

The King

Ace Anthony

Please note, this work includes content related to substance use.

Las Vegas was hot.

Not the type of melt-your-skin-off kind of hot, but it came pretty close. Most people forget that Vegas was a desert and beyond the walls of shining lights and colorful wealth was a dry, desolate environment waiting to capture the stragglers of the casino.

They wouldn't even realize, no, not while they look for the next bar, next deck, next hand. Las Vegas does that sometimes. It wrings you dry until you become a semi-coherent resemblance of who you were.

Those men have lost everything and don't even know it yet.

The band played Vegas two nights in a row already—tonight would be our third—and I was sick of the dry air. I could feel my voice straining with every poor articulation of the lyrics because of it. I missed California's lighter winds and the bursts of salt that would hang heavy in the air the closer you got to the shore. It wasn't as dry there and the sweat that desperately clung to my upper lip that tasted vaguely of cigarettes reminded me that California wasn't as hot, either.

Andrew claims I should move to New York. It's 1973 for Christ's sake and the music scene is bigger there he'll say to me. I told him I would be too recognizable there, that they'd swarm me until I was nothing more than a pile of scraps and bones. Plus,

the drugs are harder in LA; they just know what's good there.

My manager rolled his eyes at me then. He was just a pawn in the empire I've made.

The small bell above the door of the tiny cafe rang as a woman who smiled brightly walked through. She was young, her eyes alive either with genuine joy or a high from what I could only guess was from a combination of things. She walked to the counter to order a coffee and pathetically slurred her way through her order. The latter, then. I snickered. She could've tried harder to hide it.

The rest of the cafe was quiet and full of tired, hungover, middle-aged gamblers with no hope for their future. Lacking love and money, their slumped shoulders dipped inwards, caving into their coffees as if it were some sacred relic. The grayness of their expressions clashed violently with their previous night's attire: women wore ugly bright blues, oranges, and too much makeup in a poor effort to make them look younger while men stuck to cream colored suits with their shirts unbuttoned arguably too low for their age. I snuck the flask of whiskey out from my suit pocket and poured it into my coffee. I brought the white porcelain to my lip and cheered to them.

I was still slightly drunk from the night before. The party was—well, I don't really remember. The blur of flashing lights and the heat made it hard to keep track of the number of lines I did, the constant

stream of something to smoke put between my fingers, and of course—the girls. They *loved* me. I called them names and bored them until they had the crushing reality that there would always be a prettier girl I'd rather talk to instead. I went home alone, though. Well, not *home*, just stumbled through different hotels and casinos alone and marveled at how quiet everything had dimmed down to be that early in the morning. Andrew didn't like it when we brought random girls back to the venue or hotel, claiming that the groupies should suffice.

Girls were replaceable, I was not. According to Andrew. I am too busy and far too famous for anyone.

The rest of the band wasn't invited to the party and I didn't tell them I went. I didn't want them there, didn't need them breathing down my neck and counting the drinks I took. Andrew was furious, I'm sure, when I didn't come back to the hotel we were staying at, despite me even walking right past it and still no one grabbed me. I didn't care. I could do whatever I wanted. The band would not be as famous as they were without me.

I wrote the songs, they're *my* words after all. So, I went to the party. Tried not to feel the weight of the world. The weight of this damn crown I'm forced to wear.

I'm just *busy*. Making music. The only thing I'm good for.

The tiny annoying bell above the door announced the presence of another poor soul to the cafe. The harsh sunlight flashed through the cafe and gave me a slight headrush. I pushed my sunglasses further up my nose in fear of someone recognizing me. Once I'm spotted, the entire Las Vegas strip would sprint to this secluded cafe just off the highway to see the infamous Ryan Reiz. I wonder if they would behead me.

Fuck Andrew for this tour.

I glued my eyes to the booth in front of me and clutched desperately to my coffee. Two pairs

of footsteps approached my withdrawn table in the back corner, sighed, and sat across from me. My manager and my lead guitarist glared. One angry, one annoyed.

