The pillow wasn’t really soft, and the blankets weren’t that warm, but it was better than home. Whatever home even was, at this point. He wasn’t sure he knew - or even cared - anymore.

Sleep did not come easily, but it eventually did. It brought some unpleasant surprises, he’ll be honest.

First off, he was standing in the middle of a field.

Ryan was pretty sure this wasn’t where he went to sleep, because that would be pretty fucking stupid.

The field was golden, and he guessed it was wheat. He was in shorts, and the grass was incredibly itchy, already making his bare skin red and irritated. It blew in the wind and ran along his legs. Honestly, Ryan wanted to scream. He couldn’t move his legs and the wheat was only making them more itchy.

The brunet opened his mouth to let out a cry of exasperation, but no sound came out, much to his surprise. What the hell was going on?
As he was panicking, he came to focus on something moving in the grains a couple of yards away. It looked small, and if Ryan could run, he probably would, because he hadn’t really seen any of the creatures of this world, but what he had were pretty terrifying.

It eventually made its way over to Ryan, and he set his bottom lip between his teeth and tried not to whimper as it wound its way around his legs and sniffed at his feet before curling up. He gathered the courage to look down, and found a small, soft-looking brown creature. It seemed somehow cat-like, with a long, large fluffy tail and a long snout with a dark chocolate chip nose. The creature seemed to realise that Ryan was looking at him and looked up. Its eyes were big and brown, and it had a splash of white across its snout.

“I’m assuming you’re confused.”

The voice was soft, and it vaguely reminded Ryan of Andy’s. He really wasn’t concentrating on that right now, though, because what really was happening was that the creature wrapped around his legs was speaking to him. Right now. It’s mouth open, lips and tongue and jaw moving in time to make a coherent set of sounds that he actually understood.

It took a few moments for Ryan to regain his composure, and when he did, he found it somewhat hard to respond. “I, um, yeah I guess I am,” he managed, his tongue suddenly feeling too big for his mouth, his lips seemingly puffy and swollen. “What are you? Sorry, that was rude, I-”

He broke off because the creature was now making some strange creaking, vibrating sound- no, it was laughing. “You’re alright,” it said, and Ryan really felt as though he were going to faint. “I’m what your friends would call a Fervor. Although I’m not entirely sure you should trust them.”

Ryan’s head suddenly cleared and his eyes narrowed down at the creature, who had made itself comfortable around his legs. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

It rested its chin on its front paws, and he swore he saw its already long mouth stretch even wider into a grin. “Joshua does seem a little suspicious, doesn’t he? I mean, how much do you really know about the kid?”

He crossed his arms with a huff. “We can trust Josh. Can I trust you?”

The Fervor laughed again. “Your friend Tyler seems to be getting rather close to that one. But there’s a lot you don’t know about him.”

This was kind of sketchy, Ryan had to admit, but he was seriously falling into this web as he responded, “Like what?”

“First of all, he’s sad. Very sad. He’s disappearing. Or at least, Josh is. What’s left will only be the thin shell of an animal, but none of you will ever know a thing. Because he’s not very human as it is, Ryan Ross. The way I see it, he’s a Goner.”

He froze.

Dallon had mentioned Goners.

The Fervor couldn’t possibly mean that.

Could he?

“Tyler doesn’t even like Josh,” he argued.
“Why don’t you go see for yourself?”

xx

Tyler really was a fucking idiot.

After Ryan went to sleep, he discovered that his alcohol tolerance was so much lower than he thought it was. All it took was three beers and a half before he was practically sprawled across Josh’s lap, fairly tipsy, and giggling.

Josh poked at his cheek with his index finger, a small smile on his face. “Oh, Tyler. You've never had alcohol before, have you?”

The brunet’s response was a shake of his head and another bout of giggling. “Never ever!”

Their bus had stopped for a break, and Tyler felt Josh’s hand wrap around his wrist. “Let’s get you outside in case you throw up,” the blue-head said, and Tyler’s mind barely comprehended what was going on. He just followed his friend outside the bus.

xx

Josh leaned his back against the cool metal outside of the trailer, rubbing Tyler’s back through his shirt. His companion still seemed in high spirits, not feeling at all ill, but Josh knew that sensation would come later on, probably tomorrow morning.

