

-II-

Insomnia

Kyler couldn't remember the last time he had that much fun. It didn't seem like he would be able to push the start of the day to the side, but everything before they went to game in the back seemed to be so insignificant, for the better or worse. He was running through the bushes, jumping off cliffs, and swinging from trees as he hacked and slashed at the huge powerful monsters. He was a natural at the game. Jay couldn't say the same of himself, but to both the fun was all the same.

"Did you see when I climbed up the tree and then I swung off the vine onto him WHILE, HE, WAS, FLYING! That was so freaking cool! And you set up a trap and we got off our supers and then it tripped and it was just like DAMN!" Kyler was flailing his arms in a desperate attempt to emphasize the grandeur of the events. Jay just smiled as they walked out of the lounge. It wasn't too late, but they somehow managed to spend the majority of the afternoon into the early evening playing various games in between another session of the immersion kit. "Man, I sure can't wait to try that again!"

"Well, Brody did say we can use it anytime. So I don't think it's a question of if, but only when." They both stopped at the corner of the street. Jay turned to Kyler with his hands in his pocket. "I'm glad you had a good time man. It's good to see you smile. Reminds me of how things

used to be...Just, so carefree..." Jay looked towards the sky, there was a softness to his comment, and a slight frown on his face. Kyler looked up at him noticing the odd shift in behaviour.

"I never did get to ask how things were going with you." Jay took a moment to even seem to notice Kyler's question.

"Huh?" He looked back down to his shorter friend. "You know I'm fine dude. Don't worry about me. You gotta look out for yourself."

"Yeah...just checking." Kyler felt like there was something Jay could've told him, but didn't. It didn't matter though, because he was never the type to pester unless he felt it was necessary. He knew Jay was fairly well set with life, but surely it wasn't perfect. Was it ever though? Jay bent down slightly as they gave each other a hug. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"You know it." Jay turned to start walking down the street to his home. "Oh..." He turned his head. "You know...if you're gonna do anything crazy just like...tell me first alright? Talks are good." There was a smirk forming as he finished speaking.

"Uhuh..." Kyler shook his head with a smile. They gave each other a wave before parting ways.

The moon shone brightly down on the dark furred arms of Kyler. It gave it a nice glow. He had spent some time getting some food before making his way back to his apartment. It was a pleasant walk, with the slightest breeze in the summer air. The weather had been fair for some days now, and he was trying to keep taking advantage of it to keep his mind off things. Ultimately, it always came down to the same situation though, as

he stepped towards the apartment complex and made his way to his unit.

He turned the key to the door and hobbled in, closing it tight behind him before flicking the switch of the light. The light illuminated the small, dull coloured apartment. It was an unremarkable place, with enough room for a bed, some furnishing, and a bit of extra space. There wasn't a dedicated living room though. It was all built around this one space. The kitchen served its purpose and had the utilities it needed. It had a fair bathroom with some wiggle room in the shower. Kyler's size definitely helped make the place feel more spacious than it really was. That was it really. He walked in and emptied his pockets before taking off his clothes and heading to the bathroom, glancing down to the same mess that lied on one end of the room.

A quick shower later and Kyler found himself slumped in his chair, blankly staring at the screens. He had the usual going on his screens, but he simply had no desire to pay attention. The occasional spark of laughter or shout of excitement came from the speakers. It did nothing more than make him glance over. He couldn't even bring himself to work on his last commission. His mind was barren, with not a thought. Despite the amazing day, reality always catches up, and there's only so much he could do to escape its grip.

Eventually after futilely sitting as if something was going to get done, he powered down his computer and prepped for bed, weakly wobbling his way to bed, rolling in and under the sheets and with a soft whimper he clutches his favourite plushy; a big, round, toony rendition of a Rathalos, the iconic wyvern from his favourite game. He wrapped his arms around it into a nice comforting snuggle, the moonlight shining over him into the room, and he slowly closed his eyes, as he attempted to sleep, an attempt that on most nights, was just as futile.

Kyler's eyes opened as a dim light pierces his curtains. It wasn't the bright yellow gleam of the sun illuminating another lovely day, but instead it was a dark and desaturated streak, barely leaving a mark within the apartment. How fitting, that his horrid attempt at sleep was accompanied by the gloom of a cloudy day. His night was spent tossing and turning, desperate to find the sweet embrace of sleep, but it would not come when beckoned. He could feel it in himself, the lack of a proper nights rest, as he struggled to lift himself from his bed, eyes feeling heavy and stinging. His morning routine was the most he could bring himself to do, weakly tapping his keyboard as his computer surged to life, brushing his teeth and making a small meal before slumping back in his chair, and grabbing his tablet and pen to get his work out of the way. He felt drained. There was a lack of emotion, of care, and he could barely bring himself to spend more than a few minutes at a time on his work, easily being distracted, not for the sake of finding enjoyment, but rather for the sake of not desiring it. He didn't even notice how the time went by, hours passing with relatively little progress being made. He was thankful he was almost finished, but he certainly was not going to jump into any more work after this.