I kept my sunglasses on—my shield held up in defense against them.

The king's men. Coming for their king.

“Ryan.”

Wes, my guitarist, has his irritatingly intense blue eyes pierced at me. He expected answers of where I've been, where I had gone, who I'd been with. I knew he didn't *really* care though; Wes was only worried what my spontaneous actions would do for the fame of the band. What would the headlines look like if the world suddenly found out our band was nothing more than a coked-out group of nobodies who were half-decent at writing music? And me, leading them to this cruel fate; I am just addicted to the music as I am to any drug and that makes me the fool. I avoided Wes' gaze and sunk further into the cushion of the booth hoping it'd swallow me whole.

He huffed and crossed his arms like that was all the effort he could've given. He glanced at Andrew in defeat and pouted. Like a child. I should have him executed.

I took another sip of my drink, not caring that it was a disgusting room temperature by this point. I was waiting for the infamous 'Rage of Andrew' that would reign, usually after one of us fucked up real bad. It was our own kind of apocalypse.

I didn't care and it made him furious. “Where the hell were you? You know what, don't answer that. Why didn't you fucking come *back*? You can't just dip out like that, Ryan! The whole band was worried about you.”

I stared blankly at my manager. My gaze shifted towards Wes who was still pouting that he got dragged here from whatever luxury he abandoned at the hotel — either a girl or a good guitar was my guess. I scoffed. He sure looked worried about me.

“I have done nothing wrong,” I claimed. My voice came out scratchy and cracked. “I played the show, a damn good show for that matter, and soundcheck isn’t for another hour, which I was planning on going to.” I pointed my finger at my manager to prove that I did, in fact, plan on going. I pretended to shoot Andrew with my finger and imagined him slumping back in the booth with the look of failure for our prodigy band written across his face. I laughed under my breath.

Wes stared at me in astonishment. “You’re lucky you’re the only one in the band who can hold a damn note or else—”

“Or what, Wes? Are you going to sing?” My eyes slid to him in boredom. “You may be one of the most talented guitarists of our generation, but you cannot fucking sing to save your life. They’re *my* songs, with *my* lyrics. None of you can write, or sing, and I’m the frontman. If it wasn’t for me, this band would have died years ago. You would be nowhere without me, still hitchhiking on Texas highways to anywhere north just so you could get away from your parents and bad music.”

“You are a terrible person, Ryan.”

Wes pointed an accusing finger at me to make sure that I knew that I was the Ryan Reiz of his nightmares and scooted out of the booth. He left the cafe, letting in a wave of hot air as he opened the door. Through the tinted window, I watched him light a cigarette then hastily put on his sunglasses. He took a drag, twenty seconds too long, and slumped against the glass.

I glanced back at my manager and lazily took another sip of my coffee. I wanted to be alone. The drink was almost gone which meant that Andrew was going to drag me out of here. Back to the venue, to the band who hates me, and to the music that I cannot help but get caught up in because it is the only thing that matters to me anymore. It’s starting to not feel as important as it once was and, isn’t that fucking terrifying?

I should’ve clarified how famous I wanted to be when I first started to write songs. One glorious victory? Or an entire kingdom that granted me immortality. Where I stood, they kneeled.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Ryan.” I could tell that Andrew was reserving himself for the sake of not drawing attention to the frontman of the band who’s been sitting at number one on every chart for three and a half weeks now. “I’m going to buy you another coffee, we’re going to leave with Wes and go back to the venue, and then you are going straight back to the bus right after the show is over. This is our last show in Vegas. You can do whatever the hell you want on the bus but I can’t have my best singer disappearing to some random party in every state we go to for the rest of the tour. You’re the damn frontman, you can’t just *leave*.”

And he’s right. Despite my efforts to disappear to parties or whatever part of the city we’re in, I have to finish the tour. It’s in my contract. My hands are bound, have been since the start of the West leg. Maybe I should’ve overdosed in the dressing room in Boston during the East leg last month, that would’ve really shown Andrew.