“How are you, Joshy?” he asked, leaning back into Josh’s hand and laughing at nothing.

Josh internally cringed at the nickname. “I'm doing just fine, Ty. How are you?”

Tyler didn’t answer. He turned around and stared at his shoes, appearing deep in thought. Well. As deep in thought as a drunk person could be. Or look, for that matter, because he kept breaking his serious face, making faces at his reflection in a puddle in front of him.

When he did look up to meet Josh’s eyes again, he was staring through his lashes, his lower lip caught between his teeth and his hands crossed awkwardly in front of him. Tyler said something quiet that Josh didn’t exactly pick up, and when he asked for clarification, Tyler grabbed his shoulders and pressed his back flush against the side of the bus.

His breathing hitched as Tyler pressed his face into Josh’s neck, breath hot on the exposed skin there. He held his breath when Tyler moved up, his lips pushing against Josh’s ear, and whispered, “I want to kiss you.”

“Do it,” Josh said, without any hesitation whatsoever. “Do it, Tyler, god, please.”

Apparently, Tyler didn’t need to be told twice, because then his lips were pressing up against Josh’s insistently, and Josh could taste the beer on his friend’s lips, but, god, right now he didn’t care. He couldn’t possibly care less. All he could concentrate on were Tyler’s hands, now running up his t-shirt, and he shivered against his touch. All he could concentrate on were Tyler’s lips, moving hard against Josh’s own, and he could barely breathe. All he could concentrate on was Tyler’s tongue, swiping across his bottom lip, and of course he opened his damn mouth to let his friend’s tongue explore his mouth.

Josh pressed his own tongue against Tyler’s, and there was an underlying sweetness to the alcohol on his breath. It took him a moment to realise that the sweetness wasn’t candy or pizza sauce or bubblegum, but Tyler himself. This was what Tyler felt like, tasted like, and Josh wrapped an arm
tightly around the small of his back, the other hand tangling itself in his dark brown hair, tugging.

Tyler let out a soft moan and pressed harder against Josh’s body, and he could vaguely feel something pressing into his jean-clad thigh, but Josh didn't care. This was all he cared about, just Tyler, pressing him up against a wall and kissing him senseless until his lips were numb and red and swollen.

Josh let out a little sound of protest when his lips were no longer touching Tyler’s, but the presence of those same lips along his neck and collarbones entirely made up for it. The brunet was sucking hard in that spot where Josh’s right collarbone met his neck, and it felt so good, he just wanted to live in this exact moment for forever.

The whole thing was put to a stop, however, when Tyler suddenly broke off and spun around, clutching his head with a groan. Josh was about to ask if he was okay right when he threw up on the asphalt. Well. There was that question answered.

“Let’s get you inside,” Josh said softly, taking Tyler’s wrist and rubbing his back again. He didn’t object, just followed the blue-head back onto the bus and into the bunk area. Ryan’s curtain was already closed, and Josh helped Tyler into his own bunk.

“M’sorry,” Tyler whispered, still clearly drunk. “Stay.”

He made grabby hands as Josh started to walk about. Tyler let out a little whine, and if Josh jerked off in the bathroom later to soft lips and warm hands, who could really blame him?

xx

The next morning, Ryan didn’t exactly seem himself. Neither did Tyler. Both of them picked at their cereal, and Tyler’s head was pounding relentlessly. He couldn't remember much of last night, but he’d woken up at about two am with a raging hard on, which led to a lot of different scenarios in his head. To try and fall back asleep, he’d entertained himself with thoughts, his favourite being Josh pushing him against a wall and kissing him and shoving his hands down Tyler’s pants until he was just about to be pushed over the edge, and then leaving. Maybe he had a slight thing for not being able to come, but whatever.

Ryan kept sending worried glances at Tyler, but he couldn't care less, really. He’d told his best friend that he was okay, but Ryan just hadn't believed him. That was fine, he supposed, as long as he didn't push Tyler to tell him something that didn't exist.

The thing was that when Josh came out of his bunk, he wouldn't look Tyler in the eye. Every time he tried to catch the blue-head’s gaze, he would always look away. It got him thinking, maybe he’d done something really bad last night. Maybe he’d been really horrible to Josh, or maybe he’d kissed him and Josh hadn't liked it. Oh god. Tyler really didn't know what would be worse.

