

WHAT WILL I SAY TO YOU, JASON? I KNOW NOT YET THE PUNCHLINE

It happened again.

Jason has definitely noticed it too, but he shouts his lines into the mic, center stage: “Thank you! We love you Denver!! Keep it real. You’ve been amazing tonight. We’ll be BACK.”

It happened a-fucking-gain.

I stand at the far edge of stage right, my guitar’s machine heads drooping down to the ground, as I smoke a cigarette and look forward to getting to go away from this, go backstage, get through talking Jason down, and then getting to arrive back at my hotel bed with Fusa to crash for the night.

The audience gives Jason and the band a standing ovation. They scream that they love him. They cup their hands around their mouths and shout personal, earnest, heartfelt quips of love at him. They clap, they woo.

Someone at the edge of the audience, nearby my secluded hangout at stage right, isn’t standing, he’s still in his seat, and he isn’t applauding Jason or the band. He’s about 25 years old and he’s dressed in clothing brands that won’t exist for another 40 years. And he’s looking right at me. Been looking at me the entire show when I’m out on stage, even when I’m just doing pretty boring backing guitar.

I give him a cub scout salute: two fingers on the left hand to the temple.

He grips his hands together in front of his chest, and looks intensely at me, trying to convey just how much my presence here has meant to him.

I put a fist to my mouth, kiss it, and then open my hand and blow the kiss off towards him.

He nods, and puts his hands in front of his chest again.

This has been happening ever since me and the boys started opening for Jason's band. Me and the boys are The Okay Reasons. That's what we started calling ourselves a month ago, some heckler was wanting to know who we were, and Stevie came up with that on the fly, apparently, and we've been rolling with it. Jason's band is called Righteousness, they're kinda metal in terms of genre, but have a strong Christian current to what they do, and they have been exploding lately. They're all over TV, every publication is snapping at the chance to do interviews with any of them, frankly all of them could afford houses and do okay for the rest of their lives if they threw in the towel right now. And yet, the time travelers in the audience always show up for the opening from The Okay Reasons, and then don't stick around for Righteousness. The mainstream audience doesn't give a damn about us as the opening act. They're bored, they go to get merch, beers, they talk among themselves loudly over our playing. The time travelers are enraptured by us though. The one time traveler still here in the audience, seated nearest me, is the only time traveler who stuck around for the entire show, and he went off to use the men's room during the break between when our opening act ends, and when I come back on stage as a minor addition to Righteousness's backing lineup.

The audience has started flooding the exit aisles. For some of them this has been the best night they've ever had, but, they do want to beat traffic now.

The time traveler gives me a cub scout salute while making intense eye contact, and then he disappears.

I glance over at Jason, who is still center stage. He was watching, and saw.

I point a thumb backstage and nod my head back that way.

He leaves the mic, and we both leave the stage.

He pats himself down for rogue lapel mics, and then he says to me, "It happened again."

"I know, man."

"Lucas," he says to me, and leans in conspiratorially. He asks: "What is the deal."

"Dude," I say to him. I drop the cigarette out of my mouth. When I go to stomp it out, my foot bumps the foot of a stage hand who has gone to stomp it out herself. In the span of two seconds, Jason and I are disarmed of our guitars by people in black clothes and things-to-do expressions. I silently move past the fact that that treatment is very abnormal to me, and I say to Jason, "You're the hero here. You're the rock star they all came to see."

"I'm the one people RIGHT NOW are coming to see. It happened AGAIN, man. The time travelers are only here for The Okay Reasons."

I throw up my hands. "I don't know any more than you."

He can't get over it. He says to me, "You end up being a way bigger deal."

I tell him truthfully, "Doesn't feel that way right now. Me and the boys made enough opening tonight that we're gonna have food until the next act, and..." I glance around, see some of my bandmates are in earshot, and then I lean in with Jason and say more quietly, "We're gonna afford food until the next act, and Stevie and Ten have been debating each other if fast food is worth it or if buying tackle and fishing in the local rivers and lakes is how they're gonna get ahead."

Jason's eyebrows scrunch, and he says, genuinely taken aback, "Are you all that tight on money?"

I somehow didn't even clock that he had no fucking idea. I say to him, "Yes."

"I'm gonna get with Amanda about that and get you all hooked up better, that's not right. If you haven't heard anything by... tomorrow evening, remind me."

"I will do that," I tell him.

He gets back to it. "EVERYONE from the future is here for you. Show after show. There has not been ONE time traveler to see us. You're a BIG. DEAL."

I grab for a pack of cigarettes in my breast pocket, and remember that I left them out of my pocket to go on stage. Before I can even think of where I might have set the pack down, a lit cigarette is placed into my hand by one of the stage hands. I start to say thank you to them, but they nod before I'm done saying it and go off to attend to something else. I say to Jason, before I start on the cigarette, "Maybe we're both a big deal in the future, and you're just the one who's still alive to see in their present."

He takes a sharp inhale, and turns away. He hadn't thought of that. He doesn't like it.

I don't know if it's true. But it's the only explanation I've come up with that saves face for him.

I inhale on the cigarette, and blow the smoke out into the air.

He comes back in with me. He says, "You're kind of. No offense, you kind of mostly just do funny songs."

I nod, not agreeing with him, but acknowledging that I have heard what he's said.

"Like. Stuff about horses making you, y'know, aroused, stuff about your DOG being your husband."

"He is," I mention.

"I know, but like, that's joke stuff, when you put it in the song."

Cigarette in the corner of my mouth, I say, "Some people might take it that way."

To myself, I consider how people from the future, for some reason, might very strongly not be taking it that way.

He's not really listening to me that much. Working through his own thoughts, he says, "All of that gets the audience in a playful mood, it gets them laughing. That's why, like—and you're seriously still talented, that's why I always want you back out here—"

I nod my head rapidly a bit.

He goes on, "But it's like, the joke, comedy, not real stuff, that makes you good as an opening act."

I shrug.

He doesn't like that, and says, "No come on, what's up? Why are you so remembered in the future, and clearly I'm not?"

I shrug again. I hold out my cigarette to the side, and someone takes it. I'm a little giddy at that. I thought it might happen, and was pleasantly surprised it actually did happen. I rest a hand on Jason's shoulder, and I tell him, "I'm as surprised as you are that the future is more interested in The Okay Reasons. Maybe it's a fluke. A weird period in time where everyone already agrees you're the super star, but for some reason the opening act was in question for this year. I don't know. None of this was apparent to me until we started opening for you. But look. You got a standing ovation. Everyone out there loves you, okay?"

He contemplates for a moment, and then seems to reach some internal resolution. "Okay."

"You are killing it, indisputably, and I wanna see you be a historically famous artist."

He nods. "Okay."

Lem, one of the guys from his group, shouts over to him and asks him to come over.

Jason does go over to Lem, and I duck out, looking forward so much to snuggling up into my husband's hair, and wondering what the hell is happening as I fall asleep with him.