These Days
by Werepirechick

Summary

There’s a night, sometime after their father is buried and their enemies defeated, when their home is too quiet and unspoken tension is rising and coiling and choking at everyone-Donnie knows.

He knows he has to leave.

Notes

Inspired by both my utter salt for the current brother-brother dynamics in canon, and the song These Days by the Black Keys.

I have a lot of emotions over the B-team and their treatment, and I wanted to give them a fic that could fix that. I'll try to have a couple more chapters up before the next season, because at that point this will lapse in an AU, and not a wistful theory.
Sort of a continuation from the previous fic Mute, but can be read as a standalone. I connected the two though because of their similar content, and thought some folks might want to read the prior one.

See the end of the work for more notes.
There’s a night, sometime after their father is buried and their enemies defeated, when their home is too quiet and unspoken tension is rising and coiling and choking at everyone- Donnie knows.

He knows he has to leave.

It comes, after another night, a different night. One that’d had another realization, and another quiet, insidious feeling upheaval.

On that night, he wakes up, starts to head to his lab on automatic, even though there’s little reason to anymore- and Leo stops him. Leo asks Donnie, and their other siblings, to meet him in the dojo. Saying that it’s time they had a family meeting, broken as their family is.

There’s a tone in Leo’s voice that Donnie hasn’t encountered before. It’s new, and he doesn’t know why it unsettles him.

Donnie isn’t sure what he’s expecting, kneeling on the dojo floor, like he has for years and years, waiting for Leo to address them. Whatever he might have expected, it’s not what Leo has to say.

Leo kneels in front of Donnie, in front of all of them, instead of with them. Setting himself apart. Donnie watches him, confused by the change.

“Sensei- Splinter,” Leo says, correcting himself for some reason, and that’s when alarms start going off in Donnie’s head. “Splinter gave me a final message, the night he… died. A few hours before.”

Donnie sees Raph and Mikey beside him shift, sitting up straighter. None of them had known about that, and it’s been days since their father’s passing. Donnie wants to ask “Why didn’t he leave one with us too?”, but he can’t before Leo continues.

“He told me that he knew his time was short,” Leo says, hands on his knees and completely serious. “He knew that he was going to die, and he told me that I’d have to take his place. I was chosen to be our leader because he knew that it would be me, all along. Not for skill or for training- but because that’s who I was meant to be. A leader to all of us. He told me I was to take up the mantle as both a master and a father to our family, and I intend to.”

Donnie feels his stomach drop, and his eyes go wide.

“From now on,” Leo says, continuing despite the shocked noises Raph and Mikey are making. “I’ll be our Sensei, and I’ll expect your respect for that position. It was our father’s dying wish, and I’ll see that I carry it out.”

Donnie swallows thickly, and he can’t speak.

He shouldn’t feel that way. He shouldn’t feel dread at the idea that his eldest brother holds all the power in their home, but he can’t not feel it. And he doesn’t know why.

Donnie’s vision blurs, and he misses what happens next. He doesn’t come back until after, when Leo and Raph have gone to train, to “-test out whether or not you really can call yourself my Sensei.” as Raph puts it. Mikey slinks away, and Donnie almost misses his brother’s retreat; utterly silent, and the complete opposite of his usual self.
Donnie is left alone, unsure of why he’s feeling so upset, so *viscerally upset*, about everything.

He takes five deep breaths, and then hides.

Hides in his lab, doors locked shut and his stereo turned up high enough he could feasibly miss someone knocking.

He sits at a lab table, empty of any projects, and stares at his hands. He stares and stares and for once doesn’t know what to think.

His father had known he was going to die, somehow, and he hadn’t told anyone except Leo. Only Leo. No messages or goodbyes to any of the rest of them. Splinter hadn’t bothered to. Or worse, hadn’t thought to at all.

Donnie feels lost, and in a private second all to himself- he admits that he’s also scared.

He’s scared and he doesn’t know why.

He avoids Leo’s eyes, Raph’s eyes, even Mikey’s- when he emerges from his lab, much later in the night. One or all of his brothers tries to talk to him, but it all sounds staticky to Donnie. He replies vague niceties, and gets by without really knowing what’s going on.

He’s in shock; he knows that on the edge of his mind. He’s in shock and he thinks it’s for multiple reasons. Because of his father, dying, dead, because of his brother, newly empowered and smiling and for some reason that makes Donnie nervous as anything, because they suddenly don’t have any goals anymore, no Shredder no aliens no *anything*-

Donnie avoids the eyes of his family, and keeps to himself.

-/-

The night Donnie Knows comes soon after. After he’s spent days thinking and drifting and feeling unsure and nervous about everything. After Leo looks him in the eye, and Donnie can see it.

He sees that Leo fully expects to have control of their home. Of their family. Of Donnie.

Donnie thinks back to months ago, before space and before losing New York and before the first invasion. Before the coma. Before this Leo had become the *only* Leo.

It started then, and Donnie pretended not to see.

It’s here now, the look in Leo’s eyes. The piece that’s so obviously missing. The piece that Leo lost while he recovered from near death, and then never got back.

*It’s just trauma,* he’d told himself over and over, *it’s just something he has to work past. Things will be normal later. It’s my fault anyways, I’ll just give him space until he’s better, we can talk about it after...*

Things hadn’t gone back to normal, and how things were had become the *new* normal.

Donnie blames himself, and he’s scared.
Donnie sees this, thinks this, and feels this all at once- seeing the look in Leo’s eyes, as he tells Donnie it’s time for training. That it’s time for their first session together with him in charge.

Donnie can only mutely nod, and follow along.

He thinks- after the training session, after listening to Leo’s commands for hours and having to follow each one- he thinks to himself, *I can’t do this. I just can’t.*

It’s strangling, the atmosphere of his home. He can’t look his brothers- his *older* brothers- in the eyes, and not feel apprehension. He can’t listen to what they’re saying, and not feeling like their words are deafening him. Just the one training session leaves him hollow and tired.

He can’t live like this, and he hates himself for having that thought.

And besides- what other way is there? There’s only his family, there has only ever *been his family.* There’s nothing else for him, other than to keep building for his brothers, keep protecting them from whatever comes their way with intent to harm. Keep listening to his father.

But is there even that anymore? There’s none of that left.

No enemies. No wars. No Sensei.

Donnie feels lost at what to do, and he feels hateful of that fact.

Even more so, he hates the thought that follows *I can’t live like this,* because it whispers *what if I just leave?* And Donnie *cannot do that.*

He has a duty. A duty to his family and his clan. To his brothers. He owes them his care and his protection and his efforts. He can’t just *leave.*

Can he?

Donnie, looking in the eyes of his brother, his eldest brother, who is smiling and proud despite their father’s death, smiling despite the sheer *pointlessness* of everything they do- and he wonders if maybe, just maybe, he actually can.

--

*What if I just leave?*

The question haunts him for hours after, following Donnie as he moves listlessly through maintenance of their vehicles. His vehicles. The ones he built almost entirely by himself, but everyone uses. He’s not sure if they ever thanked him for that.

Donnie, wavering and hateful of that wavering, quietly asks himself where he would even *go* if he left. He can’t just pack up and drive away without a plan. He has nowhere to go that would be safe.

*What if I found somewhere?* Is his answer to that. And what if he did? What then?

Could he really do it?

Rambunctious voices coming down the tunnels interrupt his thinking, and Donnie has to scramble
out of the engine block for the Party Wagon to look at the sources.

Leo and Raph and Mikey— all of them sidle into Donnie’s- into their garage space. Leo grins at Donnie, and holds up a hand, swinging the spare set of keys they have for the Shellraiser. “Hey Donnie, we’re going out to meet up with Karai and Shinigami. Hope you don’t mind it, but we’re taking the Shellraiser and the stealth-bike.”

Donnie takes a second to respond, and in that second his brothers are already clambering into the vehicles. “I- no, the repairs aren’t done yet, and if we push specific parts much harder I’ll have to replace them entirely.”

“So then replace ‘em,” Raph says flippantly, sliding into the stealth-bike and starting it up. “It’s not a big deal if one or two gears gotta get replaced later, right?”

“No- you don’t get it, those parts were hard to get as it was and I don’t want to have to replace them so soon-” Donnie tries to at least catch Leo, because he knows the Shellraiser needs its pipes cleaned and checked for cracks, even more than their bike. “Leo, please- if you guys could just wait another hour, I promise I’ll have them done, I swear-”

“Nope! Can’t keep the girls waiting,” Leo says, shutting the sliding doors right in Donnie’s face. From inside, Donnie hears a muffled, “I’m sure if anything breaks, you can fix it easy later on! You’re good at that kind of thing, Donnie. Trust yourself a bit!”