Josh made his way to sit as far from Tyler as possible, and the brunet felt a huge wave of guilt wash over him. Something had happened last night between him and Josh, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to find out.

The awkward, tense silence between the group was broken by somebody knocking on the door.

xx

Ryan took the urgent knocking as a sign to leave everybody else and open the door. They’d parked in the lot for a really fancy hotel and were going inside for a few days to relax. On the backdrop of the beautifully-sculpted building was Pete, grinning like an absolute idiot. “Have you guys seen
He shook his head, because Patrick wasn't even on their bus, so why would any of them have seen him? Pete just shrugged and turned around to leave.

It was, at this point, common knowledge that Patrick had a massive crush on Pete, and that Pete didn't return those feelings. Pete was probably just looking for him to make sure everybody was accounted for before they moved in.

The door shut loudly, and Ryan flinched at the accidental slam. Everyone in the lounge looked up at the noise as well, and he shook his head in apology.

He made his way to sit back down next to Tyler again, but Josh grabbed his wrist when Ryan made his way past the blue-head. “I need to talk to you.”

Ryan followed the blue-head outside. Josh sat down on the concrete, patted the ground beside him for Ryan to follow his movements. The brunet did, and Josh hunched his shoulders, sighing heavily. He was biting his lip and picking nervously at his shoelaces.

“I kissed Tyler last night,” he finally blurted, and Ryan tensed slightly, remembering what happened in his dream. “Well, I mean, I guess it was him who kissed me, but he was like, really drunk, and I kind of kissed back and I feel really, really terrible about it now because I kind of took advantage of him?” At Ryan’s horrified look, Josh quickly added, “We didn't have sex or anything! But, like, I mean, the kissing got kind of escalated and I think we might have if he didn't throw up and I don't know if he remembers but I feel so bad. Oh my god, Ryan, I'm so sorry!”

They were quiet for a while, Josh occasionally sighing heavily and twiddling his thumbs. He didn't make eye contact with his friend, and Ryan was kind of glad he wasn't trying to. This whole thing was pretty heavy, actually, because while Tyler had acted first, he was drunk and had no idea what he was doing, and Josh had kissed back and-

He stopped and ran a hand through his hair, tugging hard on the tufts of soft brown. God, this was not what he expected today to start off with. Apparently he wasn't supposed to trust Josh because he was going to hurt Tyler and all of them, but now Tyler was showing seriousness toward acting on his feelings for Josh.

You've known him for a week, Ryan growled at his friend. Why would you kiss him?

“I don't know!” Josh exclaimed, and Ryan realised he must have spoken aloud. “I don't know, Ryan. I feel horrible. Should I talk to him?”

It was kind of a tricky question to answer, and they were both silent for quite a while. Should Josh tell Tyler? Ryan didn't know.

The tension was dropped when Patrick walked out of one of the other buses in jeans and a denim jacket, rubbing furiously at his eyes with his palms. He looked tired, almost like he hadn't gotten any sleep last night, and he was flushed. When he caught sight of Ryan and Josh, he froze, his face getting red.

“Uh…”

Ryan raised his hand in greeting, smiling and trying to look a lot more welcoming and calm than he was feeling. Josh continued to wring his hands anxiously.

Eventually, Patrick made his way over to the two of them and sat down in between the boys on the
ground. “Good morning,” he said, although it came out as more of a question than a statement. Ryan responded with another smile, and Josh continued to stare at his shoelaces. “This is—” Patrick paused. “I’m not an idiot. Something’s obviously happened. What were you guys doing?”

“Talking,” the brunet replied easily, his tone a lot smoother than he’d expected it to be. “What were you doing?”

Patrick’s face immediately flushed, and he stuttered out something before standing up, brushing imaginary dust off his thighs, and rushing off. He mumbled something about needing to use the bathroom. Ryan and Josh exchanged a look; either Patrick’s bladder was really random, or something was going on, and Ryan didn’t think it was the former.

After yet another minute of silence, Josh leaned back slightly and stopped wringing his hands. “Well that was odd.”

Ryan just nodded in agreement.

xx

Mikey felt like shit.