My manager looked at me expectantly: eyebrows raised to his hairline with pleading eyes. I said nothing while I let him drag me out of the cafe with another hot drink in a shitty to-go cup that burned my tongue viciously. I couldn’t see Wes’ eyes behind his glasses. The tension in his shoulders was visible.

The king’s men were finally bringing their king home. For my palace was the stage, my guitar my stronghold. And thus, my crown carried in the shape of a flask full of whiskey hidden in my pocket.

Soundcheck was quiet and awkward.

I could feel Jason’s eyes burning holes in the back of my head from his place at his kit, elevated slightly on a small platform behind me. I didn’t look back, didn’t dare. I knew he was mad, too. I could only hear the faint *click, click* of his stick against the rim of his snare in a steady beat. Impending.

Threatening.

It did nothing to keep us in time.

“What the hell are you on? You seriously cannot keep a damn beat to save your life right now. That is seriously ridiculous, Ryan.”

I blinked at my bass player. “Maybe if you didn’t rush the bridge, I would’ve been more focused on keeping in time instead of your poor playing, Anthony.”

“Don’t fucking look at me.” Anthony’s hands were raised in defense.

“All right, all right, that’s it.” I clutched the neck of my guitar and wrenched it from my body. I leaned into the microphone. “We’re done, I’m leaving.” The empty venue echoed my words back to me.

I strode off the blinding stage that was blistering with heat. Andrew rushed up to me in a frantic hysteria.

“Hey, hey, think about what I said earlier about leaving, Ryan—”

“Cool it, Andrew. The techs can finish soundchecking for us. I’m *just* going to take a smoke. Be a good manager and keep the others busy, yeah?”

I shoved off the hand he had placed on my shoulder. I could feel the anger rolling off him in waves, stuck between being mad and accepting defeat, as he got sucked into a mass of the equipment crew and techs. I walked away clean and free. Andrew and them will be just damn fine without me for an hour.

It took twelve minutes and an awkward conversation with a stage manager to find a good place to smoke. Why I hadn’t found the rusty black fire escape two days ago when we got here was beyond me. It kept shaking under my weight as I climbed to the top as if it would suddenly give out.

I was playing death up here.

I wonder who would secretly be glad if the structure suddenly collapsed while I was on it. Wes, for sure.

I can only imagine the headlines: *The famous Ryan Reisz, dead at 27, died from his own stupidity and stubbornness. It was later found that his bandmates placed bets against at what age his death would occur. They would’ve overthrown him, anyhow. A devastating loss to the music industry. Truly.*

I lit a cigarette. From here, I couldn’t even see the stars if I wanted to. I blew out smoke, my lungs strained. I hope they still exist there, hiding in the atmosphere.

Fans lined up on the sidewalk of the venue, wrapping around the building and blocking every exit. I was trapped, imprisoned. If they looked up, the fans would see me. They would be able to storm the fire escape and tear me apart like they were desperate for souvenirs. How many parts of me would they take? How much could I give?

I lit another cigarette. A brief fantasy flashed in my mind. How much money would Vegas lose tonight just because we’re performing? I bet we were practically robbing them, with how famous we were and everything. I wonder if the entirety of Vegas would go broke in a night—maybe tonight—and all that would remain is the shit desert town that’s underneath the flashing lights. It would be a pathetic town full of hopeless people, hot air, and quiet homes where no one really pays attention to anyone anymore.

They’d be able to see the stars, at the very least. That must count for something.

My two cigarettes ran out too quickly.

And my damn pack was empty. Jason owed me one from the game of cards I won four nights ago in Denver. Damn Jason, never keeping his promises.

I left the fire escape and the screaming fans and the town full of burnouts who will never know what it’s like to be famous. To be a king for the masses.

I envied them. I envied them because despite Wes’ hatred towards me, Jason’s inability to socialize with us, and Anthony’s eyes set on something other than the band—a girl, a family, whatever—I will

always pick up the guitar. I will never learn to stop picking up that stupid instrument and write, write, write until there's more music. Always music. Even if it kills me, even if the fame tears me limb from fucking limb.

