

## **everything i am is everything i should be**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/39735750) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/39735750>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Twenty One Pilots</a> , <a href="#">Scaled And Icy - Twenty One Pilots (Album)</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Josh Dun/Tyler Joseph</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Josh Dun</a> , <a href="#">Tyler Joseph</a> , <a href="#">Jenna Joseph (mentioned)</a> , <a href="#">Debby Ryan (mentioned)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Self-Acceptance</a> , <a href="#">Gender Identity</a> , <a href="#">josh sort of has a gender crisis but tyler is there to help him through it</a> , <a href="#">Nonbinary Josh Dun</a> , <a href="#">Friends to Lovers</a> , <a href="#">starts at the beginning of sai era to the florida shows</a> , <a href="#">Sai era</a> , <a href="#">Implied Sexual Content</a> , <a href="#">tyler is sweet and loves josh with all of his heart</a> , <a href="#">josh figures out his identity through tyler</a> , <a href="#">they both figure out their relationship with each other</a> , <a href="#">i love them dearly</a> , <a href="#">Anxiety</a> , <a href="#">Questioning</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Fluff and Angst</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-06-19 Words: 13,158 Chapters: 1/1

# everything i am is everything i should be

by [torturedsleep](#)

## Summary

Josh was sure he had figured out everything there was to know about himself. Over Sai era, he's presented with more opportunities to explore himself, and with Tyler's help, realizes he's been repressing more than he thought.

## Notes

title of this fic is from the song RUNAWAY by half•alive. it's one of my favorite songs that has stuck with me over the years, and i listened to it a lot while writing. it's helped and continued to help me feel more confident and secure in my identity as well whenever things get rough so yeah. thank you to half•alive love you guys lots.

i wrote this fic for one of my best friends (ichthustent), since they really inspired me and i see so much of them in josh. <3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

If there was one thing that could be inferred based on Josh's appearance, it was that he was good at self-expression.

He figured that others would pick up on this. Whether it be dying his hair every color of the rainbow, painting his fingernails, wearing clothing that was more punk or non-traditional--he had practically done everything under the sun. He had a lip ring in high school. He got gauges soon after, and now he had two nose rings, one on each nostril. His entire persona growing up was that he was rebellious and that he challenged established norms.

So when he came to the realization that he was struggling with a major part of his identity related to this, he was shocked to find out he was surprised.

He could've just been overreacting. Maybe he doesn't know what he's talking about. After all, he's really only dealt with a sexuality crisis, and that *really* didn't start until he met Tyler. But a gender crisis? That was completely new territory.

He didn't even realize that *that* was what was going on at first, but still.

He could say to himself that he didn't know when he started and try to accept it as a lie, but he was telling the truth. From as long as he can remember, something just...didn't feel right about just being called he. He was fine with it. He had no problems with it, seeing as how that was the pronoun he was most comfortable dealing with. But there was also something more to it. He just...he didn't know how to explain it. It was confusing. It made his head hurt trying to come up with the words to feeling fine with one label but also wanting.... *something else* to it.

Tyler would know how to explain it. He didn't want to go to him, though. His best friend already had a lot on his plate.

They had just started working on the new album after they released their single *Level of Concern*. Josh had painted his nails again, and they glowed in the dark as he drummed in a neon windbreaker. He wished Tyler could've been there to paint them for him. He knew that nail polish was typically a feminine thing to do, but in all honesty, he didn't care. It made him feel warm and happy inside, and he wished he would have the courage to do it more.

Not having any time to debate sending it, Josh reached out for his phone after he got a break practicing a new drumline for the latest song on the album, *The Outside*. He texted Tyler before the feeling faded.

*next time we get together, you should paint my nails.*

Tyler, even though he preferred calling to texting, got back to him almost instantly. That's one of the things he always loved about him.

*any particular reason?*

Josh smiled to himself.

*nah. just liked it when i did it for the loc video. thought it could be fun to do again.*

Josh didn't really know why he was blushing or getting so embarrassed.

*sounds fun. i'm in. i know it'll probably be a while until we can see each other, but let's definitely do it.*

*you'd look amazing.*

Then, when Josh thought he couldn't get any more heated, Tyler sent one last text.

*miss u jishwa.*

Josh beamed and typed him back before continuing on with his practice.

*miss you too ty.*

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Tyler was right. They couldn't really see each other until a few months later when Josh finally came to visit him in Ohio to meet Rosie.

To be honest, Josh had felt bad about moving to LA. It never really felt like home. But he had always struggled with making definitive decisions and knowing exactly what he wanted, so it wasn't like he could just up and leave when he practically had a second life there.

Nevertheless, he beamed when he met Tyler's daughter. She had Jenna's eyes and Tyler's smile, and it made Josh excited at just the thought of getting to watch her grow up.

Tyler smiled as Jenna took a picture of them before he wrapped Josh into another hug, probably the tenth one he'd given him since he got here. Tyler was just so happy to see him, and Josh was too. Here was his best friend in his arms, with his hair growing out and a smile that hadn't faded since he picked him up from the airport.

Tyler tugged on his arm to go down to the studio with him. It had been ages since they worked on music, and they did for a while, Tyler running new ideas by him and revising lyrics as Josh pointed out changes.

After a while, they found themselves on the couch, Josh in his Navy blue shirt and hat while Tyler was tucked away in one of his older sweatshirts Josh had given him. He smiled happily as Josh settled comfortably in his arms. Cuddling with Tyler was one of his favorite things to do. Tyler wrapped his arms softly around his waist as Josh gently set his hat on the floor near the couch.

Tyler nuzzled his nose into Josh's hair, earning a sigh from him. "You've been growing out your hair too, huh?"

Josh's lips quirked up into a smile. "Yeah," he hummed.

“I like it,” Tyler said softly. “Looks really good on you.”

Josh’s heart did a thing again. He liked having his hair long, his curls wild and free. Nothing like when he shaved his head in Trench era, where he was overcompensating for the start of these *feelings* by wearing neutral hoodies and nothing with color.

He knew that everybody and their mother had been saying they’ve been doing some self-reflecting over this time where the world shut down, but Josh had *truly* been doing that. He didn’t even know where to begin with how to explain what was going on, other than the fact that he wasn’t completely sure about what people should be calling him by.

It wasn’t a big deal though. Maybe he didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Reminds me of when I first met you,” Tyler whispered. “Your curls were so cute back then.”

Josh slipped into the comfort of Tyler’s arms, closing his eyes. “You look cute now, too,” he mumbled.

Tyler’s cheeks began to blush as everything went quiet for a while. “Love you, Joshua.”

Josh’s heart tightened. “Love you too.”

They dozed off soon after. The exhaustion that came with them being apart surrendered them to sleep.

When they woke up a few hours later, and when Josh had to go back home to visit his family, Tyler promised that next time he would paint his nails. Josh said he didn’t mind.

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They didn’t see each other as much as they would’ve liked the next few months. Josh tried to keep himself preoccupied with other things to keep his mind off Tyler, and off of...whatever else was going on with him. He still didn’t really have a grasp on it yet.

It was easier to do things to distract himself from Tyler because he had been perfecting that skill for years. He could run, box, spend time with his wife when she wasn’t working, drum. All of those things would preoccupy him and require all of his mental and physical energy.

There were moments, however, when he was all alone with nothing to distract him. Those would be the chances when the thoughts would creep back in.

One particular night, when he was alone in his house in LA, hit him hard. He didn’t have any energy to find a distraction, since he had been recording drums all day and it was too late to go and hit any gym. He was in bed with nothing but some boxers, leaving his chest exposed under the covers. He pulled them back slightly, as he tended to sweat and get hotter when the overthinking hit him.