The stealth-bike goes roaring past Donnie from behind, and he has to dodge backwards as the Shellraiser rumbles to life as well. He can’t do anything to stop it as it leaves, and then his brothers are gone, taking with them his inventions, and not paying him any mind about their condition.

Donnie can’t even muster enough energy to yell in frustration, because he feels drained by just how normal this all is.

They didn’t even bother to invite him along, let alone ask for use of his vehicles.

Donnie stands alone in his garage— not theirs, they never do anything useful in it, nothing to deserve calling it theirs— and repeats the question to himself could I leave?

He finds himself saying, I just might.

-/-

He can’t just runaway. He can’t just disappear with nothing but his bo staff on his shell, escaping into the wilds of New York with nowhere to go. He needs a plan.

Donnie is an expert at plans, though his brothers rarely listen to them. So he starts searching.

He goes out, not a word to anybody— because who’s to care if he’s out past their designated roaming hours? Who’s to attack him when there’s nothing left but thugs and regular human gangs in New York? He has no father and he has no arch enemy— so Donnie searches.

He follows maps he searches up, scouting locations underneath the cement ground above. He’s searching for somewhere with ideal conditions, somewhere he can modify and shape as he wants. Somewhere he’d be safe.
He briefly considers asking to stay with Karai and her clan—but he banishes the idea even faster than he’d thought of it. Karai can’t be trusted, for all the work she’s done to earn their trust. She doesn’t have Donnie’s, not about this. She’s too close to Leo, too likely tell. And the Mutanimals, maybe they would let him stay, but Donnie doesn’t feel it would work. His brothers would find him too quickly, too easily, there wouldn’t be any point.

So Donnie embarks alone, with a flashlight and multiple maps, and looks for somewhere to—live? Hide? Escape to? Maybe a combination of the three.

Donnie has to stop, over and over, and laugh at how ludicrous this is. Who is he running from? His brothers? He—he shouldn’t be, he loves them and they love him. He’s supposed to stay with them for the whole of their lives, because they’re all they’ve got now. All they’ve ever really had.

But then Donnie remembers the slow strangling feeling of being in his own home, speaking to his own family, and staring at the picture of his now deceased father—and he keeps searching.

He’s supposed to want to stay with his brothers, and he feels like shit for not.

He finds a place, a ways away from his home and his familiar territory. It’s sizable, and close to a power grid, and not too far from a couple junkyards. It’s perfect, despite the dust and the crumbling stone.

It’s another abandoned subway station, though considerably smaller than the lair. It’s not made for a whole family.

Donnie supposes, it’s a good thing he’s not bringing his whole family.

-/-

Donnie has a place in mind, a goal of moving into it, and now all he has to do is… actually accomplish moving into it.

He needs to make it livable first. Hook it back into power connectors, and then set up the plumbing again, and then add additional stabilizations to the one pillar on the far left side…

He’s got a lot of work to do, but he’s used to the work load. He’s done all that and more before, and sometimes on a tighter schedule.

He sneaks out, night after night, preparing his escape. He takes with him tools and supplies, using the Party Wagon to transport everything. It’s slow going, the amount of stealth he has to use to get in and out of his home, but it’s worth it. It’s worth it to see the steady improvements to the small station, and feel like he’s actually accomplishing something. Like he can breathe again, thanks to his secret success.

Until, he goes home one night, late, and all the air whooshes out of his lungs, as Leo storms into the garage with an angry expression.

Donnie doesn’t want to get out of the car, but he has to. It’ll only be worse if he doesn’t just get it over with right now.

“Where have you been?” Leo demands immediately, before Donnie even shuts the door. “I called
you ten times, and I got no answer. I was worried about you.”

“I was out scavenging,” Donnie replies smoothly, riding out the fury in his brother’s voice. “I needed parts to fix the Shellraiser’s shocks, and I needed time to search for them.”

“Why was your phone off? You know you aren’t supposed to turn it off,” Leo says, still mad, still glaring at Donnie.

Donnie lets it flow over him, not bothering to let it touch him now, not in this tense, horrid moment. He lies again, “I turned off it to charge it earlier, and forgot to turn it on again. Honest mistake. I’m sorry.”

“You missed training, again,” Leo snaps, seeming to pick a new topic to be upset about.

“It’s just one night, and I thought you’d prefer to have a working car rather than me showing up for class.”

Donnie crosses the line with that one, and Leo’s hissed words, “I am your Sensei and you will not disregard me like this”, speak that quite clearly. Leo glares at Donnie, waiting, watching. “Are we clear on this? No more skipping sessions. At all. We will work as a team, and I won’t have you undermining us like this. Do you understand me?”

He sounds like their father did, and Donnie can’t tell if his brother has done this on purpose or by accident. The effect is the same though, if worse.

Donnie swallows, and nods. Leo takes this as being enough of a response, and leaves Donnie in the garage. Alone again, having watched his brother- his Sensei, stalk away, still in a huff, Donnie balls his fists and bites his tongue hard.

-/-

He keeps going out. He keeps fixing up the small station he’s found, and he keeps building his quiet hope.

I wouldn’t be gone forever, he tells himself, as he finishes bolting a steel support into place. Just until we’ve all calmed down. Just until we’ve figured things out again. Just enough time for us all to get some space from one another and think. Just, just, just...

He wavers though, even after he tries to cement his resolve to leave, just for a little while. He wavers and thinks maybe I’m being too hard on them, maybe I’m being overdramatic, maybe I should just give this up and try harder...

But then Leo and Raph will say something, or do something, or demand that Donnie do something or say something- and Donnie will remember why he’s doing this. Why he’s leaving.

He can’t live like this. He can’t live with his two older brothers, especially his eldest brother, breathing down his neck. The two of them trying and obviously failing to figure things out, now that their father is suddenly gone, and using Donnie and Mikey as footholds to do so. Donnie wants to be able to handle that, but he can’t. He just can’t. Not anymore.

Donnie finishes as much as he can in his hiding place, and figures its time he start moving things
into it.

Like the other outings, he has to time it right. His brothers- they never pay attention to what goes in or out of his lab, not unless it explodes or it’s something they can steal to play with. Donnie just has to time it right, so the latter doesn’t happen.

He plans around his brothers’ outings, which are frequent and long. Spent with Karai and Shinigami and Casey, running around the city doing something or other. Donnie doesn’t know most of the time, and they don’t seem inclined to inform him. He doesn’t feel upset that they don’t so much as he’s resigned to that fact.

Donnie has begun to realize that he’s resigned to a lot of things, and wonders when that happened to him.

He starts moving out his big pieces of equipment about a week after finishing the station. He can’t take everything, much as he wishes, but he can take most of it. One by one he can move the biggest and most delicate pieces in the Shellraiser, whenever his brothers aren’t using it.

In his efforts to avoid detection from the two elder siblings- Donnie forgets his one younger.

Mikey is suddenly there one evening, when Donnie is struggling to fit an awkwardly shaped bit of equipment into the train car. Donnie stops dead, and feels gripping horror slide around his neck.

Mikey stares at him, and Donnie, hands shaking, stares back.

“You’re leaving,” Mikey says, not asks. Donnie starts to reply, something about just needing to toss this machine out, get a new one, but Mikey cuts him off with, “And don’t lie to me. You’ve been doing this for weeks. You’re leaving, and not just to throw something away.”

Donnie sags, and he feels the horror turn into resignation. That’s it then, it was a nice dream while it lasted. “Yeah. I am.”

“Were you even going to tell me?” Mikey asks.

“I… I don’t know,” Donnie says honestly.

“Well, why not?” Mikey asks, accuses. “You were just going to fuck off without saying anything?”

“I don’t know!” Donnie exclaims, his panic suddenly flooding in to cover his resignation. “I didn’t- I didn’t know if you’d tell, okay? I didn’t know if- if I could trust you!”

Mikey looks like he’s been punched by Donnie’s words, and Donnie feels the same. Worse, maybe, because they’re true.

“I… I couldn’t predict how you’d react,” Donnie says, shoulder slumping again. “I couldn’t… Mikey, I… I’m sorry. I have to leave. I can’t stay here anymore. Not- not with how things are.”

Mikey looks down at the floor, and his shoulders hunch up. “Yeah. Well. Maybe I’m not exactly happy here either, ever think about that?”

“I didn’t…” Donnie can’t finish that sentence, because he did.