Above all, I envied them.

The venue inside was in a state of frenzy. People who oversaw making sure Ryan Reisz and his band of assholes play a perfect show were trying to get everything in order. The support band was already starting their set on stage but their bass was tuned up so loudly I could hear it through the walls. I met them a week ago but I don't remember any of their names. I think they were somewhat famous. I'll have Andrew tell me again.

Wes and Anthony were already in stage clothes when I walked into the dressing room even though we didn't go on for another hour. They looked fucking ridiculous. Wes paired a bright red silk button down with his matching guitar while Anthony insisted on doing his makeup to match his pants that were far too tight, even for the stage. They were acting like damn royalty, even when they knew I was above them.

Jason was nowhere to be found, damn him. I bet he was either with a girl or...yep, in the bathroom doing some mix of drugs that he had plucked methodically from the bottom of his snare case that was wide open. I half-thought about joining him just to get out of this awful dressing room but Andrew strode in and pinned me to the small couch with the sharp glare in his eyes.

Maybe I'll be good. Maybe.

The roadies and a few groupies we had picked up from the past two nights lounged themselves in the dressing room with us. To compete with the band's lack, they looked around with adrenaline-filled eyes and big smiles to soothe Anthony's calloused fingers and Wes' mouth that was permanently in a taut line every time he glanced over at me. Jason stumbled in some time later and

gave me a lazy smile. His eyes were glazed over and, only when I asked, gave me the rest of his cigarettes in a jaded manner.

Andrew expressed how the show is sold out. Again. Just like the last two nights. He seemed hopeful in that Andrew sort of way. I felt the whiskey in my stomach churn.

He couldn't shut his mouth and kept going, though, to tell us that the rest of the tour would probably sell out at the rate that we're doing things. My manager said that we're even famous enough to go to Europe.

We never fucking agreed to Europe.

"We're not going." Andrew must've been goddamn insane for suggesting the idea. *Surely* he had officially gone mad with the words coming out of his mouth. How would we *survive*? He had no right to declare war; that was an ability only I had. The stability of this band was crumbling, collapsing, caving in beneath my feet. We were famous, yeah, but how far would that get us? We might not stay alive long enough to finish *this* tour, but *Europe*?

"We can talk about it later, Ryan." Andrew brushed me off with a big smile and a wave of his hand. Anthony shook his head and sighed as if disappointed in me and I thought that at least he would have an opinion on this. Wes curled his fists as anger flashed across his face. And Jason—well Jason had taken too much to give much input other than smile brightly.

The dressing room was swirling with heat as sweat dripped down my neck. "No, do you guys really not see how awful things are between us? We can't just do another damn tour as if that will fix everything! Andrew, are you kidding me right now?"

He avoided my eyes through the dressing room mirror.

Traitor. They all were.

"This is insane. How can you think that we will make it through that? We haven't made a new album in over a year, we can't just keep touring forever!"

“Well maybe—” Wes shoved off the girl who was clinging to his shoulder and stood, “—the rest of us go, but you *stay here*.”

I felt sick. I stared at my guitarist in utter disbelief. They could never do that. I’m their fucking king.

“I’m just saying, Ryan, that maybe you’re the problem. All you ever do is show up to soundcheck drunk and leave the stage to find another party! You don’t even tell us. You don’t even care about the band anymore!”

“Oh, yeah? Jason can’t go on stage sober, Anthony can barely play his damn instrument anymore, and you only care about getting famous. When does it end, huh? How many bigger venues and bigger songs and bigger crowds will it take until you’re fucking satisfied?” I couldn’t see straight anymore. The whole room was spinning and I was holding the neck of my guitar so tightly I thought it’d snap.

“At least I still care, you have done *nothing*—”

“But it’s my band, Wes. I care about this band more than you ever will.” I almost laughed, then, at how desperate I sounded.

“I can’t believe you just said that to me. You’re acting so childish. This band isn’t just *yours*, it’s all of us!”