He had been trying to incorporate different methods on how to deal with his anxiety. Over the years, whether it be from videos or articles or techniques from his therapist...usually something would work. But nothing was clicking now.

He rolled over on his back, head swimming with past memories that would usually settle in the front of his mind as he tried to fall asleep. Memories of when it was just him and Tyler, along with Mark and Michael, all squeezed together in the van, barely making it from show to show. Josh remembers the vivid feeling of not caring about any of the risk, because as long as he could have Tyler's sweet words, Tyler's arms and lips and whole heart, that would be enough.

Obviously things had changed a lot since then, including their marital statuses and the amount of times they saw each other. Their feelings for each other were obviously still there, but that wasn't Josh's main concern. He had realized that about Tyler a long time ago and tried to just accept that Tyler didn't like him that way anymore, no matter how much it disappointed him.

But now, he was thinking about every time he looked at himself back then, every time over the years that he would almost feel silly for getting excited over those things like new clothes or dyed hair or more piercings. He especially thought about all the times he felt unhappiest, and that was when he wasn't indulging in those things.

Reaching for his phone, using Google as a baseline resource to jump off from, he scrolled with questions. He bounced from articles to Reddit posts, then finally to Twitter, trying to search for some sort of semblance of an answer.

Seeing his fans online and seeing how involved they were with the causes they supported filled Josh with a sense of pride. Tyler had recently expressed that sentiment too with a tweet for Pride Month he had seen on his timeline, in which Josh was still confused about Tyler's wording and if he was coming out in his own way.

He decided to leave it alone after reading all of the replies of support and clicking on some profiles of dedicated fans.

They all had their pride fully on display. Whether it be links to carrrds that detailed the basics of their identity (including things like sexuality) to having their preferred pronouns in their bio, people were happy to share these elements with the world like it was nothing.

Josh, however, wasn't that brave.

Sure, he was closeted as *something* in high school but didn't really know what to do about it. That was until Tyler came along and helped him realize that he was bisexual. He still wasn't sure about ever sharing that part of him to his fans, as it was something private that he only trusted to the people closest to him. Besides, he was pretty sure most fans could intuit that about him anyway.

But gender identity? Pronouns? He hadn't really given it much thought. If he identified as anything else and didn't use strictly he/him pronouns, wouldn't he have known by now?

Surely he would've known.

Right?

So then why did all of a sudden, during these past few months, hell, these past *few years* ... why did something feel like it was missing?

Josh shut his phone off, shifting in the white and gray sheets onto his stomach and burying his face in his pillow to try and will himself to sleep.

It would've been easier with Tyler's arms around him, but finally, he relented.

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The next few months flew by until it was already December, the holiday season upon him in full swing. Josh had just done a Christmas Twitch stream with Tyler, surprising all their fans with the knowledge that he was with Tyler in Columbus the whole time, and that they had a new Christmas single ready at the end of the stream.

Josh had worn a Santa hat with a black shirt. Nothing too special or flashy. Nothing that would make him feel better or worse.

After that night alone in LA, he was trying hard to push it all down. He just had a little more time to think about things he normally didn't have time to think about now that he wasn't touring. That was all.

Even then, he realized that if he wore whatever he wanted, even if it wasn't traditionally masculine, he felt somehow liberated and happier than before. He didn't really know what to make of it.

To this point, soon after the stream, Tyler would post a picture of him in his new birthday present, a white shirt that said "My friend Josh" on it with pink lettering and a picture of Josh in a sheer shirt decorated with stars. When Josh was posing and getting the shirt made a few weeks ago, his tattoos were showing and his hair was still growing longer. And yet, Josh somehow felt confident. He thought he even looked pretty.

Pretty?

Huh. That was new.

Tyler even made sure to mention this fact right after the stream. They had an after-party directly after it ended, which consisted of Tyler and company eating snacks that Jenna made as they spread out in the living room. Josh, as always, sat right by Tyler's side, but this time Tyler leaned in and rested his head on his shoulder.

"You look so pretty in that hat," he whispered into his ear as he flicked the top of it gently.

Josh could really only blush to himself as he reached to hold Tyler's hand.

He liked being called pretty. Like, a lot. He just didn't know he would like it *that* much.

"I mean it," Tyler said after Josh didn't say anything.

"Thanks," was all that Josh could get himself to say.

“I’m really glad you’re here, by the way,” Tyler said, holding his hand a little tighter. “In case that wasn’t obvious.”

Josh chuckled at that, and Tyler beamed. “I’d do anything to be here with you all the time.”

Tyler’s expression changed a little bit at that. He wasn’t angry or mad, just suddenly filled with a little more solemnity. “Then stay,” he said simply.

It wasn’t a command or anything to be scared of. He was simply just asking. And Josh hadn’t really realized that it was such a simple thing to do. He didn’t really like being in LA as much as he thought he would. Seven years passed, and he really only had to be there a few weeks out of the year. But now that they had all this time to be apart, after not being able to see each other for months...it killed him. It killed both of them.

Josh had felt like he never really left this place, and Tyler never wanted him to leave to begin with.

He was never good at being assertive with what he wanted. But maybe this is what he wanted the whole time. Maybe he wanted Tyler to ask him to come home, and now Josh was just now gaining the courage to do it.

The answer fell so simply from his lips.

“Okay,” he whispered, and Tyler’s face instantly softened as he squeezed his hand.

Things may have been confusing with how he felt about himself, but there was an optimistic part of Josh that assured him that being closer to Tyler would definitely help.

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Josh lived up to his promise, and after a few visits to Columbus (mainly one for Rosie’s birthday and a few others to work on music) and a lot of debating and conversations, both with Tyler and Debby, Josh was finally coming home.

On the plane ride to Columbus, Josh realized the only reason he stayed there for as long as he did was because he felt a strange sense of obligation to his separate life there and the relationships he had.

He also had realized over the years that none of that life came even remotely close to Tyler. That’s what made coming back all the better.

Josh had decided to come alone since Debby was still working. He caught an earlier flight, and since he already owned a house back in Columbus, he wouldn’t be moving too much of his things. Just the stuff he needed from his apartment.

He had gotten off his plane and had just picked up his bags from the baggage claim when he saw a pair of legs running closer to him.

Dropping his things, Josh ran towards Tyler and pulled him into the tightest hug he could, spinning him around as he wrapped his arms around his back.



Tyler, hair pulled back, clothes loose fitting and comfortable, started laughing. Josh had heard it a thousand times over the phone or through FaceTime, but nothing came close to hearing it in person.

When Josh put him down, they swayed a bit as he buried his head into Tyler's shoulder, breathing him in. "You don't know how much I missed you," he admitted as his chest hummed against Tyler's breathing.

"We called each other last night," Tyler laughed again, but he just held on tighter to Josh's dark sweatshirt.

Josh smiled, already feeling like the comfort that Tyler brought with him was filling his heart to the brim.

"You know what I mean."

Tyler still hadn't pulled away from the hug. He sighed with content. "Yeah. I missed you too."

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Josh was feeling better after that, or at least, he was starting to be okay with what he was feeling.

He spent a lot of time with Tyler initially now that he was back. They put final touches on the album, did more promo, and filmed music videos. When all of that was finished, on the chance that he could see Tyler outside of working, he usually just came over for fun. He hadn't been in the same place physically with Tyler for ages, unless you counted touring. Even then, they had separate buses now, which Josh was less than thrilled about, but said nothing of because he didn't want to be selfish.

Time spent with Tyler was mainly time catching up with him, whether it be Tyler jokingly pressed up against Josh giving him piano lessons or agreeing to let Josh dye his hair for him before their livestream.

Right now, they were sitting together on Tyler's living room couch, both of them huddled together as they shared Josh's laptop to look at clothes to wear for the show.

"That one looks cool," Josh gestured to the screen, pointing out a shirt for Tyler with red, cream, and blue designs.

