Girl Anachronism

*In, two, three… out, two, three*

Michael tugged self-consciously on the hem of his oversized cardigan and forced air in and out of his lungs in a pitiful attempt to calm himself. *It’s only a week.* He heard Ray’s strained voice in his head again. *“We only have a week left to find the stone, Michael, and then…”* Ray’s voice had trailed off, a paling wash of terror overcoming his face. *“And then what?”* Michael had asked, obliviousto Ray’s discomfort. *“And then…”* Ray seemed to tug himself out of his daze by his hair. *“Just focus on finding the stone, okay Michael?”* Michael had nodded and walked away, confused.

Now, Michael could sympathize with Ray’s aggravated demeanor, as he currently found himself in his own personal hell. Aggressively artificial lighting, too many bodies in a too-small hallway and everyone seemed to be screaming, or maybe that was just Michael’s brain. His brain felt clouded, like that time he got a concussion from slamming his head into the titanium of the ship. Actually, his head felt like it had just *been* slammed into the side of the ship. Michael blinked his eyes open and found himself pinned to a locker by a very angry boy with large hands.

“Look who finally decided to join us,” the boy said upon seeing Michael’s eyes open. He moved his eyes from side to side, his head slowly following. The white cinderblock walls and uniform blue lockers provided no clues to his location and the locker slamming didn’t help. He concurred that while he had been thinking about Ray, he had walked blindly around the school to a deserted hallway where he had then been apprehended by this maddened boy and his equally angry-looking blonde companion.

Michael noticed the boy’s lips moving and realized all too late that he had asked him a question. The boy shoved him harder into the locker, leaning so close to his face Michael could smell his breath.

“You can’t ignore me forever,” he said, putting on a tone of mock calm. “Now, what the hell makes you think you can just walk into this school, wearing those clothes?”

“My…clothes,” Michael said dazedly, looking down at his now blood-stained sweater. He had decided an outfit of a plaid skirt, white blouse, and light brown sweater from his time in Japan was the most appropriate, compared to his Victorian corset or 50s-length skirt. Ray had cut time-period clothing shopping out of his plan who knows how long ago, claiming it took up too much time. Part of Ray’s plan included not standing out, but he supposed the saved time was worth a few extra stares, so he had kept quiet. Michael also didn’t think face-smashing on the basis of clothing was on *anyone’s* agenda, so he felt his slight resentment toward Ray was definitely justified.

Speaking of face-smashing, the boy seemed to have forgotten Michael’s lack of answers in favor of trying to bash his skull in. He braced himself for another hit when a loud voice rang out and three heads turned in the direction of the sound.

A boy, a rather short boy, was standing at the end of the hallway, glaring daggers into the boy restraining Michael. He sauntered over to where they were standing and plowed his fist square into the boy’s face. He staggered back, releasing Michael to instead clutch at his freshly bleeding nose, and spat, “Oh great, *it’s* here.”

The boy simply rolled his eyes and said, “Go to hell, Brendon.” *Brendon*. Now he knew the name of the boy who felt it necessary to bring him physical harm, to make him bleed and (Michael noticed his watery eyes) cry, solely because *he was wearing a skirt.* He experienced a primal surge of anger along with an impulse to lunge at him, but felt it quickly subside at the thought of the chastising he would surely get from Ray if he acted on it.

Michael heard the boy talking. “You and Bob can’t just walk around, beating up ‘freaks’ as you please. You don’t own this school, y’know?” Brendon seemed to nearly spit with rage.

He rounded on the boy and opened his mouth when his friend--Bob, Michael now knew—grabbed his shoulder and said, “Let’s just get out of here, Brendon.” He looked ready to kill, but still let Bob lead him down the hallway, seething and muttering obscenely.

Now that the immediate threat on his life was gone, Michael turned his eyes to look at his savior, who had begun fussing over Michael’s bleeding nose, properly now. He was short in stature, even with large platformed boots he barely reached Michael’s height. His dark hair was buzzed short and covered by the black hood of his sweatshirt. Michael vaguely recognized the band advertised on his t-shirt and had been racking his mind for something to say to him, so he said, “I like your shirt.” The boy stopped and glanced down at his shirt, eyes lighting up with glee.

“You like *Depeche Mode* too?” He practically shouted. Michael nodded. “Finally! I thought I’d never meet someone in this place who likes the same music as me. The only people I get compliments on this shirt from are teachers. And that’s only the cool teachers.” Michael thought his grin might split his face in half. “What’s your favorite song?” Michael shrugged noncommittally. “I’d say *Heaven* is probably my favorite, it reminds me of a show I love, but I also really like *Enjoy the Si*-“ He cut himself off when Michael winced, the flow of blood from his nose had picked up again as the boy became more focused on the band than his face.

“Oh God I’m sorry,” he said sheepishly, pressing more tissues to his marred nose. “What’s your name, by the way?”

Michael was close to sleep at this point. The violent beating, blood loss and this stranger’s smooth, honey-like voice, were enough to lull him into the deep depth of unconsciousness. But he wanted to learn his savior’s name and he knew it would be rude to ignore him, so he pulled himself further from the sweet relief of sleep and said, “Michael.”

Except it didn’t exactly sound like that. Having only spoken around six words in the past few hours and repeatedly getting someone’s fist jammed into your windpipe doesn’t usually bode well with having a clear speaking voice or being particularly keen on correcting someone, so when his companion grinned again and complimented, “Mikey. Cool name!” Michael didn’t have the energy to correct him.

 The boy stared at his face for an abnormal amount of time. “Oh, and I’m Helena, in case you didn’t know,” Helena smirked.

“Helena. Cool name.” Michael decided.

*Helena*…*why does that sound so familiar?* Michael wondered cryptically *Sounds like something Ray’s mentioned…* Michael would’ve pondered this auspicious feeling more but instead shook away the déjà vu to focus on the much more alarming heat creeping into his face. Helena seemed to notice this and laughed. He stood up and offered Michael a hand.