He sees it with Mikey too. The sullen quietness, covered almost entirely by the overreaching cheer. The way that their brothers push him around, push him down. The way Raph has gotten more
physical lately, and has for a long time, with shoves and punches that land just a bit too hard. And every single time Mikey’s opinion on something comes up, he’s talked over. Ignored.

And Donnie does it too, mimicking their brothers that way, just like Mikey comes into his lab with their brothers, comes into the garage and takes and takes and breaks his things.

Neither of them is happy, and Donnie’s been selfish. More than just because he’s leaving—because he was leaving without Mikey.

“I’m sorry,” Donnie says, tired and worn out. He doesn’t know what will happen next, if Mikey will be furious and tell what Donnie has been trying to do, so all he can say is—“I’m sorry.”

Mikey is silent for a long moment, and then he says, “I wouldn’t’ve told, you know. If you told me you were going. They would’ve asked me, and probably made me tell them that you’d gone— but I wouldn’t tell them where you went. Promise. I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“…thank you,” Donnie says quietly, thickly, feeling undeserving. “I’m sorry I doubted you. I was just… scared. I didn’t know if I could trust anyone except… me.”

Mikey shrugs, and then both of them stand in awkward silence. It’s tense, but not like it is with their brothers. The tension is different.

Mikey breaks it, when he quietly, so frighteningly quiet for him, asks in a soft, desperate tone— “Can I come with you?”

Something old and scarred in Donnie breaks a little harder at that, and he nods jerkily, eyes stinging for reasons he won’t say. “Yes. Yes, of course you can.”

-/-

The first time Donnie shows Mikey the hidden station, far enough from the lair that they don’t seem close to it at all anymore, his brother’s face lights up and he smiles for real, maybe for the first time in weeks. It’s a good sight to see.

There was plenty of space for one mutant turtle before, and there’s still plenty of space for another. There’s space for a living room and a kitchen and separate bedrooms… a lab and an exercise room and an infirmary… there might even be space for experiments Donnie could never do at home.

The tunnel leading in is large enough to park the Shellraiser in, and that’s probably the one Donnie will have them take. It’s defensible, and good for running away in. They could and have driven through complete battle zones before, and come out with only minor issues to repair afterwards. Donnie has faith that it could protect him, should he ever have to evacuate his hiding place, and now he has faith that it could protect Mikey too.

Donnie hates that he hadn’t implicitly trusted Mikey, right from the start. That he hadn’t been able to look at his single younger brother and say “Come with me” without hesitation.

But he hadn’t been able to, and hasn’t been able to for a long time. And maybe he’s not alone in that, because Mikey quietly lets slip about things that bother him, while they move equipment and furniture around the station. He lets slip moments that he still thinks about that Donnie has never even heard of.
Mostly it’s about things they had no control over. Losing battles, losing friends. Sometimes it’s about their brothers, things they’ve said and done. Once, it’s about their dad, and how Mikey doesn’t understand why he didn’t say goodbye.

Donnie doesn’t have an explanation for the last thought, and they both let it pass in heavy silence.

There’s still a lot to be done, beyond what Donnie accomplished on his own. Furniture, appliances, painting... lots of work, and Mikey seems willing.

It’s less lonely, scavenging for lights and tables and couches, when he’s got a companion. Mikey picks the couch, an ancient and plush blue thing, and Donnie chooses the dark wooden coffee table to go with it. They both pick the lights; multiple shapes but all the in same green, and put it all together with a thick rug on the floor underneath it all.

They get a TV, a big one, and Donnie fixes it so it’ll get every channel this side of the hemisphere. The fill the kitchen with mismatched plates and pans, and Mikey has final say on the wares they select. Donnie’s lab is set up over time, and when he’s done, he loves it despite the decrease in space. He chooses to think of it as compact, since he wasted much of his original lab’s space anyways.

Eventually- only weeks later, even if it felt like painstaking years- they’re done, and it’s time to leave. For real.

Donnie’s lab is stripped of what he can take with him, all the essentials already long moved to their new location. It’s only got the bare bones now, in his eyes at least. His brothers haven’t noticed at all.

That leaves his room, also stripped of its essentials. There’s only day to day things left, and the most noticeable and iconic things. Donnie goes to sleep with the morning, staring at his assembled collection of weapons and possessions in the corner. It’s time, and he’s still not sure.

But, he’s sure of one thing though. If he doesn’t go now, then he never will, and the strangling sensation around his throat will worsen. He has to leave tonight, or else he doesn’t know what will happen.

He sleeps fitfully, exhaustively, and wakes hours before Leo and Raph will. He dresses shortly, cinching his belt and mask into place without emotion. His cases of throwing stars and books and last remaining computer make no sound as he picks them up, and neither does his bo staff as he slides it into its familiar loop on his shell.

As he exits his room, he sees Mikey doing the same, and they meet eyes. Mikey has Ice-dream kitty in her cooler already, and his duffle of miscellaneous items. With his nunchucks in their holsters, he’s ready to go, both in literal and emotional sense. Donnie can see it in his eyes.

There’s no words spoken as they go, leaving the silent halls of their long-time home. Donnie and Mikey both spare a glance over their shoulder at it, and Donnie feels a great swell of emotion.

This has been their home nearly all their lives. Where they grew up and learned to be who they are. Where their father lived.

Its empty feeling now, and haunted by spectres that no longer exist. It feels cold and sucked dry of everything Donnie once loved about it.

He turns away from it, from his still sleeping older brothers, and doesn’t look back.
The drive is tense and silent. The only sound is IC kitty’s soft mewls, her attempts to comfort Mikey’s obviously maelstrom emotions.

For once, Mikey doesn’t return the coos with his own, and sits quietly in the passenger seat. As Donnie drives them another block from the lair, kitty finally gives up, and settles for purring worriedly in her cooler.

Donnie pretends he doesn’t hear Mikey’s near inaudible sniffle, and pretends it doesn’t nearly drag his own emotions to the surface.

He shifts the Shellraiser’s gears, and drives a bit faster.

It feels like it’s not real, pulling into the station’s tunnel. It feels like they should be just here for more repairs, not to actually stay.

Donnie moves in a daze to put his things away, trying to distract his mind from his emotions as he painstakingly ensures that everything goes to its new home. He doesn’t leave his new bedroom until he’s done, and it’s a hard thing to leave his bo staff by the wall. He shouldn’t, but he feels like they’re waiting for an attack now. For the backlash of their actions.

Donnie drifts back into the living room, warmly lit by the lights he and Mikey had spent so much time finding. His brother is already on the couch, knees to his chest and kitty on the coffee table in her favorite bowl.

Donnie sits down on the other end, slumping back against the cushions breathlessly. He takes one, shuddering inhale, and runs a hand over his skull. “I can’t believe it,” He says shakily. “We actually did it.”

It’d been nice to talk about in theory, fun, if a bit nerve wracking, to set it up- but this is real. This is real and they can’t take it back anymore. They left.

Donnie doesn’t know how to feel at all.

“So… what do we do now?” Mikey asks quietly, mostly addressing his knees.

Donnie shakes his head, swimming in disbelief still. “I- I don’t know. Eat breakfast maybe?”

He suggests it, even though he feels sick instead of hungry. Mikey seems to accept it as a task though, and gets up to wander into the kitchen in the next room over. Soon enough, he comes back with microwavable cups of instant oatmeal, and sets them on the table.

He pushes one in Donnie’s direction, and Donnie accepts it gratefully. He picks it up, mindful of the spoon stuck into it, and starts stirring the hot oats around.

It doesn’t take long for their brothers to start calling them, texting them. Donnie’s phone rings again and again, and he sets it on the table to stare at it. Mikey does the same, and then they’re both staring at the t-phones on the coffee table beside kitty. They look like parodies of mini-turtles, minus legs and heads, as they vibrate and call out.
Donnie finally has the sense to reach out and mute them both, and then it’s silent again. Their oatmeal, both portions uneaten still, has long since gone cold and Donnie still doesn’t know what they’re supposed to do.

Mikey dares to check his phone’s messages, and from the way his expression flickers with emotions, they aren’t good. He sets his phone back down hastily, and pushes it so it skids across the table and away from him. Donnie doesn’t look at his, and he decides not to touch it at all.

Minutes- hours maybe- later, and Mikey asks in a rough voice, “Want to watch TV?”

There isn’t anything else for them to do, and the question covers up the one that’s been hanging in the air all evening. Are we really doing the right thing?