"I could wear that during The Outside," Tyler suggested, as he added it to his cart.

Josh grinned. "You'd look sweet."

After clicking around from site to site for a bit, picking out things for Tyler to wear depending on the transitions between songs, Josh held his credit card and read out the small gray numbers as Tyler paid for everything. He released a sigh as he looked at the time. It was already well into the afternoon.

He ran his fingers through his hair, which was longer still, but not pulled back today. His brown eyes shone expectantly as he turned his attention to Josh.

“Now we gotta find stuff for you,” Tyler said softly, brushing his hand over Josh’s arm lightly to encourage him.

Every time Tyler touched him like that, while seemingly innocent in nature, sent a chill down Josh’s spine filled with feelings he was doing a terrible job at repressing.

What Tyler had suggested, though, was what Josh had been dreading. He still didn’t know if he had the courage to wear what he wanted, but then again, Tyler had been doing it with ease. He seemed happy that he could use this new era to finally try out a new style. And he did seem happier. The long hair, comfortable clothing, bright colors. All of it seemed to make him shine brighter.

Maybe that’s why Josh was so afraid. Even though he was viewed as muscular and tough, even though he ran and boxed and made himself do more traditionally “masculine” things, he wanted to show his soft side. He wanted to wear clothes that made him feel like he could glow, just like Tyler.

The world saw him one way, and he was fine with that, but he wanted to be seen as another.

He didn’t really know what to do about it.

“Josh? You alright?”

Tyler had nudged his arm, even softer this time as Josh fiddled nervously with the ends of his glasses.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay,” he reassured, and Tyler looked a little less worried. Josh always felt a little bad because of how much Tyler cared. He knew it didn’t make sense, but he still felt that way irrationally.

He added a small, “Let’s get looking,” which prompted Tyler to pull up some options he already had bookmarked.

They went through corduroy pants, different kinds of fancy shirts, shoes that would make him feel more confident than he was. Tyler knew Josh better than well after all these years, so his selections were pretty good.

All in all, Josh just wanted things to make him feel *pretty*. Ever since Tyler had been calling him that lately, he just felt extremely happy thinking about it. Sure, he wanted to be handsome, and he did like it whenever someone saw him that way. But to be pretty, and beautiful...something about it just made him feel even better. Maybe it was the fact that he wasn’t “supposed” to feel that way. He never was one for rules anyway.

After he and Tyler figured out what to order, Josh couldn’t help but smile at how happy all the new clothes were already making him feel.

Tyler seemed to notice as he was checking out the last order with Josh's card. He said nothing though, just smiled to himself, waiting for Josh to speak first.

"Thanks for doing all this today. Really, it's a big help. I hate shopping," Josh joked, burying the excitement away.

"It's the worst," Tyler agreed. "But I think we did pretty well."

"You're gonna look amazing," Josh instantly supplied as he nudged Tyler with affection.

Tyler smirked. "Did you see the stuff you picked out? You're gonna knock me dead, Dun."

Josh bit the inside of his cheek as he blushed. He loved how easy everything was with Tyler, how casually they could flirt but still be so close to each other. They had their own personal brand of love that wasn't defined by boxes or labels. That was very important to the both of them.

Labels, however, were important in their own way to Josh. He was bisexual. He knew that much.

He just didn't know what the hell was going on with anything else.

Tyler looked at Josh more seriously, staring into his eyes. He was so close on the couch, his breathing soft and quiet and even. Josh could see the specks of lighter brown in his irises.

"I'm really proud of you," he said, his voice low.

Josh was a little confused. "Why?"

"Because. You bought all that stuff, and I've never seen you wear it before. You may think I haven't noticed, but I have." When Josh didn't answer, his eyes wide, Tyler placed his hand overtop of Josh's to comfort him. "You're taking risks. I like it."

"R-risks with what?"

Josh was suddenly insecure. He barely had the heart to admit what was going on with him to himself, much less the person that he loved most in the world. He was just buying clothes. It shouldn't have been such a big deal to him.

Tyler, being as good and as kind as he always is, was patient. "You know. With expressing yourself and stuff. I mean, you know I've been doing it more ever since this break. It's been doing me a lot of good mentally. And I know it will for you too."

Josh sort of stopped at that. He had been doing fine, right?

There were two answers to that.

On the surface, he had been alright. He hung out with friends, worked out, and was always drumming. He kept himself busy because he had the time now, and he was motivated.

The other more honest reason behind that question had to do with the first answer. The only reason he had been doing those things was to keep himself distracted. He only hung out with friends because Debby made him. Those friends were mainly friends he met through her. He only worked out to keep his mind moving. If he didn't sit still, his mind wouldn't either. And he was always drumming to let his pent-up emotions out, because the first two actions were causing him even more despair.

It was a never-ending cycle and it was only getting worse.

So now as he sat on Tyler's couch, staring at his best friend, he really could only give in and accept the truth. He hadn't been doing alright. He'd been doing pretty awful.

He was so, so lost and confused and he had no idea what to do about it.

"Thank you, Tyler," he whispered, his voice cracking a bit. "I think this is gonna do me some good."

The way he said it, all somber and hopeless, made Tyler's heart wrench. They didn't speak for a while, not until Josh let out another sigh that felt like it got caught in his throat.

"You know I'm always here for you, right?"

Suddenly, Josh felt like crying. "Tyler..." he started.

"No, I'm serious," he said a little more adamantly, holding onto Josh's hand tightly now. "I know things have been hard ever since things shut down-"

"They were hard before that," Josh cut in.

Tyler's face softened with empathy. There were too many layers to what Josh was saying. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he settled with. He swallowed, then started again. "I know I haven't been the best with communication. Even when we do talk, it's not as much as we should."

"You have a family now," Josh countered, but his voice sounded weak, like he didn't want to admit it to himself.

"You do too," Tyler said back, softly, gently, just like he always is.

Josh almost felt like laughing. "Debby's different."

He wanted to say *Debby's not family*, but thought better of it. He was unhappy and he knew it. Tyler knew it. Most of his friends did too, and she probably picked up on it whenever he let his guard down. He had settled for the first ex to take him back all because he couldn't get over Tyler, and probably never would.

Tyler hadn't gotten over it either, but this mutual closeness between each other had never really been talked about. But that was a whole other issue, even if they both wanted to avoid labels.

“How so?” he asked, but he sounded like he already knew the answer.

Josh gulped, took a deep breath, tried to count but failed. “She’s just...she’s not like that.” And then, sinking further into the couch, he breathed, “She’s not you.”

Tyler didn’t seem surprised. He already knew.

“You’re the only family I’ve got,” Josh whispered, because despite all the confusion and chaos in every part of his life, he always had Tyler. If nothing else was left, Tyler would be there.

He needed him more than anything else, which is why coming to terms with his identity and letting himself be vulnerable with Tyler was so hard. Tyler was the only family he had.

Tyler wrapped Josh in his arms as Josh finally let his tears flow. He held tightly onto him, readjusted his position on the couch, and cradled Josh in his arms.

“That’s not true,” he whispered fiercely. “There are so many people that love and care about you, Josh.”

Josh had to catch his breath. “None of them matter as much as you, though.”

Tyler released a sigh, like he was realizing the same thing about his own relationships.

“No one matters as much as you do to me, too,” he returned, playing with Josh’s hair in an attempt to comfort him.

They stayed like that for a while, nothing but the sound of Josh’s racing heartbeat coming down and Tyler’s breathing as he protected him in his arms. He didn’t break the silence for a long time.

“What’s going on, Josh?” And then, when Josh didn’t answer, he sighed. “Did something happen? Did you see something again?”

By that, he meant that as him seeing a comment online that would get to him, but that happened rarely at this point, and even the stuff that got under his skin didn’t affect him as much as it used to.