“Ready to get out of here, Mikey Revenge?”

He looked around, heard Ray’s voice in his head, shook him off and replied, “More than anything.” When Helena smiled at him, Michael smiled back.

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The bitter air hit Michael like a wall. He hadn’t anticipated a tropical vacation, but this was a different beast entirely. Even though the shining sun gave the impression of warmth, the mid-November air of southeastern Minnesota seemed to have other ideas. It skillfully permeated the thin layers Michael wore and sunk its sharp teeth deep into his flesh.

When Helena had asked if he wanted to “get out of here” he had not anticipated actually exiting the school and sitting on the icy bleachers by the frosty grass of the football field. *Helena.* He turned the other’s name over and over in his head, like a mantra, trying to get something out of it. He knew Ray had mentioned it before, he just had no clue why. He thought and thought and thought, while Helena chatted endlessly about anything from record stores to art supplies—to his great surprise—to Michael.

“So, what brings you to beautiful Circle Pines, Minnesota on this fine Tuesday afternoon? Because I find it hard to believe that you could be wandering the school for two whole months without me noticing you.” Michael shrugged.

“Just family stuff, I guess,” Helena nodded.

“Of course, you’re here against your will. Nobody ever comes to this garbage town by choice,” he replied, laughing bitterly.

“I don’t think it’s a garbage town,” he said quickly, “I mean, I did get beat up within my first hour of being here and I think I may be getting frostbite, but that’s not really the town’s fault. Trust me, it could be a lot worse.” He smiled slightly, hoping Helena would smile back.

“Where have you been that’s worse?” He asked instead.

Michael froze. “Oh! Uhm…you know, just,” Michael’s face heated up as he grasped desperately for an answer.

“Ohio? Florida? Texas?” Helena supplied.

He sighed, relieved, knot in his stomach loosening. “Yes, all of those,” he answered gratefully.

“Wow,” Helena exhaled through his nose, amused, “I’ve been here my whole life, I can’t imagine moving around so much.”

“Yeah, it’s…it really sucks sometimes, never staying somewhere permanently,” Michael thought. “But I have some people that make it worth it.” Helena just stared at him, an expression of awe crossing his face.

It was at this point in the conversation that Michael noticed 1. how oddly close Helena’s body was to his, 2. that part of his scarf was wrapped around his neck and 3. how incredibly tired he was. He turned his head to question the lack of distance and found himself looking directly into Helena’s eyes.

Not wanting to break the eye contact, he stayed silent, until it was broken by a defensive mutter of, “Sorry, I didn’t want you to be cold.”

Fueled by sleep and unaffected by his brisk tone, he curled impossibly closer, leaning his head on his shoulder, and mumbled, “’S fine.”

Michael was too close to sleep to hear Helena’s flushed face stutter over a pointless explanation.

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When he woke at the sound of a disturbance, Michael was no longer sitting next to Helena on the frigid metal seats. He was laying on a blanket under the bleachers with a black beanie covering his head and Helena’s scarf wrapped around his neck.

The rustling subsided when he sat up and rubbed his eyes. A familiar voice chuckled, “Oh good, I thought you might’ve died or something.” Michael laughed, his voice hoarse from disuse, then stopped when he noticed Helena staring.

“What?” he asked. He learned from experience his laugh was often jarring to other people. “Is it-“

“Sorry, it’s just…” the noirette cut him off, bottom lip catching between his teeth, “I’ve never heard you laugh before.” Michael pondered this for a moment but became distracted by a loose thread on the edge of the blanket.

“So do you just carry all this stuff around in your backpack?” He gestured vaguely.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Helena looked around, grinning, “I mean, it’s not like I need a lot of stuff for school, being a senior and all.”

*Right, school.* Michael had completely forgotten he was supposed to be searching for the stone. He would surely get in trouble for that later.

“Hey, um, you wouldn’t happen to know time it is, would you?”

“Lemme check,” Helena pulled out his phone, “2:14. School’s over by now, but you didn’t seem too concerned about that.”

*I’m supposed to go back right after school.* “Right, uh, yeah I’m not, but I have, um, somewhere to be, so I’m gonna go.” He stood up and started unwrapping the scarf from his neck.

“Oh, okay,” he said, trying to hide the disdain in his voice, “You can keep that, by the way. And the hat.” Michael stopped and rewound the scarf around his neck.

“Thanks, for…everything. You really helped me today. I appreciate it.” He smiled. Helena grinned back, somewhat conflicted, before pulling Michael into suffocating hug.

“See you tomorrow, Mikey Revenge?” He asked hopefully.

“Yeah. Of course.”

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The door of the ship had barely closed before he became the victim of a well-meaning ambush of questions.

“So how was your first day?” Ray was in a surprisingly good mood.

“Good,” Michael said, as if Ray hadn’t been watching him the entire day.

“Good! I’ve noticed you made a friend,” he nodded, “Do you like him?”

“Obviously, I like him, he’s my friend. Why wouldn’t I?” Michael glanced at him suspiciously, “Why are you so excited?”

“Oh, no reason!” He smiled stupidly.

His grin faltered, however, when the ever-present Frank poked his head around the corner and said, “I thought it was because he finally made a friend or whatever.” Ray’s eye twitched and he looked ready to slap him.

“Well yes, that’s very good but first, you weren’t supposed to say thatespecially *in front of him* and two, I am mostly happy because of the *other reason-“*

“I’ve made friends before,” Michael cut him off, “In the more recent eras we’ve visited, I always made friends.”

A skeptical beat passed. Frank opened his mouth to reply, but Ray swiftly clamped his hand over his mouth. Frank’s eyebrows knitted into a scowl.

“Of course, you have! We just meant we’re glad you’ve made such a good friend so fast! Isn’t that right, Frank?” Ray replied pointedly, glaring at him. Frank glowered and Ray pulled his hand away, wiping it on his shirt disgustedly.

“Yeah, whatever you say.” He walked away.