So Donnie nods, and grabs the remote off the table to turn on their salvaged television. It’s easier to not drown in anxious second guessing with it on, especially once Mikey steals the remote and starts surfing through channels without aim.

It’s not perfect, but it’s enough for now, and Donnie settles into the musty old couch to just… let go.

After weeks of constant stress and activity, it feels unfamiliar. Maybe even before that it would’ve. Donnie can’t actually recall the last time he sat down and just did nothing.

His eyes burn, and everything catches up with him all at once, and Donnie wipes his eyes before Mikey can see. Not that it would matter, because Mikey has been wiping at his eyes all night.

An insidious whisper in Donnie’s mind says they’re making a mistake, that they’re abandoning their brothers and their duty- but Donnie can’t give a damn about that right now. He’s tired of always keeping to his duty, and he’s not going to let a voice in his head bully him into giving up everything they’ve worked for.

Donnie watches the television with Mikey for a long while, and tries not to think of anything at all.

-/-

It’s not perfect, but it’s better. Donnie can feel it when he wakes up the next evening, and doesn’t dread getting out of bed.

He gets up, and he takes his time doing so. There’s no early evening training to attend, no surly brothers to sidestep as he gets ready, and no life-saving projects he absolutely has to get done right that second. He can breathe again.

He wanders into his new kitchen, and finds Mikey making eggs on the stove. The toast pops in its toaster as Mikey turns around to face Donnie, and they both sort of stare at each other for a moment.

“Could you butter those?” Mikey asks, and Donnie nods. He can do that.

The coffee maker is already set up, and Donnie turns it on as he goes to butter the toast. Mikey finishes the eggs on the stove, and then brings them to the table. Donnie grabs a cup for when his coffee is finished, and follows.
They sit down on either side of their small table, and share a breakfast for the first time in a while. The coffee maker dings, and before Donnie can get up to fill his cup, Mikey snatches it out of his hands and does it for him.

Donnie blinks, and feels caught off-guard by the simple kindness.

“Thank you,” He says, genuine and odd emotion climbing up in him as he takes the cup. Mikey doesn’t seem to know what to do with the situation any more than Donnie does, so he shrugs and sits back down.

There’s silence following that, but it’s not tense silence. It’s amicable, and Donnie can’t recall when he last had that.

Somewhere across the city, their brothers wake up for the second time without their younger siblings, and Donnie and Mikey are too far away to know what reactions that causes.

-/-

Donnie swings back and forth between waiting for the other shoe to drop, and actually being able to believe that this is happening. That they actually got out.

Their new home isn’t home, but it also is. It is because they made it their home. They built it, piece by piece, and made it into something they could live in.

They both have space to themselves, and where they crossover with one another, it’s not terrible. There’s relearning happening, and Donnie can see it properly now. How they both forgot how to interact with each other without their brothers involved, or maybe that they’d never known at all.

Sometimes, Donnie finds himself saying something snide or spiteful, and sees how it makes Mikey’s shoulders hunch. Sometimes, when Donnie reaches out to grab something close to Mikey, or moves his arms too fast, his brother will tense up and close his eyes. Waiting for a blow. It hurts Donnie probably just as much as it hurts Mikey, dealing with the following moments after those interactions. The regret from them both.

Mikey isn’t perfect either. He crosses the line multiple times with Donnie’s things, and breaks two precious beakers in the first few days. He belittles Donnie’s work once, scoffing at Donnie’s ideas to farm a tiny renewable hybrid vegetable patch, and obviously regrets the way Donnie shuts down afterwards. Donnie doesn’t do it on purpose, the way he shuts everything down like that, but he does, and Mikey tells him he’s sorry.

Donnie returns the sentiment, about getting into Mikey’s personal space, and for the hurtful words that slip out without his say.

It’s a work in progress, but they’re working hard on it.

Donnie’s phone continues to pile up with phone calls and texts from their friends and family, and he ignores them all. He doesn’t want anyone to know about this yet, not while it’s still new, still becoming real.

He reads the texts though, listens to the voice messages, if only because he still feels guilty. Guilty for not being strong enough to bear everything he needed to, and for running away. He listens to
them and reads them in case they’re distress calls. In case his brothers really need them.

If they’re hurt, if they’re in a fight– Donnie will go to them. He won’t even hesitate. He might have run, and taken Mikey with him, but he won’t abandon them fully. Family is still family, no matter what.

They’re all they have anymore, and Donnie doesn’t think he could bear to lose his big brothers too, hard as it is to deal with them right now.

So Donnie keeps an ear open, tries to remember how to interact kindly with his little brother, and attempts to believe his reality.

He thinks, about the second week into their escape, as he enters the living room and Mikey doesn’t jump and instead smiles at Donnie, he thinks that he might be able to believe it just a little. For now at least, until they go home again.

But, for the time being, Donnie slides onto the couch, and pushes his anxious, guilty thoughts away, and watches bad cartoons with his brother.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tell a kid enough times that he's stupid, useless, and a screw up- and he'll probably be just that. In his actions and mind both.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s a moment, watching for Donnie’s reaction, that Mikey’s scared his brother will say no. That he’ll refuse to let Mikey go with him, and instead will leave him alone in the lair, with just their brothers and a silent altar for company.

Mikey doesn’t want that. He really, really doesn’t want that. If Donnie disappears and leaves him then Mikey doesn’t know what he’ll do.

He’s scared for an awful, drawn out moment- that Donnie will say no, and Mikey will get left behind. Trapped, because he’s not smart enough to form his own escape. He doesn’t know where he could go or how he could get there. This is his one chance, and Donnie holds it in his hands.

Then, Donnie says “-of course you can.” and Mikey nearly drowns in relief.

He doesn’t know what he would have done if Donnie had said no. He doesn’t know if he could have accepted it quietly. He wouldn’t have told on Donnie, wouldn’t have given away Donnie’s escape-

But Mikey knows he wouldn’t have been happy either. He would have been scared, because whenever Donnie finally left… Mikey would be the only one left to face the evitable anger of their brothers.

Mikey buries that fear, smiles best he can in gratitude to his brother, and offers up any help he can give.

-/-

There’s something to falling. The split second between hitting the ground and the time it takes to get there. It’s an important part of learning ninjutsu; learning how to take a blow, roll with it, and come back up swinging.

Mikey feels like he’s got it down to an art, that he’s the undisputed master of falling down. He says that to himself as a comfort, as he takes a blow from Raph during training, and takes only a split second to get back on his feet. Stars in his eyes don’t bother him, because Mikey has fought with worse in his way.

He feels Leo’s eyes on him, Donnie’s too, as he and Raph keep sparring. They’re both watching
him- or maybe they’re just waiting for Raph to wipe the floor with him already.

It’s hand to hand combat night. A special training session, for when they lose their weapons in battle. They’ve done it lots of times before, just… not with Leo in charge.

Hand to hand combat night is always Raph’s favorite. Always. And Mikey always gets paired up with him. Always.

Maybe it’s because of how well he can roll with things, since Leo and Raph would just get into competition, and Donnie would give up less than a minute in.

Mikey raises to block too late, and his jaw aches from the impact. He lists to the side, and a solid force against his chest knocks out both his breath and his legs. Mikey falls down, and skids across the floor. He takes it like a champ though, only momentarily struggling to breathe right.

Leo calls the match, and Raph is declared the obvious winner. Mikey raises himself back off the ground, shaking off the worst of his fall, and answers Leo’s quick question if he’s alright.

He’s fine. It’s just one fall, just a few hits. He’s totally fine!

Mikey gives a winning smile, despite being the loser, and ignores his bruised chin. He ignores Raph’s scoff at how badly he’d lost, and he ignores Leo’s reminder that they’re going to have to work even harder on Mikey’s training.

He doesn’t have to ignore Donnie, because Donnie is already doing just that to Mikey. Donnie’s eyes might’ve been following the whole fight, but glancing at them now, Mikey can see Donnie probably hasn’t really seen anything for the last while.

Mikey dusts himself off, and obeys his new Sensei’s commands for another spar round, this time against Donnie. “Because that way you’ll be evenly matched,” Leo reasons, and Mikey pretends very hard that the words don’t sound condescending.

Mikey smiles, agrees, and playfully exclaims that this time it’ll be different, that he’s the one who’s going to beat his opponent. He adds a laugh or two, and pretends he doesn’t hear the slight mocking tone to Raph’s joining laughter.

Mikey’s the best at falling, though he falls considerably less when he’s sparring with Donnie. As he slides his feet into position, raising his arms and ignoring where they hurt from Raph’s fists, Mikey doesn’t feel nervous facing down his closest sibling. Dealing with Donnie, he rarely does.