No, this was much, much worse. This was like high school all over again, but that time, he was struggling with the feelings he had for others. Now, he was struggling with himself, all of himself, how he looked and felt in his own skin.

Tyler wrote about insecurity, sure, so Josh knew he would understand. He just didn’t know how to word it like Tyler. He was so exhausted from trying to figure it all out.

After a while, Josh finally answered him. “No,” he whispered, even though he had been seeing so much, with so many people with pride online that he couldn’t help but cower at because he couldn’t find the strength to do the same.

He felt like shit.

“You sure?” Tyler asked again, and this time, Josh could tell that he knew he was lying.

Josh hesitated, then spoke honestly. “I don’t know what’s going on, and...and I don’t know how to say it.”

Tyler just held him closer. “That’s alright. I just want you to know that I’m always here to help you. I’ve got your back, Joshua. I always have and always will.”

At this, Josh smiled. “You’re the best friend anyone could ever ask for.”

Calling them best friends seemed so limited to what their entire relationship meant, but it was the only label they used.

It was a label. Just a label.

It was a start.

“Ditto,” Tyler laughed.

They stayed there for a little while longer until the sun went down, until Josh had to grab his things because Debby texted him about their dinner plans about a restaurant Josh could’ve never dreamed of affording when he was 23. With a sad smile, Tyler reminded him that he was there, he’d always be there. Josh nodded, but still felt like a boat lost at sea.

“I’ll paint your nails next time, alright?” Tyler called as Josh made his way to the front door.

That seemed to be their promise after every meeting.

Josh just smiled. “Yeah. Next time,” he echoed, and he walked out the door with an ache in his chest.

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The livestream went amazing and the reception and praise was so much more than Josh expected. He knew they had been putting countless hours of work into it, and seeing it pay off left him more than satisfied. He was proud of Tyler most of all, which he would remind him of, whether in person or through text when he couldn’t find the time to see him.

They filmed another music video over the summer in which Josh thought it was completely, 100% obvious in the behind the scenes video that he was showing he was crushing on Tyler hard. Well, that fact was always the case, but now that they were finally close again since they lived closer, those feelings he had been able to keep at bay because of distance started flaring up again.

Tyler didn’t really help and only encouraged it, which just made Josh fall further for his best friend, but it was always an unspoken thing. It would be better that way. Safer. Contained.

Throughout it all, Josh went to events with his wife and awards shows with Tyler. He started to wear more necklaces and jeans with smiley faces on the knees and leather jackets and practically anything if it just made him feel good.

He was trying to be okay with it, because during the summer, in addition to spending time with the people closest to him, he also did some more research.

By “research”, he meant going online and watching his fans again, in addition to more frantic google searching and scrolling through Reddit and fine-tuning his YouTube recommended videos. Only after seeing a tweet from a fan on Twitter stating that they wanted to try out new pronouns did it click.

Maybe Josh wanted to try it too.

It was just a test, right? If he didn’t like them, he wouldn’t have to mention it. He could just forget about it and move on.

He was thinking about what he saw all day, even when he was hanging out with Debby and her friends. She had about six or seven other people over, people that Josh knew well enough but had to fake his friendship towards. He had gotten pretty good at it, and gotten even better by forcing himself to have a few drinks.

The fake conversation was draining him, especially when he felt out-of-place. These people had their life together. They presented however they wanted, had the confidence to be themselves and wore it proudly every day. Josh, however, had been taking solace in the quiet victories, the things that could easily be passed off as meaning nothing if he needed to say so. He reached for his heart necklace around his neck and twisted it before whispering to Debby that he had to go to the bathroom.

He made his way swiftly to the one upstairs and locked the door. His chest was heaving, his head was pounding, and all he wanted to do was feel okay, whatever the hell that meant at this point.

Those words kept pounding into his skull. He couldn’t even get himself to look into the mirror until he took a few calming breaths.

It was now or never. What could this hurt? There was no harm in just trying.

Josh took another deep breath, but it was shakier than the last.

“Hi,” he pretended to introduce himself in the mirror, his lip quivering. “I’m Josh.”

Then, with a breath, he cleared his throat.

“My, uh, m-my pronouns are...”

He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. His hands shook as he barely could exhale.

*I can’t*, he thought dejectedly as he sank down to the floor with his head in his hands.

Everything was suddenly too much and he was feeling even more overloaded and overstimulated than before. He couldn’t stay here. Not now.

He did the first thing he thought he could do and called Tyler's number without a second thought.

It only took a few seconds for him to pick up. Josh never really called unless they planned time to, so this was out of the ordinary for them.

"Josh?" Tyler asked, his voice sounding happier than him, but still hesitant.

When Josh couldn't respond, Tyler asked again. "Josh, are you there?"

Again, Josh couldn't will any sound from his throat.

"Josh, please, are you alright?"

Finally, Josh managed to speak. "N-no."

"Are you okay? What happened?"

Josh instantly felt guilty about the panic rising in Tyler's voice. "I'm alright," he replied weakly. "I'm...I'm just not having a very good time at Debby's party."

He could practically picture Tyler's features softening at the fact that Josh wasn't in any danger. "Do you want me to pick you up? You can stay at my place tonight."

"Tyler, you don't have to do that."

"Josh," he said a bit more adamantly. "Of course I'm doing that. You're my best friend."

Josh felt like crying at that, and not in a sad way, but in more of a way to express how thankful he was.

He didn't even realize until he started to cry. He tried to hold back as he listened to Tyler's breathing over the line. "Thank you, Tyler."

"Of course. I'll be there in ten."

They said their goodbyes before signing off, leaving Josh muffled sniffles to echo off the bathroom walls, sounding hollow and foreign in his own ears. Josh quickly texted Debby a bullshit excuse about leaving, saying that "Tyler had a song that we really needed to work on and that I wasn't really feeling that up for the party anyways".

He didn't really leave any chance for her to say no, and he didn't even say goodbye when he slipped out the door to meet Tyler in his driveway.

Josh walked up to Tyler's truck door, the cool air of the night settling deep in his chest as he opened the car door.

"Hey," Tyler whispered in the darkness of the car, nothing but the house lights illuminating the side of his face.



Josh turned back to look at how beautiful he was and sighed. “Hey,” he said, his voice obviously signaling how broken he felt.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Tyler said after a while, resting his hand comfortably on Josh’s thigh. Tyler’s hand was cold. They always were until Josh warmed them up.

Not having any time or strength to debate it, Josh slowly wrapped each of his fingers in Tyler’s as Tyler started to drive away from the house. He needed Tyler’s love more than ever now. Perhaps it was all he needed.

When they got back to Tyler’s house, it was late. Tyler said Jenna was asleep with Rosie, and Josh felt sort of guilty because Tyler must have been sleeping too. He told him this through gritted teeth.

“Nah,” Tyler whispered softly. “I was still awake. You know, working on music and stuff.”

“Ahh,” Josh said, his voice low, earning a light laugh from Tyler. “I should’ve known.”

Tyler smiled at him as he grabbed a few pillows and blankets from his linen closet near the laundry room before holding Josh’s hand again as they went down to the studio. It wasn’t their first time doing this, sleeping down there together, but somehow, this time felt like it triumphed greatly over any previous time. The care he felt from Tyler was somehow stronger.

He sat down with him as Josh instantly curled into Tyler’s arms, feeling himself come undone with just the touch. Tyler was wearing another sweatshirt, but this time it was a softer pastel color with his plaid pajama pants. His appearance reminded Josh of when they used to share hotel beds and the mattress in the back of the van, back when they were still just a small local band. They’d cling to each other like they were the only two people in the world.

That’s what Josh was doing now. He felt like everything and nothing had changed.