Michael watched him, confusion melting away into anger. *What the hell is his problem? I’ve made plenty of friends before! And what was Ray’s other reason of excitement? God, I hate when they keep secrets from me, as if I’m* *not the one risking the most for this mission…* His thoughts became increasingly incoherent as his annoyance rose. *Asking me how my day was…he watched me the entire day! Didn’t even ask if I was okay after getting my head slammed into a wall…* The irritation settled in for a long night at the forefront of his mind, periodically rearing its ugly head, even long after Michael had gone to sleep.

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Michael returned Helena’s eager wave, clearly excited that he had known where to meet him, having been unsure that Michael would even see the note he had slipped into his pocket yesterday.

“I got your note,” Michael said upon reaching him.

“I know!” Helena giggled. Today he sported a *Toxicity* shirt, black jeans and a *Koi No Yokan* sweatshirt. Michael was wearing exactly what he wore yesterday sans his own blood.

“I hope you know all of the bands your clothing has advertised since our meeting are nowhere near the same genre,” Michael scoffed.

“Duly noted.” A hint of sarcasm. They began walking towards the track. “My taste in music is all over the place. Just like me.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at that.

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Michael pulled the borrowed jacket tighter around his slim shoulders and resisted the urge to repeatedly drag the zipper across its teeth.

“I found it!” Helena exclaimed, sitting upright, and pulling an mp3 player and a pair of tangled headphones out of his bag. He scooted back to Michael’s right side, placed an earbud in his right ear, and handed the other one to Michael. “I know you’re probably thinking, ‘Helena, you have a phone, why are we going to listen to music on an mp3 player, it isn’t 2002 anymore, et cetera, et cetera.’”

“I wasn’t thinking that.” Michael cut in.

“That’s why I said *probably*,” he rolled his eyes, “But if you had been thinking that I would say ‘Well Michael, there’s actually three reasons: first, there’s a certain charm in the using of a device you don’t actually need to use solely for aesthetic purposes. Second, the beauty of mp3 players is that they don’t require internet connectivity, which, let’s face it, we are definitely not getting any of that out here. Third, I only have one pair of headphones and they don’t plug into my phone.’” He grinned. “So, we are going to listen to whatever assortment of songs I downloaded onto this crappy thing in 2014 and we are going to enjoy ourselves!” He said this with such inflection it made Michael terrified to not enjoy himself.

“And I have the perfect song to start us off,” he began to scroll through the library, “Okay…okay…where is it…” he mumbled agitatedly. “Found it!” He pressed play. Michael put the earbud in his left ear, but they were sitting in such a way that made it impossible to have both earbuds in without their faces almost touching. He tried to shift slightly away, but his friend chose instead to lean into his frame, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

*Just to see you, it’s such a treasure. But when I feel you, my flesh yields no pleasure.*

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A rush of blood to the head and a feeling you’re unable to shake, like a fever you can’t sweat out. Michael felt it coming from a mile away, but no matter how much he tried to ignore it, the sensation always rocked him to his core.

*Come to the ship immediately. Urgent news regarding the stone.*

*Ray.* Michael’s stomach flipped into his throat. He jumped to his feet, pulling out the earbud and muttering an apology when Helena regarded him with concern.

“What’s…what’s happening?” He slurred sleepily.

Michael felt remorse creep into his tone. “Sorry I just…have to…go home really quick.” He looked around absently for an explanation. “Family stuff.” *That’s what he had called it.*

Helena attempted to conceal his dejected expression. “Okay…but…then you’ll come back, right?”

“Yes, yes, of course I will, I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He kneeled down and awkwardly folded his arms around Helena. “And then we can listen to more Paramour or whatever the hell you called it.” He cracked a smile at this.

“*Paramore*,” he corrected quietly, “But yeah, we’ll listen to more.” He smiled wider. “Bye, Mikey Revenge.”

Michael stepped back into the sunlight. “Bye, Helena.”

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Ray’s habit of sweeping him off proverbial his feet before he walked through the door seemed to have no chance of subsiding anytime soon.

“Michael!” He shouted, “Guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, what!” For someone who was suddenly so excited about theorizing, he didn’t give Michael a lot of time to even *think.* He was still on the first syllable when Ray began elaborating.

“So, you remember how back when we were in Russia you were almost violently killed by gunfire?” *How could I forget.* “Well, while Frank was desperately trying to keep your organs inside your body-“

“I was *not* desperate.”

“Debatable, but while that was happening, I had the ingenious idea to use our insolation sensor to track *people* the stone has been near instead of the stone itself because people are unfathomably easier to track than a tiny rock.” Frank laughed. “And look.” He pulled up a large, digital map, displaying the geography of the planet in tones of blue, and slowly zoomed in to what Michael assumed was their location, which glowed red.

Ray’s smile beamed brighter than one of sunshine. “So, you’re saying…if the red is where the stone is currently,” A nod, “And we’re also where the red is, that means someone around here has the stone.”

“Yes, that’s EXACTLY what I’m saying!” He always loved when Michael summarized his epiphanies, it helped him share the joy in discovery and made Michael feel more included. “So, all you have to do is keep going to school until we can find the exact person who has the stone and then get it from them!” He shot Frank a look that sounded like *don’t tell him.* Frank nodded casually.

“That’s amazing,” Michael tried to ignore them in favor of the life-changing news that had been broken. “So, in a few days, we could all be back home?”

“Yes, in as little as 48 hours we could be cruising our way back to our rightful dimension,” Ray ushered him back towards the door, “So in that case, you should be getting back to…school and Frank and I should get back to work, right Frank?” The short man nodded solemnly. *As if he ever does any work.*

He opened the door. “Okay, thanks for telling me, good-bye Frank, good-bye-“

The door slammed.

“-Ray…” The boy didn’t let it bother him; Ray was always like this when he solved something.

As the sun slowly crested across the sky, Michael set his sights on the school and his thoughts on ~~Helena~~ home.