The dressing room had slowly transformed into some suffocating hysteria of heat and threatened to tilt. I couldn’t breathe. The groupies slowly dissolved out of the room, deciding this was a band only discussion. My guitar hung from my shoulder, equalizing the force of a noose.

I was practically knee-deep in my own grave.

“It’s all about the stupid music, don’t you understand that?” I asked, desperately. My collar was digging relentlessly into my throat. I tugged at it harshly. “All that *you* want is the fame, the only thing I never wanted.”

“Oh, come on.” My bassist looked at me this time. He was anything but sympathetic. “That’s

actually hilarious, Ryan, hilarious—”

“Would everyone just shut up.” This was too much; this was pushing the silent consensus that everyone had agreed not to acknowledge anything about how the band, my kingdom, was on its downfall.

Andrew was sitting on the couch and staring blankly ahead with a beer bottle in his hands, probably fearing mutiny at this point. His face was drained of emotion and clearly thinking that he should’ve brought up Europe at another time. Yeah, he should have. I wonder if this was the night he was finally going to quit. It was about time. Maybe I’ll fire him myself.

A boy with greasy hair and glasses too big for his face ran into the room dressed in all black with a small headset hanging from his ears. He stumbled in and froze as he read the anger in the air.

“Spit it out, kid,” I said through gritted teeth, stepping forward.

“You guys have to go on stage in five minutes.” His voice was timid as he looked down at the ground. I scoffed. Pathetic.

I turned to my bandmates and barely recognized them anymore. I wanted this band so much and the damn good albums we’ve made. When we were younger and fresh out of high school—Wes didn’t even graduate—we told ourselves that the music would be the most important thing. We were so naive. So fucking naive. We never stopped to ask when the threshold to fame would be, how far we would make it before we weren’t allowed to go back. Wes stared at me with disgust. He’s who I trusted from the beginning; I showed him my songs before anyone else and he played a cheap acoustic guitar he bought with babysitting money. We were young and foolish and desperate to start something bigger than ourselves and I certainly feel like now, it’s too big. It’s some black hole sucking everyone in and we had no choice but to surrender to gravity.

If we didn’t have the music, then what else was

there?

I felt the utter hate of the room like a car crash: shrapnel went through my body and I died on impact.

I was too far in their anger to think straight. My kingdom has fallen. They have destroyed everything.

“I quit,” I said.

The room erupted into an uproar of protest, but really, they should’ve seen this coming. I quit in my head about eight and a half states ago and I’m sure the thought conjured itself *well* before that. I tore the guitar off me, an elegant ES-335 Gibson, and held it by its neck. Choked it like my bandmates have done with me, choking me out of this tour, this ridiculously long tour that I was forced into.

They did this to me.

“If you don’t go out on that stage, Ryan, I’m going to—I’m going to kill you.” Jason, hands gripped tightly to his sticks, glared at me. The threat was slurred and futile in his state.

So they do want death for the king. “You wouldn’t get close enough to touch me,” I spat.

The kid was still in the room holding a clipboard with shaking fingers. He was desperately trying to catch our manager’s gaze, *anyone*. I turned and placed a hand on the kid’s shoulder. He staggered back with wide eyes.

I smiled, all teeth. “You’re going to go out there, speak into that stupid mic, and tell them that we will not be going on stage tonight.”

He didn’t move—either out of fear or the fact that famous Ryan Reiz is touching his shoulder and oh god, oh fuck. Useless boy.

Our manager stood slowly as if he had strings attached to his limbs; it was almost unnatural and resistant. Then, in a frantic motion, slammed his bottle on the floor which didn’t shatter but shut the room up quickly. His thin frame and tired eyes illuminated our tour life and for a brief, paralyzing second, I almost felt bad. I was his best singer after

all and I messed everything up. But, the second passed and I remembered that even though I hated it, I was the frontman of the most popular rock band in America and this was *my* reign.