He burrowed deeper into Tyler’s arms as they wrapped comfortably around him, before he froze slightly as Tyler pressed a soft kiss onto Josh’s forehead.

Tyler must have realized it too, because he was pulling back slightly as Josh sat up to face him.

“Sorry, I didn’t know if you wanted--” Tyler whispered.

“Do you feel it too?” Josh asked him.

He saw the soft glow of Tyler’s pink hair, his features in his face that defined themselves more over the years. He saw everything that had shifted over time. But those eyes, those soft brown eyes...they would always lead him home.

Tyler didn’t even need to clarify to know what Josh was talking about. He could see the youthful innocence, the way Josh smiled, the way he was sometimes still cautious and reserved just like the kid he had started this whole thing with. It was like he was looking back

on a snapshot of him, just for a moment, like he was looking at the first version of the boy he fell in love with and now saw the present version, the one that he loved even more.

“Yes,” Tyler breathed, and that was all he could say.

They both met each other halfway as they kissed, pressing soft lips and softer hands all over each other, curling and embracing each other as they savored the feeling they haven’t relished in in so long. Tyler’s hands gently tugged in Josh’s hair. Josh cupped Tyler’s face gently before they both pulled back.

Maybe it was a heat of the moment thing. Maybe it was because Josh was hurting and Tyler didn’t know why. Or maybe this had been building the whole time. Maybe they missed the nostalgia of what their relationship once was, when it was nothing but the two of them, kissing each other senseless before shows, their home nothing but the other's arms in that shitty van during that shitty, perfect time in their lives.

And maybe, this was just a way for Tyler to show that he was listening, and would always be there for Josh. Maybe this was a way for him to say it without words.

--

Their next big thing was a softball game for charity hosted by a local radio station. Tyler would be there, along with Jenna and Debby and some more local “stars”. Josh never really thought the term applied to him, and forgot that on some level he was more famous than other people.

Recently, he had bought a motorcycle after Tyler had convinced him to buy one since it’s something Josh always wanted. Plus, he was feeling pretty down lately, especially since neither him nor Tyler brought up what happened at his house after the party. He figured he could use a consolation prize.

“Let’s play some softball!” he exclaimed happily to the camera Mark was holding as he pulled up to the game, slowing his motorcycle to a stop and taking off his helmet.

In addition to the black gloves and vest, Josh was also wearing some tight athletic leggings that made him feel extremely happy when he tried them on. He was a bit self-conscious about wearing them on the field while he was playing, so he changed into some other pants in the locker room. Still, it brought him strange comfort to wear different clothes like that.

The game went fine, with Josh making an entrance onto the field by cartwheeling, the number 11 on his purple jersey bringing him a sense of nostalgia. He picked it for the year he joined the band with Tyler and thought back to all those early memories.

He wanted to talk to him about it. He really did. He also wanted to tell Tyler how confused he felt in his own body, but he couldn’t think about any of that. Not now.

He occasionally looked over to the poster on the side of the stadium, one of a heart and one of a rainbow. Josh smiled at both of them as he continued on, watching Tyler dance onto the field, sign autographs, break his uke, and bring his Grammy onto the field with him. He was

ridiculously adorable when he got competitive. He knew Debby had noticed him staring, but it was hard to hide at this point.

Hours passed until the game finally came to an end, with Tyler's team winning, so naturally Josh was looking forward to seeing Tyler in a good mood. He was right, because as they all went back to the locker rooms to retrieve their things, he felt Tyler's soft hands grip Josh's shoulder.

"Hey man," he said softly, and it wasn't filled with smugness or pride. It was filled with quiet desperation, with love and adoration. "You did great out there."

"You did too. Team Tyler should be proud," Josh chuckled softly, letting it echo in his chest.

Tyler laughed at it too before leaning into Josh and whispering closely tonight.

"I...I was thinking that maybe...we could go home together. Tonight."

The way he breathed the words so hesitantly but so sure of what he wanted sent a fire blossoming deep in his chest. Josh looked over to the other helmet that he brought with him and started making connections.

He grabbed the helmet out of his bag and handed it to Tyler, the exchange sending sparks as they brushed fingers.

"That sounds perfect," Josh whispered back darkly to him, and he smiled when he saw the flush of Tyler's cheeks deepen.

Josh changed back into his gear that he rode into the game while Tyler stayed in his jersey. They both gave each other a look, heated and charged with unknown implications before they went outside in the parking lot. They made a grand exit as Tyler clutched onto Josh's back, giving Josh chills as they sped out of the parking lot.

"You better lean into me more," Josh called to him, a wicked grin overtaking his features.

"You're just giving me another excuse to hold you," Tyler told him back, but nevertheless, he wrapped his arms further around Josh's midsection, cradling him and pressing into his back.

Josh tried not to lose his breath. "That's it, babe," he said sweetly, and he didn't even need to look back to know Tyler's entire face was turning red.

As he made his way onto the interstate, he sped up, the wind whipping across his skin as he felt Tyler's grip tighten around him protectively. Josh had to bite his lip to stop himself from grinning like an idiot, but it wasn't working very well.

Now, he just remembered he set up his speaker to his phone beforehand, so he switched it onto one of their many playlists. The soft orange lights blazed past them as Josh was reminded of all the times he stared out at them in the window of the van with Tyler wrapped around him, just as he was now.

Tyler and him sang loudly as they sped on the open road with barely any other cars in front of them. With the stars painted above him, the lights surrounding him, and his best friend holding him, Josh felt like whatever was happening inside him would work out eventually.

Moments came after that, where Tyler and Josh stumbled into Tyler's house. Where they went down to the studio and surrendered to each other's hands and lips, nothing but the sight of Tyler's messy blond hair and body slick with sweat and smeared paint on his cheeks to bring Josh home. Moments where they couldn't get enough of each other, where they didn't speak on what was happening but where Josh didn't care because Tyler was a needed necessity. Tyler pulled him away from his own head, out of his own body, until he left him feeling cleansed and new.

For all those single moments, Josh didn't have to say anything. He felt alright.

--

They hadn't spoken about what happened after the game after that, but Josh knew that those terms came with whatever was happening between them. Maybe all the repressed feelings they had for each other over the years just needed to leave their system. Maybe they'd do things this way for a few times before they left it alone.

Or maybe, hopefully, Tyler would want Josh as much as he wanted him. Maybe he would stay in love with him after all these years.

Maybe, he would finally help him realize why he felt so miserable day after day, like he had a silent illness he couldn't figure out the cure for.

He left it alone for a while.

--

After hours of planning over the span of weeks, their next tour had come to fruition. Tyler's hair was fading out to an even lighter blond at the tips, Josh was wearing his newer outfits on stage, and both of them were feeling a newfound validation in how they expressed themselves based on their fans' reactions.

Of course, Josh hadn't made any progress about telling Tyler what was really going on with him. He just couldn't get himself to think about it without practically having an anxiety attack.

Other people went through this, but it was different. Other people got to feel this way. He didn't. He was *Josh Dun*, drummer of Twenty One Pilots. People would think he was doing it for attention.

And yet, wouldn't they accept him? Most of them joke about Tyler and Josh being together anyways, and neither of them mind since those fans are partially right.

Why wouldn't Josh using different pronouns be any different?

Tour kept him busy so he wouldn't have to think about it. There were quiet moments, sure. Times alone in the houses he rented with Tyler, getting ready before shows while he fastened his custom necklace or put on his outfit for whichever type of show he'd be playing. There definitely was more time to himself on this tour, considering he stayed in one place for a week. If there was down time, he'd try to still stay in-shape, walk his dog, even hang out with Tyler if Debby wasn't too demanding.

In a way, it was somehow more draining than going to a new city everyday. If they had done it that way, he'd have no time to sit down and let the tiredness catch up to him. Now, he was mentally and physically exhausted by so many different factors that he was surprised at how much he didn't let on.