The day was spent one hour at a time trying to pretend like something was being accomplished. At one point in the late afternoon he heard the ding of his messenger.

"hey man hows it going" It was Jay. He wasn't surprised, but he also wasn't in a mood to talk, and ignored the message, being sure to not click over it so the system didn't think it had been read. He felt a bit bad, but he just couldn't bring himself to engage in conversation. Best to have him believe he was occupied rather than ignoring him.

More minutes turned into another hour, into another stretch of time he couldn't really feel, until he felt a slight desire for more food, making another quick small meal before slumping back down.

"yo, you alright bud?" Jay had messaged again as he slowly ate his sandwich, nibbling at a banana on the side as well. He couldn't ignore his best friend twice though, and found the will to reply.

"sorry man, didn't sleep well, just finishing my work, gonna go to bed early tonight, i'll talk to you tomorrow" He sent the message and saw a quick reply on the way.

"alright dude, sleep well, if you need to talk, im here" Kyler smiled faintly at the response, only because he could always find some sort of comfort in knowing his friend was always looking out for him.

It didn't take long to finally finish his work, setting it aside after getting some approval from the commissioner. At least he made someone happy today; two if he considered his own wallet. The downside was that he glanced over to the time and it was already well into the evening. The day had simply vanished behind him, caught up in the storm of negativity in his head. He couldn't deny the thoughts that fought a never ending war within him. All the events of past days were brought to a boil, making any task seem like a chore. He couldn't find any excuse to not try and recuperate from last night, and he decided he would stick to his word and make it an early night, prepping himself for bed, clutching his plush, and struggling again to find sleep.

The cloudiness had turned to a rainy night, and while he would normally find it soothing, it made this night seem all the more frustrating. The time passed, as he tossed and turned and whined with each time his eyes flicked back open, seemingly always right as he was about to find

peace. He took a look at his phone, the light harsh at first, but squinting he can see that an hour had passed. Frustration was overtaking him as his head hit the pillow again, staring over to the desk where a small pill bottle lay. Only on the most necessary nights would he take them, the melatonin pills staring him down now. He never relied on them for sleep, but took them on the off night where he knew he had plans in the morning. He couldn't take this though, not two nights in a row. His hand outstretched to the desk as he grabbed it and shook out two pills, sighing before placing them under his tongue and returning the bottle to the desk, his head slowly nestling into the pillow again as he waited for them to dissolve. He didn't know how much time had passed when he started to feel the effects. A warm relaxing numbness was spreading through him, and after a bit more tossing, he felt comfortable. The rain was once again a soothing melody to him, and he never knew at what moment it was that he found himself gone to another reality.

I opened my eyes, the light was harsh and forced me to cover them under my arm briefly as they adjusted. A cool breeze was very welcoming against my fur. Other than the wind it seems quiet, and in a moment I finally was able to see my surroundings, stunned by the scene.

My eyes take it all in, this familiar yet foreign place. It's pristine, made to look like the pinnacle of modern design. A large complex walled by polished alloys that stretches as far to the sky as it does across the land. Surrounding it is this lush park full of vibrant plantation, but none of it seems real. It all carries an unnatural sheen, as if this was all...just a dream... I look around anxiously, and other than me there doesn't seem to be a single soul in sight. The park is barren of any visitors, and it leads me to bringing my attention to the tall metal structure directly ahead of

me. I've been face to face with this complex before, but never have I had the opportunity to enter it, nor was I sure I wanted to. I swear there's a voice somewhere, beckoning to me, but I can't actually hear it. It just seems to be coming from ahead. Something...some force calls to me, and in the back of my head there's a conflict. Do I want to enter? Of course I do, right? There's nothing stopping me...no one to push me back. I needed to know what was in there. Why was I always stopped. This time felt different in so many ways, particularly in the way everything looked so consistent, like it was very much a real place. There was only one option, and I took my first steps towards the polished wide double doors down the smooth paved path, the gentle breeze once again welcoming me. Walking up to the doors only emphasized the buildings scale, the doors seemingly towering over me, but as my hand stretched out to push them aside, they slid to the side on their own, a soft hum accompanying them as they revealed the interior. Taking a step in I quickly looked around, and it was as if I had yet again stepped into a different world.

The first thing that caught my attention was the desk, a pristine looking polished mahogany, impossible to tell if it was even wood or not, but knowing my surroundings, probably not entirely. There was various objects on it that gave it the impression it was some sort of reception desk, but there was nobody behind it. In fact, there still was no sounds to be heard after the door finished sliding behind me, leaving me in this eerie calm. Looking around I saw some decorative plants, all carrying that similar sheen, and a comfy looking couch, which did appear to be leather, accompanied by a small coffee table with magazines. I don't know if this is all simply what I expect, some sort of construct of my own imagination. All I know is that surely I must be dreaming, and yet I can't simply stop, even though part of me wanted to. The last thing I noticed was a door off

to the left of the desk. Unable to choose to escape this realm, the only other thing in my mind was to proceed.