Donnie doesn’t seem like he’s feeling much of anything on the surface, and Mikey isn’t sure if this makes it easier or harder.

Leo’s call to start the fight comes, and Mikey charges in.

Afterwards, Mikey trails after his elder siblings, and doesn’t look at how Donnie doesn’t look at any of them, and he smiles and smiles and smiles and ignores how everything hurts.

-/-

Mikey is glad at least, that that was the last one. The last spar session he had to endure, and the last
time he had to pretend so fiercely. For now.

They have to go back. Eventually. Some time. But not now. Not yet.

Mikey holds both those things close to his chest, and ignores how confusing everything feels.

He’s good at that. Ignoring things. Not thinking about the things he’s ignoring. He can do it so well that whole hours will pass by without him thinking about a single thing!

If he does it well enough these days, it’s like his father never died.

Mikey does this in his new home, the new lair- no, the station. He’s calling it the station, and he knows that Donnie has been too. It’s theirs, not the lair. It doesn’t have to be like their old home unless they want it to be.

Mikey doesn’t know if he wants it to be like home or not. He admits to himself that yeah, he wants to bring back how things used to be. Like, really how they used to be. When they were kids and their dad was alive.

Mikey misses being a kid, much as his brothers call him childish as it is. He misses being a real kid. A real kid who got to pretend fun things, like being an astronaut or a fireman, and not that his shoulders and arms didn’t hurt. That his laughter was real even when it really, really isn’t, way too often.

Mikey misses his dad. He misses his home. He misses not feeling scared.

He ignores all of that, and ignores the creeping feelings of none of this being real, and focuses on mindless stuff. Things that get his thoughts to turn into fun ones instead of gloomy ones. He binges movies and monkeys with his action figures and kitty and tries to not think about what his brothers must be doing right then.

WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU TWO?!?!!? – that’s the latest message from Raph. One of ten others with similar wordings, some with different meanings. Sometimes they’re threats about if they’re not somewhere in danger, how Raph will make them regret making him worry like he is. Sometimes they’re pleads for them to just answer one text at least, to let them know that they’re really alright.

Mikey doesn’t answer any of the texts, doesn’t answer any of the calls, and he can’t figure out why he doesn’t just turn his phone off completely.

It’s been five days. Five whole days, and Mikey is maybe going a bit stir crazy from cooping himself up inside all the time.

Donnie… isn’t always all there, locked up in his new lab like he is. And when he emerges, it’s a flip between what Donnie Mikey will get. Sometimes it’s the anxious one, sometimes it’s the blank one. On occasion, it’s the one who will smile, and ask what Mikey wants to make for dinner that night.

Mikey doesn’t really know how to deal with any of those Donnie’s, much as he likes the last one. He hadn’t been required to deal with Donnie except for the bare minimum at home. They’d kept to their individual lanes, crossing over only when their brothers brought them all together.

Mikey doesn’t know what to do, really, with all the time they have together now. So he lapses into habit, and tries to work with what he knows.
Mistake. Big mistake.

Donnie is talking, fast and excited, and Mikey is halfway into his head already. Everything is going above Mikey’s area of knowledge, and he’s completely lost as Donnie prattles on about tubers and spores and nutrient soil levels, and before he knows it-

“Why are you even doing this?” He says, disinterested and bored. “We got lots of food. We don’t need some stupid garden. All it sounds like is a bunch more work for us. Can’t we just watch TV or somethin’ instead?”

And Donnie stops short, and Mikey sees the enthusiasm recede. Gone, slipped under the cover Donnie always has. And Mikey immediately regrets opening his big stupid mouth at all.

“You’re right,” Donnie says, vagueness slipping into his voice. “You’re right. Why- why would we- no, we don’t. You’re right. Excuse me, I’ll just- go put away some things.”

Mikey sits up from his slouch on the sofa, reaching after Donnie as he starts to leave. “Dee, wait-”

“No, it’s fine, never mind, Mikey,” Donnie says, stepping out of Mikey’s range. “It’s fine. It was just an idea.”

“I didn’t mean to-”

“-it doesn’t matter, okay? Just let me-”

“-I’m sorry! I just- I didn’t get what you were on about, just let me try again, I didn’t mean to say-”

“-you did and it doesn’t matter so let go of me-”

“-I’m sorry!” Mikey exclaims, holding fast to Donnie’s hand, even as he tugs at it. “I’m sorry!”

Donnie stops tugging, but maybe that’s worse, because he’s not looking at Mikey at all anymore. He’s gone distant, and that’s probably- yeah, yeah that’s definitely worse.

“…I’m sorry,” Mikey says again, quieter. “I wasn’t paying attention and you lost me. I was just… my show was on and I couldn’t focus on both you and the TV…”

“It doesn’t matter,” Donnie says, even quieter than Mikey is speaking. “It was just an idea. Let go of me, Mikey.”

And Mikey let’s go, because he knows that Donnie dislikes that just as much as Mikey does. Being held against your will.

Donnie doesn’t say anything as he leaves, and the door to his lab shutting, locking audibly, sends an echo through their station.

Mikey stands still for that moment, hearing and regretting that Donnie is literally locking Mikey out again- and he kicks the coffee table a moment after. Angrily, directionless. Because he has literally nowhere else to aim it.

He grabs his skateboard and nunchaku from his room, and to escape the stifling tension he’s gone and made with Donnie, Mikey ventures outside their sanctuary for the first time in five days.

-/-
Mikey likes being loud. He likes being so loud that he can’t hear anything else except for himself. So loud that he feels like he could make the walls shake and the sewer tunnels fill with nothing but sound. Loud enough he can’t hear anything.

But he can also be quiet. So quiet, no one can hear him even existing. So silent and not there that he can come and go without anyone noticing until it’s too late, and then he’s gone. Sometimes, he can be so quiet that not even his dad had been able to find him.

Mikey skates and runs and leaps across the city roofs, silent and unseen. There’s no one left to hide from, but he hides anyways. In shadows and blind spots, making his way steadily to the one other place he knows he’s welcome, and more importantly, safe.

For however short a time he stays there, at least. Because where he’s going, he knows that his older brothers know of it, and Mikey can’t linger forever. Can’t risk it.

It’s a risk to go to the Mutanimals’ hideout, slipping in through the air ducts on the top of the warehouse. It’s a huge risk, because like Donnie had said when Mikey suggested going here, it’s a place their brothers know of and are welcome in.

Exampled by the fact that as Mikey slides into the rafters of the darkest corner, he hears two voices he’s been dreading hearing again so soon.

Mikey goes still, and wills himself to stop existing.

His heart thrums, fast and fearful, as he listens to the conversations below. No one can see him- he’s sure of that at least- but he can’t be too careful. Mikey can hide and fall and take hits better than any of them- but Leo and Raph are the A-team for a reason. They’re just better at what Mikey tries and often fails to do. They just are.

Which, as Mikey’s body locks up and turns him to stone, is why he isn’t budging another inch until he’s sure they won’t sense his presence.

Mikey stays there in his rafter, not listening at all until his brothers leave. He doesn’t hear anything as he waits. Nothing at all. He doesn’t hear the frustrated tones or the half shouts, he doesn’t hear the desperation mixed with those shouts, and he doesn’t hear his name and Donnie’s thrown around with curses and pleads.

Mikey stays perfectly still, and hears absolutely nothing.

And he keeps holding still and hearing nothing until the voices die off, and he hears the bay-doors open to let a vehicle out. He doesn’t move for another few minutes, letting the actual inhabitants of the hideout trickle back into the main room. Hidden up in the rafters, Mikey watches as some of the only other mutants in the city return to their normal lives, now that his brothers are gone.

And Mikey knows that Dr. Rockwell knows, the second he notices Mikey’s mental presence, and doesn’t react as the ape man raises the alarm for an unknown intruder in their hideout.

Its cut short though, as Mikey drops from the ceiling, and lands with a soft thud in plain sight. The halfway raised weapons and defenses of the Mutanimals drop, and Mikey takes a quiet breath in.

“Hey guys!” He says cheerfully, grinning widely as he can. “Been a while, hasn’t it?”
There’s an immediate tirade from Slash- but Mikey was expecting that, and neatly ignores every “Do you realize how worried your brothers have been?” and “How could you just leave Raphael and Leonardo like that?”

Dr. Rockwell tries to step in, to reason with Mikey and draw out explanations as to why he and Donnie have been missing for days now- but Slash’s very Raph-like anger overrules him, and the ape is shut down. Mikey tries not to see something else there.