He was always supposed to be the happy one. He was always smiling, making funny tweets for the fans, cheering up Tyler when he was down.

He also was the type to not let the cause of whatever was hurting him show until he was at his breaking point. It wasn't the healthiest or the best approach to dealing with his feelings, but he didn't know what else to do about it. When he was a kid, he was angry. He slowly grew out of that and slipped into anxiety. Even though he's conquered the worst of it, sometimes it came back in bouts, and he was unfortunately still trying to get rid of it now.

Still, he put on a smile. He told funny stories at smaller shows, tried to act confident at the bigger ones. He'd hold Tyler close, reassure him of all the things he was doing right in the times he had alone with him. He watched Tyler be happy with Jenna and Rosie, watched himself be content with Debby, even what he thought could be considered happiness on their best days.

But he still couldn't look at himself in the mirror without thinking of the party. When Tyler caught him staring at himself, Josh laughed it off.

He felt fake and he didn't know what to do.

--

The tour was finally coming to a close, at least until their next shows. Tyler and Josh had just played their last show in Atlanta, right at the State Farm Arena. Tyler's mic had gone out by the end of it, and just as Josh tapped the mic to realize that it was working as he crouched down on the ground with eager eyes, Tyler was already committed. He yelled to the silenced crowd what he always said: "We're twenty one pilots, and so are you." Josh had never felt like it was more true.

He turned to walk off-stage with him but decided to go off the other exit and meet him on the other side. When he found Tyler in the hallway, streaked with sweat with his skeleton hoodie sticking to him, he grinned wider than Josh had ever seen. He started walking into Josh's green room, not even heading for his own or for their meeting after every show to discuss what to improve. Whatever Tyler had planned was obviously more important.

He tugged on Josh's hand, a silent question, and Josh followed him wordlessly into the room. Tyler closed the door.

As soon as they were both inside, Tyler lept into Josh's arms. Josh was a little surprised, but he still spun Tyler around as they both started to laugh.

"We did it, man!" Tyler exclaimed as he clung to Josh's own sweaty skeleton hoodie.

Josh smiled. "We did it," he echoed. He was so close he could see all the individual streaks of blond still left in Tyler's hair and the individual spots that were more worn on his hoodie than others.

Josh put him down, letting Tyler bury his head in Josh's shoulder as they clung to each other. Ever since that night, everything Tyler did reminded Josh of the old days, and this was no different. The amount of times they hugged each other backstage after a really good show, or at the end of a tour, was something that he looked back fondly on.

As he slowly unwrapped his arms from Tyler, Josh made his way over to the small table set up in the corner of the room. He connected his phone to his Bluetooth speaker and pulled up his post-show playlist that he made for nights like these.

Tyler instantly smiled, but it was softer, more comforting and pure. "It's been a while," he said sweetly.

Josh found a small lighter in a drawer and lit his candle, the one he knew Tyler liked because he bought it for himself. One night during their Tour de Columbus, Tyler admitted that it reminded him of Josh and would light it whenever he missed him. So, he ended up lighting it a lot at home.

Josh was better than he was back then, less reserved and distanced. There was still so much he didn't understand about himself though, and for a moment, Josh thought it had always been there, even back then, even in the early days. Even before Tyler.

Josh hummed as he turned off the lights. They laid down next to each other on the floor, both silently agreeing from experience that they'd be too sweaty to share the leather couch. Tyler tucked his arms behind his head and breathed with no sound, while Josh curled his knees in closer to Tyler and breathed a heavy sigh.

The playlist was on shuffle, and Josh heard *Death Cab for Cutie* playing through the speaker.

He felt like all the chaos around him had ceased just to grant him and Tyler this moment of solemnity.

He leaned in closer to Tyler, feeling his warm skin, seeing the candlelight bounce and flicker off his face. So much had changed, but nothing had changed at all.

He sometimes wished things could be the way they used to be, but have their relationship have the trust and love that it does now. He wished that Tyler wasn't in love with someone else, and he wished that he himself didn't convince himself to love someone back.

He wanted to turn back time, wanted to grab the hour and minute hands through the glass and relentlessly turn them back until he had gone far enough, back to that time of him and Tyler

and no one else.

It was a foolish daydream that helped heal his wounds through the day, and then open them back up during the night. He was constantly, endlessly bleeding in a body that was not his own.

Similar words spilled from Tyler's tongue. Everything was too much.

"You know, I'm happy that we're here now," he whispered, turning his head so that he was practically nose-to-nose with Josh. He was still so fragile, so gentle. "But sometimes I wish things were like the way they used to be."

Josh, knowing exactly what he meant, still managed to freeze up anyway. "What do you mean?"

Tyler reached for his hand. His touch felt like blue fire. "It could mean a lot of things," he said carefully, because he was never one to outright explain what he meant. "What does it mean to you?"

Josh was afraid of the answer. He said nothing.

That was as much of an answer to Tyler as a thousand words.

"What's going on, Josh?" he asked. Josh didn't know how many times he'd have to hear that question before he'd finally give an answer.

Apparently, this was the last time.

"I feel like a stranger in my own skin," Josh managed to breathe out. He squeezed his eyes closed while he did it because that's what Tyler told him to do.

*You can close your eyes if you want. Sometimes, things are less scary.*

Tyler looked like he was expecting something along those lines, and yet, he still looked like he didn't know what to say.

"I just...I feel hollowed out. Like I've been living like a shell of what I'm supposed to be," he said weakly, the tears pricking his eyes. "I know it doesn't make sense, but I can't make sense of it either. I've been trying to, and I just can't."

His voice broke, and a tear dripped down his face. Tyler held him close, let him cry, shielded him from the world. He always did. He always will.

He stroked Josh's hair as he whispered to him gently. "Sometimes the biggest things in life don't have to make sense. There are things that we will never understand. They could be about us. They could be about others. But the point is that we don't have to have all the answers. We never will. And that's okay, Josh. That's really okay."

Josh choked back a sob. "But what if I get the answer to one thing and it still isn't enough?"

Tyler knew there was something more. He didn't say anything about it.

"Well then we'll look for another one. Between the two of us, I'm pretty sure we can figure most of life out."

At that, Josh gave a weak smile. Tyler held his hand tighter.

"We're gonna figure this thing out together. Just you and me, alright?"

Josh nodded as he closed his eyes.

"Yeah. Just you and me."

Tyler hummed. "Good."

--

The next few weeks were filled with silence. It was more of a metaphorical silence for Josh, since anyone who knew him would think he was fine. He still drummed, still worked out, still did everything he was supposed to. He was just better at hiding his pain.

His eyes were dry from crying. He was tired from the tour, sometimes oversleeping, sometimes not sleeping enough. But most of all, he was missing Tyler, missing the way that he would always make him feel like things were okay.

Everything was unstable, and Josh was getting used to the discomfort he was feeling, especially recently. He felt like he was stuck in a panic attack he couldn't calm down from. The only things to make him feel better were those clothes, were the necklaces, were the shoes and Tyler looking at him like he was beautiful.

He told himself everything was fine.

That was, until he logged onto Twitter one day. Tour had been over for about a week or two when he saw it. Closing the app, he opened Instagram to make sure that the photo wasn't photoshopped.

He clicked Tyler's profile and felt his heart stutter.

Along with changing his profile on Twitter, he also changed his Instagram profile. But that wasn't what he was focusing on.

He stared for a long time as he sat in his studio chair. There it was in his bio.

Tyler had added his pronouns. *He/him* . They were staring at him right in the face.

And something about the simplicity, the familiarity, the closeness that he associated with Tyler made the act all the more meaningful. Because if he put them in his bio, it meant that he thought they were important enough, that the whole concept was important enough to show his outward support for.