“Ryan,” he started. His voice was beaten, wrecked, dead. “You, and the rest of your over-egotistical selfish band, are going to perform on that stage or else I will make sure that your entire career will die like it was nothing. I have tried too hard and spent too much money to make this band famous only to have you fuck everything up. You will sing or you will become nothing.”

I was furious. Something in this band was broken. Was rotten from the very beginning and it only took a little fame and a few albums for us to recognize it. But of course, we ignored it until we were all choking on the death of this band. We were poisoned and sick and they cut me off at the throat.

King’s men, poisoning their king, coming for the crown, and the whole damn kingdom.

Andrew came up to me, right into my space, and twisted the front of my shirt in his fist. He grabbed me so harshly his knuckles turned white. “If you ever want to play again, hold a goddamn guitar again, then you *will* go on tonight. I can make sure the industry destroys you; hell, you’re halfway there yourself. You were nothing before this band and I can make it that way again.”

He meant it. I was his prodigy; he took interest in me when none of the other labels did. I could practically feel his rage strangling me. I was the best damn investment he’s ever made.

The room was quiet; only the echo of the crowd chanting our names could be heard through the walls.

“Pick up the guitar and sing like you’re meant to.”

The others were trickling out of the room as if they too could be next in the catastrophic aftermath that was Andrew Taylor. They avoided my gaze as they left but the anger was still there, still waiting for

an excuse to burst and lash out again like some kind of animal. They betrayed me.

They would not be here if I wasn't able to sing. My songs and my lyrics. It was my music.

They weren't allowed to take it from me just like that.

Let them walk on to that damn stage, but they could not do it without me. I was great, no I was more than great, I was the best there ever was. I have already made history. What have they done without me?

I was already so consumed with the music that there was nowhere else to go. I momentarily wondered if this is what it was like to drown. Who was I without this? I certainly didn't know.

I took a shot and choked it down before taking the bottle with me. I could hear the crowd crying out my name and begging for songs; I was a *god* to them.

I would go out onto the stage where the lights were blinding and the room suffocated hotly with smoke and sweat. The stage, where the amps dulling sung out static of the guitars and the microphone awaited me.

I walked out and the room held its breath.

This was my coronation.

The place where I could finally be loved.



I stumbled out of the venue high on the coke that I had stolen from Jason's open snare case and plainly drunk from the drinks I demanded were brought out to the stage to breathe in the dry late-night air of Las Vegas. I nearly sprinted away from the venue and laughed. We played a horrible set: we were fifteen minutes late on stage, I forgot the lyrics to most songs, Wes fucked up his solo and nearly dropped his guitar afterwards, and Jason started half the songs at *least* ten beats faster than they should've been played at. It put me into a damn bad mood. More than that. I was fucking enraged. The music can die without me, see if I care, see if they

manage to survive without me singing in the band. The coke was making my head spin furiously. No, I didn't care. Andrew can find a new singer but he'll never be as good as me and my manager *knows that*. We'll see how they like the band without the famous Ryan Reiz landing them eight-month long tours and songs so popular they continue to break every record.

I gave them everything.

I took a big swig of vodka, the last bottle in the dressing room that wasn't empty, but I barely tasted it. I think I took too much coke after the show. Jason always gets the cheap stuff.

How I managed to get out of Andrew's grasp after the set was over was beyond me. I scampered away the instant I sang the last line and immediately went to Jason's things before the crowd had the chance to ask for an encore which I did not attend. Jason, my sweet savior Jason, even had a few tabs of acid and after about seven seconds of contemplation and my desire to forget this god-awful night, I decided to take them, too.

I had nothing to lose; I left everything on that stage.

For Vegas, it was still early in the night and welcomed me with open arms. The lights were more colorful than I remembered and, as if the heat had finally claimed the city, started melting somewhat. They flashed, once, twice, before returning to normal. I tried to recall how to breathe. The faces who walked past blurred into a mess of semi-recognizable features. Pretty girls who weren't wearing enough clothes brushed their hands across my shoulder as I flowed through the crowd and scrawny boys forced objects into my open and awaiting palms trying to sell whatever they could. I stumbled my way through them. They looked like ghosts: pale, skinnier, not quite grounded to this earth. Their faces morphed suddenly into biting smiles with sharp teeth and predatory eyes that were

animal enough to make me desperately stagger away.