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“You’re alive!” Helena pushed himself off the cinderblock wall separating the track from the bleachers to hug Michael. “I thought you might’ve gotten eaten by wolves.”

Michael eyed him disbelievingly, “Why would you think that?”

Helena shrugged. “It’s a valid concern, you’d be surprised how often it happens.”

Michael continued to eye him disbelievingly.

“So, how’d your family stuff go?”

Michael stopped. He considered telling him, and he really, really wanted to, but he knew deep down that Helena would never believe him. He recalled the last time he had told someone and remembered why he never did again. “It was good, Ray just had…something really important to tell me.”

Helena cocked an eyebrow. “Who’s Ray?”

Michael could’ve kicked himself, and he knew Ray probably would if he didn’t play this off casually. “He’s…uhm, he’s like…my, my brother.” He tried not to wince.

Helena nodded, “Cool.”

Michael poorly hid a sigh of relief, “Yeah…I’ve known him my whole life, and he’s done so much for us--I mean me,” he really didn’t want to have to introduce Frank, “And he’s always been there and he’s just…” He thought about everything Ray sacrificed for this mission, all the work he’s put in to pull it off, and how much he truly *cared* for him in a way nobody else ever did. “He really is amazing.”

“He sounds incredible,” Helena smiled softly, gazing at him. “The way you describe him…it’s…really sweet.”

He gazed back at him, “Um…thank you.” He fought against the heat creeping its way onto his face, which didn’t go unnoticed by Helena.

He smirked. “You’re so adorable.”

This time, he couldn’t hide his abashed state, infatuation evident in the raging blush smeared across his face like paint on a canvas. Glee was etched into his every feature and warmth radiated from every pore. He looked away, breaking their gaze, and studying the ground beneath his feet, as his mouth attempted (and failed) to compensate for the lack of work his brain was doing.

A pleased laugh escaped Helena’s lips, “Wow, you’re really...” then he trailed off, eyes focused pointedly on something behind Michael. He turned halfway around before a hand encapsulated his shoulder in a vice-like grip.

“Hello *ladies*,” Brendon hissed, malice dripping from every syllable.

Michael froze, panic turning the blood coursing in his veins to lead. He remembered what happened the last time he’d crossed Brendon, how his skin bruised, and his body ached. He didn’t want himself or Helena experiencing that again and began to formulate the quickest way out of there. He didn’t get very far, however, when a previously unseen figure grabbed him roughly from behind and dragged him several feet away from his terrified companion.

“What the hell do you want, Brendon?” Helena choked, his voice shaking with every syllable.

“Oh, I think you know *exactly* what I want, *Helena*,” he uttered, spitting his name out like a mouthful of poison, “So just hand it over before it gets *ugly.*” His voice shook with contempt as he crowded into Helena’s space, trapping him against the wall.

Helena’s voice wavered. “Over my cold, lifeless body.”

He smiled venomously. “Then it’s going to get ugly.”

Brendon grabbed a fistful of Helena’s hair, which was a feat in itself as he didn’t have very much and slammed him face-first into the rough brick of the wall. Helena at least had the sense to turn his head as to avoid a broken nose, but executed this decision a second too late, as his face met the wall as he turned his head. The result was an agonizing scream wrenched deep from within the shorter boy, and blood oozing from a horrific gash across his cheek.

Michael, who had slowly been lowering himself forward to prevent Bob from catching on, took advantage of this moment to quickly bend the rest of the way down and throw his head back into Bob’s face. Bob cried, releasing him, and inadvertently handed him the opportunity to knee him in the stomach, which he graciously took. Bob dropped to his knees, doubling over in pain before scrambling to his feet and running off, as Michael turned his eyes on Brendon.

He didn’t even have a plan, really. He only saw the pain in Helena’s watery, brown eyes, then red, and the next thing he knew, he had his tormenter pinned to the synthetic rubber of the track, one hand repeatedly berating every inch of him he could reach, the other gripping his jaw and firmly grinding the back of his head into the asphalt.

He only felt the need to stop after he heard someone calling his name and felt a tug on his arm. He swiftly rolled off of his battered enemy, knowing he wouldn’t *dare* try anything else and stood to face him.

He was a mess, blood dripped from his face onto the ground and a steady stream of tears rolled down his cheeks. But he was still mostly okay and as soon as Michael turned around, Helena threw himself at him, knocking him back to the ground with a spine-splitting hug.

“I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, Mikey, I thought that after the other day they’d leave us or at least you alone but they didn’t and this should just be my problem, not yours, but it isn’t and I’m sorry but I’m just so happy you’re okay,” he punctuated this with a loud sob, hugging Michael tighter, “Thank you so much, you just saved me and I could not be more grateful.” He tried to smile through the gore and tears, pressing their foreheads together, as Michael lifted a hand to cradle his unscarred cheek. “I’m happy to be your friend.”

Michael’s eyes fluttered open, and he smiled. “I’m happy to be your friend, too.” He slowly pushed his way to his feet and held out a bloodstained hand to his friend. “Let’s get your face fixed up?”

“Let’s get my face fixed up.”

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Which proved to be easier said than done. It took what felt like an hour for Helena to even let Michael touch his face and even longer still for Michael to actually clean and bandage the wound.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, *ow*, Mikey please don’t touch it, it hurts so much,” Helena kicked at him, backing away the instant he applied pressure.

Michael scoffed, “How am I supposed to do this if you won’t even let me near you?” he cocked an eyebrow, “You certainly can’t leave it like this, and I highly doubt you’d want to fix it yourself.” That shut him up pretty quickly.

He stopped kicking and Michael sat back down, “Thank you.”

He rolled his eyes, and grumbled, “Whatever.”

Michael mimicked the motion and began to wipe the blood off his face. When he was done, he gently turned Helena’s head and began to examine the cut more closely. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches, which is good because I suck at them,” he said softly. Helena slowly exhaled a breath he didn’t know he was holding, feeling a blush bloom across his face as Michael was basically sat in his lap and staring determinedly at his face, deft fingers wrapped around his jaw.