It was then that Josh realized how those pronouns didn't apply to him.

He took a deep breath as he dug his fingernails into his palms.

"Hi," he practiced again. "My name is Josh."

He hesitated again, but this time, took a leap of faith. "My pronouns are..."

Then he trailed off again, because he still wasn't sure.

"Jesus Christ, Josh, why is this so hard?" he muttered to himself.

He shouldn't have felt even more lost, but he did.

--

He didn't bring it up to Tyler, but Tyler knew something was going on with him. He could tell in the way he was extra reserved with him during rehearsals, during shows, and afterwards when Josh parted ways with him.

It's not like he didn't want to see him. He just knew that they had so much to talk about, and Josh didn't even know where to begin.

All of that changed at their last two shows of the year, the Florida festivals.

At the first one, Josh was missing Tyler so much that it practically hurt. So what if he stared at him more than he should've?

What Josh wasn't expecting was Tyler during their interview saying that they should hang out more, that they "haven't slept together in a while" (Josh nearly gawked) and that they should "go back to their roots" and do it again.

Josh very well knew it would seem like a joke to few, but he knew that Tyler very well was using that pretense to get away with admitting things he would have extreme trouble with saying in a serious context.

Josh hadn't stopped thinking about the comment and the connecting memories all day. Even throughout the show it was nothing but Tyler. It didn't help that he looked especially good with the last of the blond in his hair and the sparkles on his jacket for *Shy Away*.

Tyler gave him a knowing smile as they walked off-stage, if not simply for the fact that he had noticed Josh staring at him all throughout the show.

Instead of leaving in separate cars, they left together. Tyler refused to leave Josh's side as his hand rested on his thigh.

Just to add more fire to the flames, Josh took a selfie of them together, and Josh was beaming because Tyler was with him, and Tyler was his everything, and his bones ached because of how much he missed being around him all the time.

His bones ached in other ways too, but he didn't want to burden Tyler with that knowledge. He didn't know how to bring up the conversation anyway. He felt weak.

He linked his fingers with Tyler's and held on tight as the fire in the pit of his stomach swallowed his entire body. Tyler hadn't looked at him like that with this much passion in years.

Tyler's words from the interview echoed in his mind. *You never know what happens afterwards.*

They found their way back to Josh's hotel room, barely stumbling in before collapsing onto the bed with each other. Josh was breathing him in, thinking of the way Tyler couldn't take his eyes off him during their interview, the way in which he was fiddling with his wedding ring more than usual, the way he blushed and joked and almost *wanted* people to pick up on the fact that something was going on between them.

It fueled a fire in Josh's lungs that he didn't know was there before. It spread to his stomach, his legs, everywhere it could reach. And all of it was for Tyler.

Tyler delicately took Josh's shirt off, Josh doing the same for him as they kissed. Tyler ran his fingers through Josh's curls, tugging softly like he always does. Little whimpers and sounds escaped Josh's lips as Tyler gently rocked into Josh's hips.

"God, you're so beautiful," Tyler managed to say between breaths.

Josh's heart stuttered at that, and he stopped a little as he pulled away.

Tyler instantly looked concerned, his pupils still dilated. "Josh? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he breathed. "It's just...I liked that. When you called me beautiful. It made me really happy."

Tyler blushed with him. "Do you want me to do it again?"

The way Tyler asked wasn't even a question. Josh's knees went weak as he nodded rapidly.

Tyler leaned closer to him, nose to nose. "You're so beautiful, Josh."

Josh connected his lips with Tyler's as he kept going with the praise. "So pretty, baby."

Josh felt his heart melting.

"My pretty baby boy," Tyler echoed, his touches even softer and more delicate.

Josh felt like crying at how perfect he felt just then as him and Tyler turned to nothing but skeletons in their sheets.

--

When they both were finished, Josh laid next to Tyler, curling into his side as he felt every emotion he was repressing come undone, like the chains around his heart finally rusted and broke free. It was becoming harder to compose himself, thinking about how affirmed Tyler made him feel, like he didn't have to be masculine to be beautiful in his eyes.

His heart wrenched. He was his beautiful boy.

He just didn't want to lose whatever this was if he opened up.

Josh didn't realize the whole thing was overwhelming him this much until a few silent tears rolled down his face.

Tyler instantly noticed and turned to face him on the bed.

"Joshie? What's wrong, baby?"

Josh, once again, backtracked to at least define something he knew was real. He searched frantically for the right thing to say but came up short. "Where...what are we?"

Tyler looked like he wasn't entirely sure himself. "I...what do you want us to be?"

"I...I don't know," Josh lied. "You can't just put this on me."

"But I want whatever you want," Tyler countered.

"I just want one solid thing in my life to make sense," Josh whispered to himself, but Tyler must've heard him.

"What...what's that supposed to mean?"

Tyler looked hurt, and Josh instantly started to panic. His throat started to close in and his eyes were watering more as Tyler's expression changed to concern. He looked like he understood that this wasn't about him.

"Josh, I know you don't want to talk, but I'm here. I'm always here," Tyler whispered as he cradled him in his arms. "Please. Just talk to me. I love you."

Josh started to cry at that more, pressing his head into Tyler's shoulder.

Everything weighed on him until it was too much. At that moment, with him sobbing into his best friend's arms, he was done with burying everything down.

Tyler loved him. He loved him. He wouldn't ever leave him or turn him away.

Josh took a shaky inhale.

"I just...I need you to do something for me," Josh started to say before picking up speed. "And if it's weird, we can never talk about it again, I promise. I just need this--"

“I’ll do whatever you want,” Tyler said instantly, and Josh pulled back to get lost in his eyes as they looked as calm as an ocean before a storm.

Tyler moved his hand to hold onto Josh’s. Josh squeezed it tight.

“But before that...I just...” Josh was stalling and struggling for the right way to finally go about this. He figured things could be worse. He was in Tyler’s arms, safe from everything else. He was home.

“I just wanted to thank you,” he finally managed to get out.

Tyler looked a little surprised, but he still managed to stay still. “For what?” he whispered.

Josh gulped.

“For...for putting your pronouns in your bio,” Josh said shakily. “It just...it really meant a lot to all the fans. And--and to me.”

Tyler’s eyes were softening, and he looked like he wasn’t the least bit surprised.

“I was hoping you’d appreciate it,” Tyler reassured him as he brushed his other hand on Josh’s cheek. “I did it for you.”

Josh froze up.

Wait.

Tyler did it for him? But how did he...what did he know?

He wanted to ask what Tyler meant by it, what he knew or realized before Josh did, but nothing of the sorts came out. Because, deep down, there was a part of him that told him Tyler already knew. There was a part of him that said Tyler was helping him this whole time and Josh didn’t even realize. The acceptance, care, love...all of it was to prove to him how much Tyler really cared. All the scary feelings were pushed aside as Tyler finally expressed how he felt for him in order for Josh to do the same with him.

It all made sense.

Josh couldn’t help but feel his lips quiver into a weak smile.

It finally felt simple enough to ask.

“Could you...could you maybe use different pronouns for me?”

Tyler beamed, his smile lighting up the room as he linked his finger’s with Josh’s even more. “Of course, Josh. What ones should I use?”

He said it so instantly and willingly that Josh thought he’d be in love with him forever. He knew that before Tyler said it, but still. This was just another confirmation.

Josh stumbled a bit, but Tyler's touch was enough to keep him steady. "I'm not entirely sure," he admitted, and it felt good to finally get it off his chest. "I just know I'm fine with 'he' most of the time."

Tyler traced circles on his knuckles, the touch bringing his anxiety down. "Why don't I just try something and see if you like it?"

Josh nodded at that, unable to say anything else.