I had taken a lot, but not *that* much. It was the lights, the heat, the post-show adrenaline. It was only that.

A man stumbled out of a casino right into me which made him drop the small amount of cash clutched in his sweaty fist. He was clearly drunk, maybe on something, and in his attempt to punch me straight in the nose, security rushed out of the glowing double doors and yanked him back by the arms. The man glared ferally at me, reminding me of somebody who could commit murder. He could've. His face was morphing into a horrific thing with fangs and a wild gaze. He could've eaten me alive. I panicked and ran.

In a disorientated and paranoid run that consisted of bumping into people who I cursed out and avoiding the wandering, admiring eyes of onlookers who I feared would recognize me, I decided I was officially lost.

I was surprised to find myself on the backside of Vegas. I didn't even think there was a backside; it was supposed to be all lights or nothing. I was even more surprised as I realized that Andrew had not followed me nor issued a city-wide manhunt with a reward for my body, dead or alive. I bet he's taken my place already, finally rising to the stardom he's never had, and wearing that crown with a goddamn smile on his face.

In small, crashing waves of dizziness, I forced myself to reteach my body how to do basic functions like breathe and blink. I stood clear of streetlights and waited for the world to stop spinning so violently. I don't remember drinking water today. Or eating anything for that matter.

I managed to lose my bottle and three-quarters of my pack along the way. I don't remember how. In bringing a cigarette to my mouth with unsteady hands, I realized I didn't even have a light. I felt like throwing up. Only sad and beat down stores were before me, everything was gray. I glanced

around and a man was walking towards me. He appeared out of nowhere and for a moment I almost wondered if I was hallucinating him. No, he was real. I stormed up to him.

"Do you have—"

"Hey, man," he said easily, grinning, "What'd you want?"

"A light." My voice sounded far away and disconnected from my body.

"Oh, yeah, yeah." His eyes were glazed over, pupils wide. The man searched his pockets. "Hey, you hear that the so-called Ryan Reiz performed tonight?"

"No. Did you go to his concert?"

"Nah, he sucks, anyway. Terrible song writing if you ask me. He just can't like *get it*, you know?"

"Yeah, I agree. Pretty terrible."

I heard a slight inhale. I frantically glanced around. A woman was walking across the street with uncertain eyes, as if something familiar had stunned her. She knew me.

"You know her?" the man asked.

"No. You must be famous or something," I said and took the man's lighter.

I nearly sprinted away and lit my own damn cigarette.

I had nowhere to go but straight. I must've walked for hours. Or maybe minutes. It was getting harder to tell and it was getting harder to stand up straight.

Lightheaded and shivering, I found myself in a part of Vegas I had never seen before: an empty, desolate desert. I don't remember how I got here. The *desert*? How long had I been going for? The only light came from the echoes of the city which seemed to be miles away. Las Vegas turned into some intangible, iridescent thing and I coughed on the dust my shoes were kicking up. I was in a long stretch of nothingness. There wasn't any wind, nor was there a single sound except for my own ragged breathing. I wasn't sure if it was even real. My body

shook, switching between swells of an aching cold and flashes of fervent fevers. I wrapped my arms around myself.

As I collapsed on the ground, my only thought was that I, the famous Ryan Reiz, had everything I had ever wanted. Perhaps too much. Not enough. Something in between.

After all, who was I without the music, the band? Did I even exist at all without it?

My head was swimming and my vision was going dark. Was this real? Or just part of the trip?

Too much coke and acid; fuck you, Jason. I felt rough, rocky dirt under my fingers. My head dug into the earth as if the action would ground me, provide some sense. The sky was choking with stars. Maybe we sold out Las Vegas and it was already becoming a desert town.

And only I made it so.

I made a great king. I was the only one who could've done it. The stars shone so brightly before flickering out one by one by one.