This, of course, did not go unnoticed by Michael, who pulled away concernedly when he observed a previously unseen redness highlighting his face. “Oh god, are you okay? Your face is really…” he stopped, realizing as he glanced down. “Oh…you’re just…blushing.” He looked around distractedly but made no attempt to move. Helena could’ve laughed. The monotony of his voice, how casually he made the remark, knowing *exactly* what had caused it and yet making to move to change it. He was either incredibly skilled at flirting, or just genuinely, inconceivably clueless and Helena got the feeling it wasn’t the former. *How is he so charming?*

Michael dug around in the first-aid kit until he produced a tube of antibiotic ointment. He squeezed a small amount onto his finger and gently dabbed it on Helena’s skin before covering it with a large piece of gauze and securing it in place with medical tape. “There you go, all done.”

*Finally.* Helena touched the soft bandage as Michael moved off of him to put the first-aid kit away. “Thank you. So much.”

Michael shrugged, sitting down opposite of him, “Don’t mention it. You’ve done the same for me and besides, it’s not like I had to give you stitches.” He smiled wickedly.

Helena shuddered, horrified at the prospect of a needle repeatedly piercing through his skin, the thought of his complexion being held together by dark, course thread, the thought of his face being held as careful fingers stitched his flesh back together, the thought of the obliviously attractive boy attached to those hands. “I don’t think I would mind.”

“I can guarantee you would, it’s abysmal, being sewn up by me.”

“I’ll call you the next time Brendon tries beating the life out of me.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

They smiled at each other, leaning in, and pressing their foreheads together, enjoying the comfortable silence. Helena stared at Michael’s closed lids and reached out to grab his hand. Michael’s brows furrowed slightly, eyes remaining closed, but he threaded his fingers with Helena’s and reciprocated the action with his other hand.

Helena thought about it, he really did. He knew how easy it would be to close the less-than-four-inch gap between them and press their lips together, something he’d wanted to do since the first time he saw him. He had been unable to keep his mind off of him for the past two days and now he was right in front of him, eyes shut and holding his hand, like in a movie. It was perfect, he was perfect, with his careful, callused hands, and his gentle demeanor, and his loud, ringing laugh. Helena loved everything about him. He was so close, so, so close, but unfortunately, not everything in the universe could be as perfect as him. Michael’s watch beeped quietly, and his eyes fluttered open.

“Sorry, ah, I’ve got to get back,” he sighed, clicking the watch to turn it off.

Helena smiled sadly; he was becoming accustomed to hearing him say that. “Yeah, I know, it’s fine.” He moved to get up, and Helena let him, taking the hand he was offered moments later. He watched Michael zip his borrowed jacket and turned his face away from the bitter wind, swallowing his disappointment.

But sometimes, the universe can comfort us in unexpected ways.

“See you tomorrow, Mikey Revenge?”

He pressed a chaste kiss to Helena’s cheek.

“Of course.”

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Michael hummed happily, tapping his fingers rhythmically on his thighs. He hadn’t seen Helena’s face, but he executed that pretty well. At least, he thought he did. Truth be told, he really had no idea what he was doing. All he knew was that he liked Helena and he was almost sure Helena liked him too. He had thought about kissing him in those few, beautiful moments when they were holding hands, but he didn’t know if that’s what Helena would’ve wanted. He didn’t want to mess anything up. *Even if I’ll only be there for one more day.* Then he’d be back to his life and his home. *Home.* It had been so since Michael had been there. No matter how you spun it, a time machine and the constant threat of annihilation did not constitute a home. *But.* Was his home even the same anymore? He’d been gone for years, he hardly remembered what his life was like before this. He began to fear there would be no normal, or that his normal wouldn’t be the same as it was before. He longed to stay forever with Helena. Live under those bleachers, in the electrically charged buzz of his youth. But he knew that wasn’t possible. He needed to go back, and face whatever was waiting there for him. He’d have Ray, and Frank, and the faded memory of three honeyed days with the most amazing boy in this dimension.

He glanced up, having reached the door. He knew Ray had seen most of what happened, but he still wanted to tell him himself. He exhaled and slowly turned the door handle, waiting for a pair of hands to appear out of nothing and pull him violently inside. What he walked might not have looked much worse, but as soon as he shut the door, he wished he hadn’t. There were a few charts and maps strewn around the floor, a few more machines were turned on, and Ray may have been typing more frantically than usual. Nothing too out of the ordinary. But Michael felt the overwhelming tension; the room hadn’t exploded, Ray did. He paid no attention to Michael as he walked in, and honestly, Michael was glad he didn’t. He looked as though he’d aged ten years, and if he ran his hands through his hair again, it would probably fall out. He approached Frank. Frank was perched on a table, hugging his knees, and rocking back and forth.

He sat down next to him, careful not to touch him, “Hey, what happened?” he asked.

Frank startled slightly, looking up. Michael could see his eyes were rimmed with red. He shook his head vehemently.

Michael sighed and moved to go find a notepad. He hoped Frank could at least communicate by hand. Frank gripped his arm tightly, nails digging into his skin, and he sat back down.

“He…lost the stone,” Frank whispered, so startlingly quiet Michael had to stop breathing to catch it. “He doesn’t know where it is.”

Michael’s blood iced over with despair; his organs felt like they had been replaced with rocks. He knew it was all too good to be true, he knew it. He fought to keep his voice level. “When did he lose it?”

Frank shrugged, “I walked away when you and your boyfriend were getting beat up, and when I came back when you guys were holding hands, he knew it was gone.”

His head spun at the mention of Helena. He knew Frank hadn’t meant anything by “boyfriend” besides the literal meaning of the word, but he still grinned stupidly. *If he came back then, he probably saw…*

“Oh,” he smirked, interrupting Michael’s thoughts, “And I did see the kiss, didn’t know you were such a romantic.” He punched Michael’s shoulder.