Tyler cleared his throat a little. "This is Josh. He's my best friend in the whole world." Then, he paused, and the gleam in Josh's eyes was enough confirmation to keep going. "They're so incredibly talented, and loyal, and the kindest person I know."

Josh's heart stopped.

"He's also really funny, and they always know what to do to cheer me up." Tyler paused as he started tearing up, too. "I'm in love with them."

Josh let out a little happy sob as finally, for the first time in probably his whole life, things finally made sense.

Unable to control his happiness, Josh launched himself onto Tyler, kissing him passionately as Tyler exhaled a laugh through his nose. He reached up to cradle Josh's face before they pulled apart.

Josh pulled back to see the shared happiness on Tyler's face. "I'm in love with you too."

They both giggled as they kissed again. Tyler curled his fingers in Josh's hair again. "You like those, huh?"

Josh nodded sweetly. "Yeah. Thank you, Tyler. I've been trying to figure it out for so long."

"Just know you never have to figure it out on your own." Tyler held him close. "I'm always here to accept you, no matter what."

Josh pressed another slow kiss into Tyler's lips as they felt their nerves go down and their heart swell with love. Then, both of them stared at each other for awhile, admiring the other, lying in bed with each other like this for the first time in years. Josh had missed the feeling with his entire heart.

Tyler looked like he did too, because he was gently stroking Josh's hair and looking at them with such genuine adoration that it reminded him of all the times they did this way back when. Everything felt like it had come full circle.

"So..." Tyler started, his voice soft-spoken and soothing. "About what we were talking about earlier."

Josh realized he must've been talking about where Tyler and Josh were in their relationship. Right. This was the other important thing that Josh could focus on now that Tyler had helped

him.

“Yeah,” Josh breathed, unsure of the best way to approach this. “Look, I don’t want to get in the way of what you have. You’ve got such a great family, and in no way do I wanna mess that up.”

Saying the words stung their throat, but Josh pushed through it.

“But still,” Josh whispered, knowing that he was pushing his luck, “I’m in love with you. You’re in love with me. I’m pretty sure neither of us have gotten over the other.”

“Nope,” Tyler chuckled lightheartedly. Josh joined in on the sound.

Everything went quiet after that as they both felt like they were tilting on the axis of a huge decision.

Tyler started to speak first. “Josh, all I know is that I love you more than anyone in this world. And our love...” he trailed off, almost as if he was holding back tears. “Our love isn’t ever going away. I love Jenna, sure, but I *love* you.”

“It’s different with her.” Josh recognized the face Tyler was making as he continued, like he was trying to come up with an applicable metaphor. “She’s like a lake,” he decided. “She’s safe and contained. You don’t know what’s beyond it, but when you made the decision to stay, you didn’t know that there was anything else out there that was better.” He paused to see if what he was meaning was coming across to Josh. Josh gave a small smile and let Tyler go on.

“But you...Josh, you’re an entire ocean. You’re what you find beyond the lake. It’s vast and scary and unknown, but once you sink down and discover what’s hidden in every level, you find that you never wanna go stay in the lake forever. You just wanna visit. It’s not your true home.”

Josh felt his hands shaking and slowly exhaled. “Jesus, Ty, you’re gonna make me cry again.”

“That was the goal,” he teased as he nuzzled Josh’s shoulder.

Things faded back to seriousness as Josh came to terms with all of this. Maybe they didn’t need a label for what they were. They were best friends, of course, but they were so much more than that. They were bandmates, they were partners, but more importantly, they were inseparable. They felt things for each other that couldn’t be put in a box.

And maybe, that was okay for both of them.

“I don’t think we have to label this,” Josh admitted as they ran their hand down Tyler’s side. “I know we could but...”

“We’re just so much more than that?” Tyler supplied.

Josh beamed. “Yeah. Yeah, we are.”

Josh sighed as they both cuddled for a while, their legs intertwining with each other, Tyler's hands wrapped around Josh as they listened to each other's silence. Minutes passed, maybe longer. Tyler kissed him again until they were both left breathless.

"I do know one thing though," he breathed.

"What?" Josh asked, his eyes expressive.

Meeting his eyes, Tyler looked so at peace. "You're my soulmate, Josh."

Josh couldn't look away from him. "And you're mine."

They fell asleep in each other's arms, feeling accomplished, like the weights on both of their shoulders had finally disappeared.

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They played one more show after that where both Tyler and Josh shone brighter on stage than either one of them had felt before. It was the last show of the year, and they had left it on a higher note than either of them could have ever imagined.

When they both got off-stage, Tyler pulled Josh aside, his hands softly gripping his arms as he kissed him senseless. Josh gripped Tyler's hair and leaned into him. Luckily, no one saw it happen, but they were pretty bad at hiding their cheesy grins on their faces.

The next day, they both flew home together on the same plane, sitting side by side, with Josh at the window seat and Tyler in the aisle. For the first time in his life, Josh truly felt calm.

He knew he'd put his pronouns in his bio just like Tyler eventually, but Tyler reminded him this morning when they woke up together that he should only do it when he felt ready. Josh kissed him again, smiled and laughed and reassured him that it would happen soon. Maybe not today, but soon. He still had to get used to the feeling.

Two hours passed and the plane landed, and they all drove home in Tyler's truck. Josh was just about to ask Tyler to drop him at his house when Tyler turned into his own driveway.

"What are we doing here?" Josh asked, but they truly weren't complaining since he loved spending time at Tyler's house anyways.

Tyler gave him a wicked grin as he dug through his carry-on bag and pulled out a bottle of sparkly white nail polish.

Josh couldn't contain his grin.

"I bought it while we were waiting to board. Saw it in one of the shops near the food court," Tyler smiled gently. "You wanna go inside?"

Josh hadn't felt this happy in a long time. He leaned over the center console and kissed Tyler, warm and slow. Tyler grinned through the contact.

When Josh pulled away, Tyler looked about as in love as Josh had ever seen him. “You’re the best,” Josh laughed. “Meet you inside!”

Josh raced out of the car, leaving his larger duffel bag in the truck and slinging his black carry-on backpack over his shoulder. Tyler followed him inside as they both greeted Jenna and Rosie, hugging them and catching them up on what happened.

And when Tyler and Josh finally slipped away, Jenna gave them a loving smile. Both of them headed down to the studio, Josh practically jumping on the couch.

“You better not make me spill any of this on my very expensive couch,” Tyler said, faking annoyance as he sat down next to Josh.

“Dude, I think we’ve done much worse on this couch compared to nail poli-”

He was cut off with Tyler landing on top of him, pinning him down and kissing him as Josh giggled between each one.

“You’re the worst,” he managed to yell as Tyler straddled him.

Josh sat up and leaned into a longer kiss.

“So I’ve heard,” Tyler smirked as he opened up the nail polish bottle. “C’m on Dun. Gimme your hand.”

“What? You wanna hold it already?” Josh laughed again as Tyler swatted him with a brown and orange pillow.

“No,” he groaned, but he was smiling. He was so bad at pretending to be mad. “It’s time for me to finally paint your nails.”

“After all this time?” Josh asked, but their eyes were softer. It felt like a lifetime since Tyler had first made that promise.

So much had changed for the both of them. Josh wouldn’t want it any other way.

“Yep,” Tyler said. “You’re gonna look even more beautiful.”

Josh’s heart leapt again.

*Yeah , they thought to themselves. I’m so, so beautiful .*



## End Notes

if you're reading this, i'm really proud of you. i've had my share of questioning with my identity over the years, and though i may not have gone through exactly what josh did in this fic, i hope i did it justice, especially for my friends who can relate.

everyone's journey is different, but no matter what, you're always valid and you are important. don't ever forget that.

also, i didn't plan on releasing this on josh's bday, but i guess it just sort of worked out like that. happy bday josh we love you sm :)

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