I approached the door and it slid open for me, revealing a bright hallway, long and wide, but lacking anything of interest. Still, there was no sound, not even a faint hum of machinery. Moving forward I took a steady pace towards the next door, trying not to mind the other closing behind me, leaving me alone in this long stretch of shining corridor. I take a steady pace towards the end before slowing at the door, inching forward until it slides open, but the light beyond is very faint. It sends a touch of anxiety through me, chill crawling down my spine, assisted by the deafening silence. One foot steps forward followed by the other as darkness starts consuming me, the light behind me seeming all the more like the pleasant option. Maybe I could escape? I could just turn back. This was just another void, and I didn't have to fall into it. I know how this all ends...the same as every one before it. Presented with something different, some sort of opportunity, but for once, I just wanted to leave on my own. I just wanted to...

"Wake up?" The voice startled me as it slightly echoed through the darkness. I could see a faint glow now ahead of me. The voice sounded...strangely familiar. "No one and nothing to stop you, and still we want to run away. How typical of us."

"Who are you...where are we?" I stood my ground, but shaking, my body deceiving my tone. I could hear him moving forward, but each step carried a weight with it, that of a hard surface on another. The images in my mind came back to me, of the one who pushed me back into the void, but I would not let him. This time I would be ready.

"We're home, Kyler. Or at least, this could be our home. If you would

let it." He stepped forward with each dull clunk of his feet until the light of the hall started streaking over him, my eyes fixated on his head as it washed over him bottom to top, but then his eyes started glowing brightly, his left eye blue, and his right...green. He had a rosey face with cream coloured cheeks, spreading down his belly with black limbs. I was staring at some sort of cybernetic twin of myself, much like those I had seen in another time. His body was a perfect replica of mine, but everything seemed like a blend of metals and rubbers to make my form as it is.

"Go ahead, the door is right there." He extended his hand motioning behind me.

"Fine. You...you're not real. None of this is, so none of it matters." I turned around towards the hall and took my first steps away from this farce.

"Oh please, I knew you would, I know you better than anyone. You god damned coward." I stopped in my tracks, the sting was paralyzing as the words resonated through the room.

"Ex...Excuse me?" I turned to look back at him, those eyes staring me down with a judging glare. "You shut the hell up," My tone become rough, but deep down there was a terror..."You don't know me."

"No? Oh, alright then. I suppose this shouldn't be an issue then."

"What do you mea-" I was interrupted by a snap of his fingers and a grinding of the door behind me, looking back just in time to see it slam shut and the darkness engulfing my vision, the only light being a dim ambience. "The hell are you do-"

"Oh shut up already." I saw his arm moves swiftly, but he didn't push

me back, no, his whole body moved forward as his hand clenched around my neck and slammed me into the door. My heart began pounding as his inhuman strength lifted me off the ground, his hands choking me as I flailed and struggled. The same sensations of weakness, of helplessness washing over me, staring into those vibrant blinding eyes, my own eyes. There was no more pretending. I was at his mercy.

“Not so confident now are you? Who do you think you're kidding, you were never confident, not now, and not ever. Everything you could ever do is before you, behind doors locked by your own fears and doubts. We have so many things we could do, so many paths we could take, but the only path our pathetic mind can handle is that of least resistance. Go back, back to the hole we call home, the hole we'll rot in because we thought we knew what we wanted.” I was losing strength, his grasp getting tighter around my throat, my flailing subsiding. “But remember that my hand is yours, and the only thing drowning you...is yourself.”

My eyes started feeling heavy, with a wet warmth streaking down them, and my lungs felt empty, wanting to gasp for breath, but I was powerless, slowly falling more and more, into yet another void...a void of my own making.

Kyler's eyes burst open as his hand jumped to his chest and he gasped, inhaling intensely before he shot up out of bed, his plush falling to the floor. The rain trickled against the window as a faint moonlight shone onto his sweat covered face, drenching into the fur of his cheeks. Breath after breath he tried to compose himself, before wiping his hands down his face, realizing the sweat was accompanied by another wetness from his eyes, still tearing up at the edges. A soft cough escaped him

before he let out a whimper. The monkey sat there, recovering from the shock, softly holding himself until he could find any peace.

It was another early morning for Jay, trying his best to stick to a work schedule. He didn't mind waking up around 8 AM daily, as it let him feel like he was getting lots done during the day. He walked through the sunlit kitchen of his condo while the brewer clicked off, reaching for the pot and pouring it into his mug. Returning it to the table he took a sip, letting out a content sigh, but followed by a more exhausted one, although one could ask whether it was physical or mental exhaustion. A faint vibration travelled through the table, and he looked over to his phone. His eyes scrolled over a brief message.

"Ah christ, Kyler..." He chowed down quickly on what was left before rushing to his room, his phone laid on the table.

"cant do it anymore, going to the branch, dont want your opinion, just letting you know. Ttyl" The message was clear, and Jay pushed his phone into his pocket before rushing to the door.

-III-

The Dotted Line