He knew he’d done a really bad thing, but he’d known exactly what he was getting into when he did it, so he really wasn’t sure why he was having second thoughts now, the night after it had happened. The blond could blame it on lowered inhibitions, or the fact that he was really, really horny, and Pete had disappeared early into the evening anyway, but when it was all said and done, Mikey still felt like shit.

All of this was so confusing. He was just lying in a bunk now, buried under covers next to someone warm and comfortable, feeling like he was going to drive off a bridge again.

Someone knocked on the aluminium door to their bus, and Ray sat up hurriedly in the bunk, grunting when his head made contact with the top. The whole sharing a single bunk thing was kind of hard, seeing as neither of them were small in any sense of the word. Mikey tried to roll over and bury his face in the pillow, but nearly fell off and thought better of it.

The knocking continued, and Ray somehow managed to climb over Mikey and pull on some pyjama bottoms. The blond watched him through the bunk’s curtains, hiding when the door opened.

“Oh man, fucking finally! Dude, were you still asleep?”

It was Frank.

Mikey peeked through the curtains again, watched Ray scratch nervously at the back of his head before answering. “Yeah, long night,” he mumbled, and Frank slid past him into the bus.

“Gerard’s looking for Mikey, have you- oh, hey Mikes.”

Mikey had barely blinked, and was now nose to nose with a grinning Frank. It was kind of uncomfortable, and made him really nervous, and on top of feeling horribly guilty, this wasn’t too great. “We were watching movies,” he said quietly, and Frank stepped back and stretched.

“The Breakfast Club?” He motioned at the box on the small table in the lounge area. “Man, I love that movie. So fucking great.”

Ray just nodded, not looking Mikey in the eye. Mikey himself waited until Frank had left before
pulling on his boxers and jeans, and his t-shirt from yesterday, and left without so much as glancing at Ray.

Great.

Fucking great.

Pete was standing near the entrance to the hotel they were going to stay at, talking to Hayley and making exaggerated motions with his hands. At first, Mikey wanted to turn back around and go to the bus, but that would mean facing Ray, being extremely awkward, and maybe, possibly, fucking up his perfectly good relationship again.

But of course, it never ended up his decision, because right then Pete caught his eye and waved him over. Mikey stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jacket and made his way over, wishing that everything could just fix itself.

“Hey!” Pete was grinning widely, and Hayley excused herself.

Mikey just nodded and forced a yawn. He rubbed at his eyes harshly with his palms, waiting for his boyfriend-who-he’d-cheated-on to make some remark on how he was like a fucking kitten, but it didn't happen. “You disappeared last night,” Pete said instead, and Mikey tried to keep himself from stiffening up.

“I disappeared last night? I hung out with Ray and watched movies, after you just walked off to do god knows what,” he retorted, and Pete held his palms out in front of him defensively.

His eyebrows gathered together in confusion, and then he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Sorry about that,” Pete mumbled, and Mikey held his breath. “I think I just needed some time away from everyone. Sorry I didn't tell you, I really should have, but it was like, an impulsive decision, you know?”

“Yeah,” Mikey rolled his eyes. “Yeah, Pete, trust me, I know all about impulsive decisions.” Pete raised an eyebrow curiously, and the taller of the two sighed, trying to move the conversation about from the topic of last night. God, anything not to think about last night. “I'm sorry, we were up pretty late with the movies and stuff,” he tried to amend, and Pete just shrugged it off like it was nothing. Really, it was the opposite of nothing, but it wasn't like Mikey could point this out to his boyfriend without having to explain that he'd slept with Ray.

Pete didn't say anything after that, he just sat down on the empty curb and folded his hands in his lap. Mikey didn't sit down with him. It wouldn't feel right. None of this damned interaction felt right at all, with all of this guilt just hanging over him.

It took a minute before Mikey noticed Pete had put his face in his hands and was shaking his head. Now he sat down beside the shorter boy and tried to wrap a comforting arm around him, but it still didn't feel right. Pete kind of just shrugged him off anyway. “God, Mikey, I did something really bad,” he said quietly.

The blond didn't have a response to this, because of course, he had also done something really bad, but he couldn't tell Pete this, because that could result in things that were even worse. Everything would just become a disaster, and their friends would all hate the both of them - or just Mikey for that matter - and everyone would leave him, and everything was just going to shit.