Mondo’s exclamations of confusion and concern are further ignored, along with Slash’s continued advancements with his mace in hand and more furious words about the state of Mikey’s siblings- by Leatherhead, stepping between the angry tortoise and Mikey.

“Michelangelo and Donatello would not have done this without reason,” Leatherhead’s growling but calm voice says. “If they’ve really made such a drastic move, then I will trust my friend to have an explanation behind it.”

Some of the twisting knots in Mikey’s chest unwind with those words, and his smile is less strained feeling with his big, dependable friend standing between him and everyone else. As Leatherhead turns to him with a prompting look, Mikey squares his courage enough to speak in his usual tones.

“It’s no big deal,” Mikey says, playing it off as nothing. It’s not but if he pretends hard enough- “We just needed some space is all! Really! I left a note and everything. Didn’t my bros get it yet?”

“…Leonardo did mention a note,” Dr. Rockwell says slowly. “But he didn’t explain the contents to us. Just that you and Donatello had vanished, and that they were in need of help to locate you.”

“Yeah, ha, um,” Mikey tries to find something to say to that that’ll sound normal and reasonable. “Don’t bother with that? We’re fine, just chillin’ in a new pad for a while. Not exactly close by but we’re not, like- gone or nothin’. I swear! No need to go poking around for us anymore. We’ll come home on our own.”

“Michelangelo,” Leatherhead says, low and careful. “What is it that’s really going on?”

With a head on question like that, Mikey struggles to keep his smile and lax attitude. “Nothing! It’s just sibling stuff. It’s like, just normal whatever shit.”

“Your brothers don’t seem to share that opinion,” Slash growls, and the tone he uses is eerily, eerily close to Raph’s- enough that Mikey freezes up and can’t think right.

And his falter is enough, apparently, for Leatherhead to come to some conclusion on his own, and step towards Mikey. Mikey doesn’t step back, and he lets his enormous friend come to kneel in front of him. Large and gentle hands landing on his shoulder, each move so careful it feels like Leatherhead is treating Mikey like glass.

“Michelangelo,” Leatherhead says gently. “Will you tell me what’s really going on, if we do it in private?”

One person is easier to fool than four, so Mikey nods, and lets Leatherhead’s larger form block him from the rest of the Mutanimals.
“You will not call his brothers.” - is Leatherhead’s parting statement to his own team, own family, as he leads Mikey away. The deep, rolling growl in his voice seems to be enough to enforce the command on the other mutants, because Mikey hears Slash smash something as they leave, but no sign that they’re going to tell on him.

Leatherhead’s room is the same as when Mikey was last in it- candles everywhere on the sturdy low tables that can withstand Leatherhead’s use, thick blankets and huge overstuffed pillows everywhere else for easy sleeping on- and the television that he’d given his croc friend. One he’d… maybe stolen from Donnie…

The sight of the old black and white television momentarily kills Mikey’s forced momentum, but he recovers and pushes his spirits up again.

“You still got all the movies I gave you!” Mikey exclaims instead, bending by the ramshackle shelf full of VHS tapes. All of them classics, mostly romances, because Leatherhead might look big and mean but he is actually such a squishy old man. Mikey sorts through them; scanning the titles for any he might be able to feign interest in at the moment. “We should totally have a movie marathon, we haven’t done that in weeks, and we defs can’t let this sweet set up keep going to waste like it is, because if I had this in my room you’d never pull me off it, no way no how-”

“Michelangelo,” Leatherhead says, stopping Mikey’s ramble. “Why did you come here?”

Why did Mikey come here? It definitely wasn’t to hide, because he’s totally set himself up for exposure. Donnie would be mad. Should be mad. Because Mikey went off and screwed yet another thing up that he didn’t think through and doesn’t know how to fix.

“Michelangelo?” Leatherhead prompts again, and Mikey’s shoulders finally slump.

“I fucked up,” Mikey says quietly, and as he does, his friend’s huge arms encircle him, and pull him into a tight hug.

-/-

It doesn’t take much, once Leatherhead has pulled Mikey into a big pile of pillows and blankets, to get Mikey to spill the ashy tasting beans.

With Leatherhead’s big, solid form curled around Mikey, huge limbs and barrel chest, he feels a little-lot safer. Like he can say what’s on his mind for real and not have to worry about being in trouble for it. Because Leatherhead, to everyone else, is the worst thing you could ever meet in a dark alley. Mikey has never been scared of his friend- not even forever ago when they’d first met and LH had attacked everyone because he was scared- and he thinks privately, that maybe because everyone else is scared of his friend, it makes Mikey feel that much safer in his arms.

Mikey breathes in time with Leatherhead, and lets everything out.

He tells Leatherhead he screwed up with Donnie, even though his brother has done so much to make their new home a home and let Mikey into it too, even though he could have kept it to himself and left Mikey behind and alone and never looked back-

And he tells Leatherhead that they left because it’s bad at home, so, so bad. Strangling and terrifying because it feels normal but isn’t but it is and it’s only like that because it’s been that way
for so long that Mikey isn’t even sure if he can go back from that anymore or if there ever even
was a back to begin with, and he’s sorry he ran away but he had to and he can’t, he can’t he can’t
he can’t go back to his brothers right now, he just can’t-

And he confesses in a harsh whisper that he’s scared, he’s scared of what he’s done and he’s
scared of how his brothers are reacting and he’s scared that Donnie won’t let him stay anymore
because Mikey can’t filter can’t manage himself right and he’s sorry that he’s stupid and useless
and he doesn’t want to be but is-

And that Mikey didn’t mean to shut Donnie down he really didn’t, he just got lost and then bored
and then frustrated because that always happens with Donnie, because Donnie talks too fast and
complicated for Mikey to follow and makes him feel stupid and lost and he hates it and doesn’t
want to hate it but he does anyways-

And how Mikey is furious and tired and so unbelievably sad and hurt that his own dad, his own
dad, didn’t even want to say goodbye to him, just left a message with his brother about taking
everything that was left of their Sensei and turning it into something else, no I love you’s or last
words of care or even an actual goodbye to anyone except Leo-

And and and-

And how Mikey is so, so tired of fighting, of being scared, of pushing everything down so he
doesn’t feel like screaming even when he does. How he just wants to feel okay and not have spats
with his brothers, have his home be one home and not two and not with only one feeling safe, and
how he wants to be able to trust his big brothers with everything but can’t and how sad that makes
him, and how he just… misses his dad, and his brothers, and how everything used to be. And how
he’s sorry.

He’s so, so sorry, and he’s not even sure what about.

Mikey cries long and hard, wrapped up and concealed all the way by the one person, the one
person, he knows won’t judge him or hurt him in any way. He cries out every bit of stress and
anxiety and regret until there’s nothing left but the hurt, and then he cries that out too.

Then his head finally goes quiet, and Mikey knows that there’s nothing left in there anymore to
hide from or ignore. At least for a little while, for as long as he’s here and safe and far, far from the
things that are weighing on him like lead chains.

His eyes are crusty and sting like crazy and he knows that he got his gross tears all over
Leatherhead’s chest, but Mikey feels better for it. He feels alright, probably for the first time in a
while.

“Thanks,” He whispers after a long time has passed, grateful down to his core that Leatherhead
was here for him. His friend’s bone deep rumble is warm and familiar, and makes Mikey feel even
better.

-/-

Leatherhead’s team stares at Mikey when they emerge, and the way Slash is glaring down at
Mikey nearly brings all the stuff he’s just gotten rid of rushing back.
But, Leatherhead’s hand is on his shell, and his friend is speaking for him. Leatherhead is protecting him, now that he knows what’s fully going on. There’s a short, purposefully vague explanation from Leatherhead, and though it seems like Mondo doesn’t really catch what’s going on, the rest of the mutants in the room concede to leave Mikey and Donnie to themselves. This is between them and their brothers, not anyone else.

It’s a family matter, and while Mikey considers the Mutanimals to be something like his weird cousins, this isn’t something they’re meant to get involved in. The fact that Slash accepts this is a miracle, and maybe only sort of has to do with Leatherhead not so subtly threatening mutiny if he doesn’t back off.

“We’ll have to tell your brothers you were here, Michelangelo,” Leatherhead says regretfully, after everything is taken care of and Mikey is getting ready to leave. “But we won’t help them beyond that. I know you can’t tell me where you and Donatello are currently staying, but know that the Mutanimals won’t be searching for it any longer. I promise you that.”