“Shut up, Frank,” he said, mock-serious, before they both collapsed into giggles; they were still giggling when a crash sounded from the other side of the room. They both jumped, startled, but it was just Ray slamming a door.

“Should we go check on him?” Michael faltered.

Frank shook his head, “I don’t really want to.”

“Fair,” he admitted, “Wanna just play *Mario Kart* and watch zombie movies all night?”

Frank’s face lit up like Christmas tree. “That’s the most idiotic question you’ve ever asked,” he deadpanned.

Michael snickered, and hugged Frank with his right arm, “Shut up.”

-

Michael sat up and began to rub the sleep out of his eyes. His room was deserted except for him. He looked at the vacant spot on the floor where Frank had fallen asleep. *He must’ve left before I woke up.* He rolled off his bed, flopping onto the floor, his eyes unfocused lazily on a dusty corner of his ceiling. *I wonder what time it is…* It must’ve been early; the ship was eerily quiet. *Ray and Frank must still be asleep.* He threw a quick glance to the clock hanging from the wall. *7:13,* it read. *Ray must really be tired if he’s still asleep.* He slowly picked himself off the floor and began to gather his discarded—but bloodless—clothing. He peeled off his (Frank’s) too-short sweater and buttoned his shirt. He remembered when he didn’t have to steal Frank’s clothes, when all the clothes he brought from home still fit. That was probably two years ago at this point. He had packed a substantial amount of clothing the first time he left for the mission, thinking he’d only be gone for a year at the maximum. Everyone thought that back then. But the months gradually piled up like his unwearably small clothing and by that point, everything in his life was done in a frenzy, so normal clothes that fit sank to the bottom of the priority list. Him and Frank had been around the same size when they left. Michael grew, Frank didn’t. Simple as that. Sue him if he wanted to wear something casual like a regular person.

He finally slipped on his shoes (thankfully his feet had stayed around the same size over the years) and felt something crunch under his foot as he stepped towards the door. A note. He read it as he walked, eyes quickly scanning Frank’s untidy scrawl.

*Thanks for being there for me last night. I like hanging out with you. We’ll come get you when you get the stone. Have fun with your boyfriend today. Love Frank.*

He smiled as he zipped up his (Helena’s) jacket. He could hear the sarcastic drawl as he read, imagined the elbow in his ribs at the word *boyfriend*, imagined his elbow in Frank’s ribs after pointing out how he signed it. He missed Frank. He’d be happy to go home after today. *Just need to find the stone.* He hadn’t exactly been looking very hard. He needed to focus. He checked the time again. *7:20.* He needed to hurry if he was gonna make it there on time.

He grabbed his watch from the table, strapping it to his wrist as he looked about the room. *So empty.* It was unnerving. No Ray, who woke at the crack of dawn, smiling brightly even if he hadn’t slept at all. Ray, who was always there, planning and plotting and scheming something to make their lives less difficult. Ray, who was always there for him, to pick him up when he fell. Michael realized this was the first time in a long time he had gone somewhere without saying goodbye to Ray.

He thought for a moment, then snatched a stray pen off the floor, fished a piece of paper from his pocket and quickly scratched out his feelings in long, thin lettering. He practically ran out the door, tripping over his shoes and leaving nothing but a discarded pen and a shouted “I love you” in his wake.

He could’ve sworn he heard the fraction of a laugh as he shut the door behind him.

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He found Helena lying on a blanket underneath the bleachers, a *blink-182* songpouring out of his frayed earbuds.

“Hey!” he said when Michael sat down, “Glad you could make it.” He removed an earbud and brushed off his well-worn *Nevermind* t-shirt.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he remarked, “What do you want to do today?”

“Well, since today is your last day here,” Michael nodded solemnly, “I thought I could show you my favorite spot in this horribly tiny town and we could hang out there for the day instead of under these stupid bleachers. That sound good?” He made to get to his feet.

“Sure, that sounds cool,” he agreed, following his lead.

“Awesome! Let’s go.” He slung his bag over his shoulder, grabbed Michael’s hand and led them both towards the woods.

-

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

Michael flapped his hands excitedly, enjoying the sound the forest floor made under the weight of his every step. They had been trekking through the woods for a while, Helena having long since given up trying to hold his hand, as he walked a lot slower to enjoy the scenery and stim at the brain-scratching noise. Helena had been more talkative before entering the woods, but after a while he had stopped talking, and they both fell into companionable, if not tense, silence. Michael didn’t mind. He was perfectly content; there were an infinite number of fallen leaves to step on and the frigid Minnesota breeze could barely reach him through the foliage.

At last, they reached the aforementioned spot, a small clearing covered by a thick layer of fallen leaves and ringed by a circle of black walnut trees. Helena dropped his unzipped bag, extracted the blanket, and spread it over the ground. He collapsed onto it and wordlessly patted the place next to him. Michael laid down next to him and took the earbud he was offered. He wondered if Helena was upset. He wasn’t very good at picking up on that sort of thing, but if he knew Helena, something was definitely wrong. But Helena didn’t seem to want to talk, and Michael didn’t want to be the one to force him, so he just moved a little closer and gently wrapped an arm around his shoulders, enough to be comforting but still light enough so that he could pull away if he wanted. He instead reciprocated immediately, wrapping both arms around Michael and holding him close. Michael held him tightly, rubbing gentle circles into his back and ignoring the soft sobs he emitted.

He wanted so badly to ask, but he at least had half a mind to tell Helena was exhausted. *I’ll ask him when he…when we…wake up.* He was still pretty exhausted too, and the familiar fragrance and warmth of the boy next to him was not helping him keep from drifting off. *He’ll probably…want to talk more…* He yawned *…when he gets up anyway.* When he woke up, he would definitely deny it. But in the moment when he was halfway between consciousness and the contrary, he would’ve told you he heard Helena mumble *I love you* into his chest.