“Me too,” he said, leaning his head on Pete’s shoulder. He didn't move away this time, and Mikey actually found some comfort in this, because they'd both apparently done pretty bad stuff, but it
wasn't affecting them now, in the morning, when the sun was still rising and you could still see a couple of stars in between the clouds. They were just little people against this huge painted backdrop of a world, and none of them really meant a thing here. They were just trying to be better at this than they'd been last time.

xx

That was how Tyler found them, cuddled up on the curb in front of the hotel. He'd had a killer headache all morning, probably because last night was the first time he'd ever drank any alcohol, ever. Josh was avoiding him, Ryan was nowhere to be found, and he had no recollection of last night other than dumb little fantasies. Whatever had happened probably wasn't good.

He sat down on Pete's other side and rested his forehead in his palms, pressing hard at the blood vessels on the sides of his head with his fingertips, wishing for the pain to go away. "Fuck headaches."

"You've never had alcohol before, have you?" were the first words out of Mikey's mouth. Tyler stuck his tongue out at him, and the blond laughed. "Man, you'll get used to it. Like, build a tolerance or whatever. Unless it's not your scene, then just don't drink it. You didn't get too drunk though, right?" At Tyler's blank expression, he burst out laughing. "Oh god, oh man, you're so screwed. Probably so screwed."

Tyler rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out. "Thanks," he responded dryly. "It doesn't even matter though, right? Cause it's not like we can fuck up any more than we did before."

He looked up just in time to catch both Mikey and Pete's awkward looks, although neither of them were looking at each other. It was pretty odd, seeing as they were supposed to be dating and all. "Yeah, right," Pete said awkwardly, then stood up and scratched nervously at the back of his head. "I've got to go set some stuff up with Gee, I'll talk to you guys later."

They watched him hurry toward the front of the hotel, glancing back occasionally, and then push open the big glass doors at the entrance and duck inside. Tyler looked back over at Mikey, who was now leaning back on his palms with his face turned toward the sky. The sun was still rising, and it was burning reds and golds and purples.

"I can't believe we've only been here for a week," he sighed.

Mikey shrugged in response. "Time seems to go by faster here. Pretty soon, it'll have been a year, and it'll have felt like only a week. That's what it's like."

"So you and Gerard are bro-?"

"I know what you're going to ask," Mikey interrupted, and his fingers curled over the curb, pressing hard until his knuckles turned white. "We didn't create a fucking suicide pact or anything, if that's what you're getting at. I don't know why Gee killed himself or anything, but I can't fucking live without my big brother, you know? He's everything to me. God, I just." Tyler looked over and saw his friend's shoulders were shaking. Mikey's face was turned back down to his tattered sneakers, and he sniffled, then wiped a hand over his face. "He's the most important thing in this entire world. I don't know if you had siblings, Tyler, but god, my brother means everything to me. He just gets me and I get him and we're nothing without each other."

"Damn right, we aren't."

The both looked up at the same time to see Gerard, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jacket,
grinning. “I mean, don't get me wrong, it's sad and all, and I'm going to sound like the worst brother ever, but I'm fucking glad I've got you to rely on, Mikes.”

“You'd better be,” the blond grumbled, still wiping at his eyes. “But you're still an asshole. I thought you were helping Pete set stuff up inside?”

Gerard’s brows furrowed in confusion. “Uh, no? Patrick’s doing that, isn't he? He's adorable, man. Wants to help with everything. You gotta love him.”

“Right. I'm going to see if they need any help,” Tyler murmured. He stood up and waved an awkward goodbye to the brothers before setting off to go into the hotel.

xx

Ryan felt like an asshole.

So apparently, Mikey had slept with Ray, and Pete had slept with Patrick, but Pete and Mikey were still dating, but also, Pete and Patrick were making out in the hotel, and Ryan wasn't supposed to tell anybody. Like, what?

They were in one of the rooms, and Ryan was standing outside with his face in his hands when Tyler came in. His friend came over to lean his back against the wall beside him, just like how Ryan was standing. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself,” Ryan mumbled in response before blowing a curly piece of hair out of his face. Tyler was staring at his shoes. “What's up?”

He just shrugged. “I feel like crap and I can't remember anything from last night.”

“Oh.”