“I know, thank you,” Mikey says, and he smiles genuinely for his friend. The umpteenth bear hug Leatherhead gives him after that is entirely welcome, and Mikey maybe lingers longer than he should in the secure embrace.

He reluctantly lets go, darting back into the night with his skateboard across his shell and his chucks in their holsters. He hears the doors to the Mutanimal’s hideout slam shut behind his exit, and he knows that he’s got only a few minutes before his brothers get the call from Slash.

Mikey runs, slipping right back into the silent shadows he’d used on the way there, and heads back to the station. He has one more thing to do before he can really feel alright, and he knows that it’s something he should have done probably fifty times over in just the last few months.

He enters through the one opening they have from the tunnels, the rest of the open exits having been boarded up with plywood. Not exactly sturdy, but it keeps out the drafts and makes things feel cozier. Less exposed.

Mikey dumps his skateboard and weapons on the couch, and heads towards the kitchen on a hunch. His hunch is right, and Donnie is sitting at the table with what’s probably a cold mug of tea. He’s the blank Donnie right now, tired and not looking at anyone. Then, as he sees Mikey, he becomes the anxious one, then a relieved one, and then back to the anxious one.

Donnie stands, stumbles, and nearly knocks over his drink as he does. He’s blinking at Mikey, and seems shocked that he came back.

The words, “You came back.” confirm that, as Donnie says so in a breathless voice. Mikey nods awkwardly, and tries to remember what he wanted to say.

Then, the same time as Mikey does, Donnie blurts, “I’m sorry!”

“I shouldn’t’ve blown you off!” Mikey says, the same time as Donnie says, “I shouldn’t have shut you out!”

And then they both stand there, looking at one another, and probably both feeling just as sheepish as the other.

Then, because the situation is so ridiculous and Mikey is only mutant- he lets out something like a giggle-snort, which sets of Donnie’s own embarrassed laughter, and then the tension is gone and they’re both cracking up.
Donnie gently clasps Mikey’s shoulder, and says again, “I’m sorry.”

Mikey puts a hand over his brothers, and smiles as he says, “I’m sorry too.”

And Mikey’s smile feels real and the obvious anxiety to Donnie’s posture drains away, and Mikey suggests that they sit down and make more tea. He has more to say than just a sorry, because Leatherhead told him to say the things Mikey told him. Because they’d help make things better, and help prevent something like this happening again, small as it was in hindsight.

Their home is still too new to be stable, and Mikey knows that even better now, seeing what one dispute can do to both of them.

So Mikey puts the kettle on, dumps out Donnie’s cold tea and replaces it with new warmth, giving it a twin as he does, and sits down at the table to actually talk with his brother for once.

“You just… go too fast for me sometimes,” Mikey explains, dragging the words out of himself. “I get lost, and then I get upset because I got lost. Um. I don’t really mean it when I say shit like I did. I’m just... mad that I can’t keep up. And I’m sorry for… reacting like that every time. It’s not your fault I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Donnie says, empathetic and genuine enough that Mikey looks up from his staring contest with his cup. Donnie repeats again, “You’re not stupid, Mikey. You’re just… not a genius.”

Mikey scoffs, internally stinging in places that he tries to hide but can’t. “What was your first clue?”

“No- no I mean- no one is going to be able to keep up with me,” Donnie says, grimacing as he chooses his words. “No one can. I’m just… too far off the grid for anyone else to get it. Dr. Rockwell can almost, but even he admits that my head goes places his can’t. And I guess I get excited, and forget that not everyone speaks the same binary code I do. And that doesn’t make you stupid, Mikey, for not being like me. I’m just different in a different way from you, and that’s okay. And- I’m sorry that I made you feel like you weren’t smart. And for… all the times I called you just that. I was out of line when I did, and I honestly regret doing that to you.”

“Well… I’m sorry I crap all over your ideas all the time,” Mikey says, accepting what Donnie said and putting it away for further examination later, because wow. That was something. “And I’m sorry I’ve taken stuff from the lab, here and back home, and broken it. And for messing with your experiments, even after you told me not to, and with the cars and the weapons and the everything, really. And I’m sorry for not stepping up when Leo and Raph did that shit too. I should’ve, but I didn’t.”

“In all fairness, I haven’t exactly stuck up for you either,” Donnie says, tone tired and regretful. “We both… kept to our lanes, I suppose. Avoided causing extra trouble for ourselves.”

“Yeah, guess so,” Mikey says, because what else is there to say? It’s over and done with, and neither of them can make a time machine to fix that stuff. They can just deal with its fallout now, and… try to fix it best they can.

The silence between them gets heavy for a moment, past events weighing on them both, before Mikey asks, “Can you try again, explaining the plant stuff for me? I’ll actually listen this time, I swear.”

The way Donnie visibly brightens, given something he knows exactly how to talk about, is almost
better than Mikey’s realization earlier that no, his brother wasn’t going to kick him out for being an ass, now or in the past.

“I had this idea, because I was thinking about how the grocery stores we hit up for food aren’t always going to be so easy to break into, right?” Donnie says, perking up with each word. Mikey nods, and his brother continues. “We don’t want to leave patterns for people to follow and we don’t like risking going outside our territories. Plus it’s a hassle. So- I was thinking, if I could combined the reproduction rate and growth time of mushrooms with tuber vegetables, like carrots or beets, and maybe with leafy vegetables, like lettuce or broccoli, the we might be able to create a self-sustaining crop if we got the soil and nutrients and water right! And, of course, tending and weeding and such would have to be involved and likely some helping hand with added fertilizer and compost and maybe selective plant marriages, but point being- we wouldn’t have to worry about food so much anymore, or about our vitamin and fibre intake!”

Mikey blinks, tries to take what his brother has just said and understand it, and finds he sort of caught what was said. “So basically we get an indoor-underground garden patch of Frankenstein vegetables and eat better in general?”

“Yes!” Donnie exclaims. “The process of combining the vegetable species alone would be fascinating, aren’t you excited by it?”

Mikey thinks about that idea, of having plants filling up the empty spaces still in their home. About the smell of fresh plant life, rich and alluring in a way that calls to something in the back of Mikey’s mind. He thinks about it, remembers the way the farm house smelt on early mornings, before Leo had woken up and it’d just been Mikey and days of time to lounge around and learn new things other than fighting and hiding. He thinks about that, brought here into their new home, their new everything-

And Mikey smiles, because that sounds pretty damn good to him. He tells Donnie as much, and the ecstatic excitement his brother has it worth all the scientific jargon he endures right after.

-/-

Trying to break out of what he’s known almost all his life is hard for Mikey. Shifting ingrained responses and switching out reflexive reactions. It’s hard and it’s difficult, but he figures it’s worth it.

It’s worth it because he finds that he likes the nice responses, the nice reactions, a lot better than the old, dismissive ones.

For one, it results in the blank and the anxious Donnie’s being around a lot less, and the excited and warm one being around a lot more. For another, it makes Donnie brighter and happier, and in turn, he makes efforts to do the same for Mikey.

Like letting Mikey actually get to help plant their first test crop, something Donnie’s never let him do before. Until now. Donnie has kept him as far as possible from his lab and projects, and Mikey appreciates the effort for change. It’s not as complex or entertaining as some of the things Donnie has done before, it’s not the Shellraiser or the grappling hooks or the many other weapons and gadgets he’s designed for Mikey and their brothers-
But Mikey kind of prefers this, in a way. The quiet steady activity of getting the soil trays just right, and watching and listening to Donnie mumble under his breath as he perfects the combinations of the plants. It’s not big and loud, but it’s nice. It’s probably just what Mikey needs.

A late night gardening session is definitely what he needs, after he’s made the mistake of reading some of their brothers’ angrier texts, listened to more voice messages than he should, and then Donnie moves too fast and too close and Mikey just freezes.

He freezes and he shuts his eyes, hunching up as he waits for a hit for whatever he’s done wrong or stupidly this time- and then remembers all at once that it’s Donnie, and that there’s no one else here and that his brother won’t do that to him.

It’s a long, awkward moment, as Donnie lowers the hand he’d been using to reach the top shelf of their cupboard, putting away a cup as they do the dishes, and Mikey feels embarrassed and stupid as his brother steps back out of his space.

“I’m sorry,” Donnie whispers right after, carefully keeping his arms down and away from Mikey. In plain sight too. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Me neither,” Mikey replies, just as quietly. And the silence that follows makes him want to hide or make noise so it doesn’t exist anymore or maybe just run. Run from this and how Mikey’s screwed up, in his head and in his life.