*I sleep in your shirts and walk through this house in your shoes, I know it’s strange. It’s a strange way of saying that I know I’m supposed to love you.*

 -

Michael sat up dazedly, slightly confused on why he was in the middle of the woods and not his bedroom. Then someone next to him sat up and his memory flooded back. That someone sat up slowly, groaning, as if the very thought of being conscious caused him pain. Tear tracks stained his reddened face. As soon as he was upright, he promptly slumped over into Michael. Michael knew at some point he’d just have to rip off the band-aid, but he was cut off before he even opened his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Mikey, I’m sorry,” he kept repeating and apologizing until he was interrupted.

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

“Everything,” he sobbed guiltily, “Since you came to this school you’ve just been taking punches and it’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Helena,” Michael interjected. “Bob and Brendon, they're just horrible people who hate themselves so much they feel the need to take it out on people they think are inferior.” He’d been to enough high schools to know, insecure teenagers were a hand-wrapped gift straight from hell.

“But they only beat you up because you’re hanging out with me. If you were friends with anyone else, you’d be fine. It’s my fault.”

The pieces of the puzzle slowly came together in his mind, and he hoped the picture he saw was wrong. “Have they…done this to you before?”

He nodded. “For years. Ever since the day I came out they’ve bullied me. Found out my every insecurity and exploited it, bashed my head into the pavement. Every time I think ‘Maybe this’ll be the last time’ but it never is, Mikey, and I’m just so, so tired of them.”

Silent rage bloomed in Michael’s stomach. He finally understood. His affinity for the outdoors, his resentment of the town, it was all because of them, two examples of unchecked insecure masculinity bent on making his life a living hell.

“And now you’ve been pulled into it,” he continued, “And you’ve gotten hurt when the only thing you’ve done is be around me. You shouldn’t have to deal with that and I’m sorry. And I’m sorry I wasn’t talking to you on the way here, I just felt bad and didn’t know how to apologize.”

Michael could feel his heart break in two. He wanted to tuck his broken soul into his pocket like a secret and never let anything bad happen to him again. “Helena, it’s okay, I don’t blame you and neither should you. It isn’t your fault we got beat up and anyone who says that is a liar. Okay?”

He looked up at him with watery eyes. “You mean it?”

“Of course, I do.” He pressed a kiss to his temple.

“Thanks, Mikey. It means a lot.”

They sat comfortably for a few beats of silence before Helena rubbed his eyes and sighed. “God, I’m a mess. There’s eyeliner all over my face, isn’t there?” He turned to face Michael.

“It’s…a little smudged,” he lied.

Helena rolled his eyes and dug an eyeliner pen and a mirror out of his bag. He opened the mirror and handed it to Michael. “You would think that someone who cries a lot and also wears a lot of eye makeup would learn from their mistakes and just use waterproof stuff to avoid this. But-,” his mouth was moving almost as fast as his hand, “I obviously enjoy making things more difficult for myself and choose to reapply this every time I screw it up.” He switched to the other eye while Michael watched, enraptured, as he skillfully crafted a practiced wing at the edge of his eye and then smudged it with his fingertip.

He capped the pen, looked up, and met Michael’s staring his eyes. Michael quickly averted his gaze, but he knew Helena caught his staring. He smirked at Michael’s guilty blush. “You want me to do it for you?”

He couldn’t hide the glee laced in his voice. “Would you?” He took his glasses off.

“Yeah, sure. Come here,” he scooted towards him, both of them sat crisscross with their knees together.

Helena gripped the pen in his hand, leaned forward and inked a shaky line across his eyelid. He fidgeted his grip around the pen repeatedly, and a few poorly aimed strokes joined the first.

“I thought you were supposed to be good at this,” Michael teased, snickering as he dropped the pen.

Helena huffed. “Sorry,” he drew out the -ry dramatically, emphasizing it with a smirk as he climbed into Michael’s lap. “Is this better?” he asked innocently, holding his jaw.

Michael’s eyes darted around wildly, trying to look anywhere but Helena’s. “Um…yeah, whatever,” he muttered, all teasing gone from his voice. His eyes settled pointedly over Helena’s shoulder as the boy leaned back in.

“Good,” he purred, slowly lining his eyes in inky black. Michael thought he was deliberately dragging out the process. There was no way he could do it so fast on himself but took this long on someone else.

After half an eternity, Helena capped the pen for a second time, loudly proclaiming himself to be “Done!” and rolled off of Michael, putting the liner away and grabbing the mirror.

He held it up to Michael. “Do you like it?” he asked.

If Michael rolled his eyes any harder, they’d pop out of their sockets. “Of course, I do. It’s…amazing. Thank you.”

Helena grinned stupidly, staring at him for much too long before replying, “I’m glad you like it.”

They stared at each other, grinning stupidly for a few beats more before Michael broke the silence. “You know I’ve…I’ve never really fit in anywhere either,” he admitted, “Everywhere I’ve gone I always thought it would be different, that I’d actually make friends, but…I never did. People always tell me I’m ‘weird’ or ‘strange’ or ‘off-putting’…It hasn’t really bothered me, but I’ve realized lately…I’m kind of lonely. You’re probably the only real friend I’ve ever had.”

It was startling to say it out loud, to know how other people saw him and accept it. He felt like he was always lying to Ray, and to himself. Saying you have friends doesn’t mean you have friends, a lesson he was beginning to learn. But maybe you don’t even realize you have friends. Or that you don’t even need friends, at least in a conventional sense. Maybe all you need is a curly-haired genius who’d give you the moon if you asked for it. Or a tiny firecracker of a boy who knows you more than you know yourself. Or even a beautiful stranger who became something less-than-a-stranger in less than three days. Sitting there with his beautiful stranger, Michael knew that no matter how lonely he felt, he was never truly alone.

Helena gaped at him disbelievingly, “Wow…I never would’ve thought…” he trailed off.

Michael looked up. “You never would’ve thought what?”

“That you and I are going through the exact same thing.”

“Oh,” he realized just how similar their situations were, “Ha, yeah…I guess we are.”