See, this was exactly the type of thing Ryan wanted to avoid. On one hand, he totally should tell Tyler exactly what had happened last night, but on the other hand, Josh should totally tell Tyler exactly what had happened last night. It was all very confusing, especially with the new aspects of other people fucking up relationships coming into it. Ryan wanted to curl up into a ball and never have to think about it again.

In the end, he decided that Tyler at least deserved to know the kind of shit he got up to when he decided to drink alcohol for the first time and not remember what happened. “You kissed Josh.”

Tyler immediately burst out laughing. “Oh my god, man, fuck, that's a good one!” He ran a hand through his hair and then turned to look at Ryan, grinning. As soon as he saw the look on Ryan’s face, that grin disappeared. “You're not kidding.” Ryan shook his head. “I kissed Josh.” He paused and turn around and kick the wall hard. “Fuck!” Ryan wasn't sure if that was from his toes colliding with hard material, or from the sudden realisation of what had happened. “I kissed Josh! God dammit! Jesus, Ryan, what do I do?”

“Oh, but like, he kissed you back?”

“So? I feel like an idiot, oh my god. I kissed Josh. Wait, are you sure?”

Ryan just nodded and tried to press himself all the way through the wall, if only to escape the situation for a moment.

Meanwhile, Tyler was continuing to ramble like an idiot.
“Dude that's really cool. But also, dude I've only known him for a week. What if this is, like, one of those rebound things? Would that count if it was from, like, death?”

At this point, Ryan was absolutely done. “Tyler,” he interrupted. “I think you need to take a walk and like, calm your thoughts a bit? Or a lot. Please.”

His friend just shrugged, turned, and left.

It was sort of abrupt, but it left Ryan to his own thoughts, which was nice, until he remembered what was going on in the other room. Now he was back where he started, keeping a ton of secrets and not entirely sure what to do with them.

xx

There should be a guide on secrets, and how to keep them.

Mikey wasn't sure if he was going to be able to keep his big mouth shut, and this made him feel even worse about everything. Every time he saw someone, he felt as though he were going to spit out everything that had happened last night. To make matters worse, Gerard kept sending him worried and seemingly disappointed glances, which filled Mikey’s nerves with unwanted mixed messages.

Finally, he’d had enough of everyone, and cashed out to go take a walk. They’d passed a field with tall grass a bit of a ways back, toward the West, and that was where Mikey was headed. He wasn’t sure how far it was, and for all he knew, it could be hundreds of miles away. But the prospect of walking hundreds of miles - being hundreds of miles away from everyone else - was so unbelievably appealing that Mikey couldn't resist.

“If anyone’s looking for me, I went on a walk,” he told Spencer, and then set out toward the field.

It took about two hours before Mikey reached it, which meant he wasn't actually hundreds of miles away from everyone, but it would have to do.

The grass came up to his knees, but thankfully he was wearing jeans, so it didn't scrape up his legs. Mikey was glad that the sun was out today, and it beat down heavily on his back. He’d probably have a burn on his neck by the end of the day, but he was okay with that, as long as nobody came looking for him to take him back before he was ready.

There was a big dilemma before him, and Mikey was worried that he was going to hurt someone, no matter what he did. If he kept it a secret, though, at least the only person who would really end up getting hurt was himself.

xx

Everyone got settled into where they’d be sleeping for the next few days, with Ryan and Tyler in the same room, across the hall from Frank and Gerard. Mikey was nowhere to be found, and although Spencer had assured everyone earlier that he’d just been on a walk, that had been hours ago, and there was still no sign of him whatsoever.

“What do you think he’s okay?” Ryan asked from across the room in the dark. It was almost one in the morning, and still neither of them were able to fall asleep.

Tyler shrugged, then remembered Ryan probably couldn't see him, and replied, “I don’t know, man. Isn’t everybody in a big group for a reason? If he’s seriously been gone for this long, then I can completely understand why everyone’s so worried.”
His friend didn’t say anything else for the remainder of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from Jet Pack Blues by Fall Out Boy
not a chapter

okok so ive recently realised how yucky and problematic my username is here, and i've remade. im not abandoning this fic, im just moving it over to @angelboyfrnk on here!!! thanks for understanding, and i hope for your continued support

End Notes

Chapter title from The Reasons Why (The Cure)

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