“Mikey?” Helena moved closer to him.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

*My reflection, dirty mirror, there’s no connection to myself. I’m your lover, I’m your zero. I’m the face in your dreams of glass.*

-

If only fate could be so kind. Michael’s watch beeped again and too soon they had to get up and leave. They held hands as they walked, Michael flapping his free hand at the crunch of the leaves.

They had just passed the threshold of where fallen leaves met grass when a strange feeling overtook him. Like someone was watching him, but more closely than usual. *Ray and Frank must be somewhere nearby. I wonder why they came to m-* He stopped walking, dropping Helena’s hand. *The stone.* He had forgotten. *Where could it be, why haven’t I found it, why couldn’t I have remembered to look, to at least try and make an effort, it’s one thing, one simple damn thing and I couldn’t even remember, I failed, that’s probably why they’re here, to tell me I failed, we’re never going to find it, we’re never going to go home, we’re going to die, Ray and Frank are going to be so upse*—A single memory came to the forefront of his mind, wading through the thick murk of his deprecating thoughts like a desperate soldier—*Frank’s note.* He recalled the second-to-last line. ‘*We’ll come get you when you get the stone.*’

*The stone must be close if they’re here.* He calmed almost instantly. *Maybe they already have it, or they’re waiting for me to say goodbye to Helena and then they’ll tell me*- A sharp voice interrupted his thoughts. It was calling his name.

“Michael? Are you okay?”

He hadn’t even realized he was on the ground until he saw Helena crouched next to him. He blinked, opening his mouth to speak.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m totally fine, sorry, I just…remembered something important,” he babbled.

Helena looked unconvinced, but he seemed fine, so he didn’t press him. He offered a hand and helped him to his feet. They continued to the bleachers, which Michael now knew Ray and Frank were waiting behind.

Helena stopped him. “Do you really have to leave?” he blurted out.

“Unfortunately, I do,” he sighed resignedly.

“Why?”

“I, like you, don’t belong in this town and although it may not seem like it, I have a home I need to get back to as soon as possible,” he explained, “And as much as I’d love to stay here with you forever, there are people that need me.”

Helena shook his head in disbelief. “I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean, and I hope to keep it that way.” Michael chuckled, half at Helena and half at Ray, who was waving frantically at him and gesturing to his watch from inside the invisibility-cloaked ship.

He turned to face the boy before him. “So, I guess this is goodbye.”

“Unfortunately,” he nodded sadly, grabbing Michael’s hands before he could turn away, “Hey, for the record…and even though I don’t have any other friends, you’re by far the best and my favorite friend I’ve ever had.”

“That means a lot, coming from you,” he grinned, “You’re one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met, and I’ve met a lot of people.”

He grinned back. “Thanks…So I’ll…see you around?” Hope found its way into his tone.

Michael laughed sarcastically. “Yeah, I guess I’ll…see you around.” He looked dejectedly at the ground. *This is it.* It was over. This long, harrowing chapter punctuated with a short, wonderful paragraph of his life was over. Soon he’d be out of this dimension and Helena would slowly forget him, just like everyone else did. He ran his thumb over Helena’s knuckles. He thought of all the things he’d never get to say. *I just wish I didn’t have to end so soon. I wish we had more time; I wish-*

“Hey.” It was torture, listening to the smooth intonation of his low voice, knowing he’d never hear it again. “Don’t cry,” he wiped away a tear, “I wanted you to have this.”

Helena lifted himself onto the tips of his shoes and pressed his lips passionately against Michael’s.

It was akin to a firecracker going off inside his skull. The tectonic plates of his brain had shifted. His metaphorical eyes had been opened while his physical ones closed. Whatever cliché you want to use to describe it, it was undoubtably astonishing. His hands ghosted gently over Helena’s face. Something had been irking him since he first laid eyes on him and now, he finally understood that it had been *love.* He was in *love* and kissing the boy he was in love with goodbye. Another tear slipped down the curve of his cheek as he pulled away. *Goodbye.*

Helena brushed his tear away. “I want you to have this too.” He undid a clasp at the back of his neck and pressed something cold into Michael’s hand. A tumbled, green gem dangling from a silver necklace chain. *The stone.* He had it. After so many years, *he finally had it.*

He could’ve keeled over in delight. It was there, in his hand. The realization of what he held hit him like a stone wall. He felt so ecstatic he probably *needed* to be hit by a stone wall, just to ensure he wasn’t dreaming. But another realization was dawning on him like the sun. *He had it the whole time.* The key to the salvation of his dimension had been protected by the key to his heart.

“When we got into the fight, Brendon stole it from me. I didn’t even notice until later that night.” *That’s why Ray lost it. Brendon disrupted the thermal sensor’s pattern because it had been with him for so long.* “But this morning, before you got here, Bob gave it back to me. Said he saw Brendon take it and wanted to return it. He said he feels bad for everything he’s done, wants to make it right. I guess this was the first step,” he smiled gleefully, “Maybe that fight was the last time.”

“That’s amazing, Helena, I really hope you’re right,” he secured the necklace at his base of his neck, enjoying the pleasant cooling sensation it provided, “Thank you so much for this, you will never understand how much this means to me.” A third tear spilled over his brimming eyes.

“Well, now maybe you know how much you mean to me.”

Michael could hardly stand it. He was so, so in love with him. He wrapped his arms around his waist, lifting him off his feet, and pressed another kiss to his lips. When he pulled away and didn’t shed a tear, he knew it was time. He set his lover down and brought his lips to his ear.

“I love you, don’t ever forget that,” he whispered.

“I could never forget the only person I’ve ever loved.”

He slowly pressed one final kiss to the back of his hand and walked towards the ship.

Helena picked up the small fragments of his heart and was the glue that held them together. You’d think leaving him would hurt, but in this miniscule moment in time, Michael forgot how to hurt.

He threw him one last look over his shoulder. “So long, Helena Revenge?”

Helena beamed at him.

“So long, Michael.”

-

*What means to you, what means to me. And we will meet again.*