Then, slowly, and in a way that’s silently asking is this okay? Donnie lifts his arms for a hug, and waits for Mikey’s response.

Mikey drops the dishtowel in the sink, and takes the hug.

They spend the rest of the night doing quiet things with the plants. They’re already sprouting, underneath the heat lamps and UV ray lamps that Donnie has rigged up through most of their home. It makes the station feel like the middle of the day with them on, and Mikey drinks in the sensation. He doesn’t miss the long, dragging days of the farm, but he does miss the sun.

He gets dirt all up and down his arms, even though he doesn’t need to, and buries the sensations that aren’t really there under the mud. Donnie lets him fuss with one of the spare pots, filling it with spare dirt and spare seedlings, and gives Mikey the labels and markers when he asks. Asks, not takes. Because there’s a new rule for them both: communication. It’s been a good rule so far.

Mikey sticks his new, personal plant right in the center of all the other pots and trays, because while he’d planned to shove it to the side originally, Donnie had said, “Put it in the middle, so it gets the best light.”

And maybe there’s more to that than just his brother being extra nice to him because Mikey’s had a crap night, but Mikey doesn’t care to read into it. He takes the kindness as it is, and names his pot Sir Bramble-squire, even though it’s probably lettuce and not brambles or squires.

Kitty isn’t much of a fan of their new home temperature, but Mikey makes it up to her by, again, asking to borrow some of Donnie’s tools, and carving a bunch of little ice cubes into fun shapes for her to play with in her freezer. He gives the tools back right after, and it’s kind of neat but sad to see the half-hidden surprise Donnie has at Mikey’s good behavior.

Mikey gets more texts from his brothers through all that, and he does the sensible thing. He shoves his phone under his mattress, and forgets about it for the rest of the evening.

Mikey’s good at forgetting things, ignoring things, and rolling with things. He’s good at falling and
hiding and pretending. He’s not so good at remembering rules unless he tries really hard, and he’s not so good at remembering where a boundary is if he’s not paying attention.

He’s working on the last two things though, and he knows Donnie is working on his own issues too. They’re getting there, and until they do, Mikey’s phone can stay under his mattress until he wants otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

....you know, I can't think of much to say here except "Thanks" to everyone who's been supportive of this fic. Really, thank you.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Teach a child to carry the world, and he will try until he stumbles. Teach a child he must give everything to be loved, and he will empty his chest for you. Teach a child that he does not matter, and he will believe just that.

Chapter Notes

this is long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s getting easier. The first week in, Donnie can breathe again, and it feels amazing.

Until the moments where it doesn’t, and everything comes crashing back down on him, and it’s all he can do not to snap under the weight every time it does.

He feels like a Newton’s Cradle. Swinging back and forth from each impact on each side. Sometimes it’s good, and he’s able to enjoy being outside his old home, away from his brothers and the toxic atmosphere that comes from being close to them.

But then, sometimes, Donnie’s chest caves inwards and he panics.

He abandoned them. Left them alone in the lair with a dead father and no doctor, or engineer, or electrician, or or or-

They don’t know how to do any of the stuff Donnie does. No one does. That’s why he did so much in their home. Why he was the one to handle almost every problem that arose. Because he was the only one who could.

And Donnie just-

-left them. Took Mikey and abandoned everything they’d fought to protect for so long.

Donnie’s chest fills with choking guilt sometimes, and then he can’t breathe at all.

-/-

The first time it comes- the first time, at least, after they’ve run- is when Donnie realizes he forgot something.

He’s opened his laptop’s insides to repair it, the oldest one, patched together again and again more
times than he can remember- and he reaches for a tool he doesn’t have.

It’s not in the tool case beside him, and for a moment, Donnie’s brain says “I’ll just go to the lab and get my spare.”

Then he remembers he can’t do that. He can’t go back to it at all.

Donnie stares at the tool case, filled with every tool for computer circuitry he has- or at least he thought it’d been. Apparently, in his rush to run away, he’d lost one of them.

It’s been three days, and he still can’t remember sometimes. Can’t believe it at all.

He can’t believe they got out. He can’t believe they abandoned their brothers.

Donnie can’t finish working on his laptop without that tool. Or, maybe he can, but he can’t think of how he’d be able to.

It’s just one tool. Why is this making him so upset?

It’s just one tool he can’t go back and get, because he’s not allowed to. If he goes back now, his brothers will catch him, and demand answers, and won’t let him leave or defend himself not until he’d explained everything about why he’d abandoned them-

It’s just one stupid tool.

One tool.

Why is he crying over that?

Donnie hadn’t bothered putting on his mask, no point when he wasn’t going to be training or patrolling. Now he’s regretting it, as he wipes roughly at his cheeks. There’s no way to hide tears when they slide right down his scales, obvious and weak and utterly stupid.

So, so stupid. It’s just one tool. And he knew he wasn’t going to be able to go back. The lair isn’t his home anymore, because he abandoned everything and everyone inside it. He’s not allowed to return again, not without consequences.

Donnie wonders if his brothers hate him for letting them down like this. For running away from a problem instead of fixing it, like he’s supposed to do.

That’s Donnie’s job. To fix things. To fix and build and heal and protect his family, using his mind and hands and knowledge of how to keep them all alive and well.

He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to fix this. For all his tech and plans and endless rolling thoughts that never stop-

He doesn’t have any idea how to fix his family. Not a single idea at all.

It’s his fault anyways. He let Leo and Raph and Mikey and everyone down a long, long time ago. And then he didn’t fix that either and now it’s his fault that they’re broken up like they are.

Donnie lowers his head onto his hands, fingers moving up to clutch at his skull, and Donnie can’t make any noise at all. Can’t breathe can’t speak can’t think-

His throat tightens, and his eyes burn. Wetness drops onto the table, and a distant part of Donnie scolds himself for dirtying his workspace like that.
He’s supposed to be able to fix anything. Any situation, any problem, and any person.

He’s their engineer. He’s their technician. He’s their left flank defender. He’s their only doctor.

And he’d left his brothers anyways.

Donnie’s forehead rests on the cool of his lab table, right next to the tool case that didn’t have the one tool that he needed, and he wheezes harshly.

He’s crying because he doesn’t have that one, stupid tool.

He’s crying because he can’t change that one, stupid mistake.

He’s crying because he broke his family and he doesn’t know how to fix it.

-/-

Donnie tries to move past those moments. Keep moving forwards, even if he’s… not really sure where that forwards is meant to go.

Lingering on his mistakes and failings won’t help them. Thinking about them will just drag him into a spiral; one he can’t get out of for hours, sometimes days.

He tries to focus on the present. On making their new home livable, and lovable, and something solid.

Donnie takes a long while to do that. Days, in fact. And taking days to figure something out… that’s too long for him. He’s supposed to have everything done right away, right that very hour if not second.

Donnie spends a lot of the hours in those days in his new lab, painstakingly going over his equipment for maintenance checks. He takes such good care of them, because it’s unlikely for him to find replacements, but he checks anyways despite knowing how well he treats them. Anything to avoid the bubble of pointlessness in his head.

Donnie used to think about endless ideas. Endless machines and inventions he could build to make their home better.

He realizes now that most of those were set aside, and then forgotten, in favor of inventions for war.

He catches himself still trying to come up with new weapons, new defenses, even though there’s no need anymore. The Shredder is dead, and what arsenal they have now is more than enough to deal with the ordinary crime of New York. Donnie’s still thinking like they’re at war, even though it’s been over for weeks now.

He realizes he’s forgotten what it’s like to invent purely for himself, for his own enjoyment, and not for someone in his family.

It’s… not a pleasant realization.

An idea that’s not for weaponry or his brothers finally comes to him, and Donnie feels something
in his mind unfold itself again. Something that had curled up and went to sleep a few years ago, because it hadn’t had a place in his life then.

He has a place now, though. A place he can create whatever he wants. Like a garden.

A garden. Real biological lifeforms, grown straight from the soil. Donnie has always been more inclined towards inorganic matter and creations, but a garden. They could have a garden, a renewable source of food and oxygen, right in the station.

The idea springs into his mind, and blooms into a whole plan.

He’d been too busy on the farm to even think about this sort of thing. Busy with mutagen and busy with keeping his brother’s condition stable. He couldn’t divide his attention any further, not when Leo’s coma had already been Donnie’s fault. He’d owed his brother his full attention.

Now though. Now Donnie didn’t have to give his attention to anyone except Mikey. And Mikey was different from their older brothers, so maybe…

Maybe Donnie could have this.

“Why are you even doing this? We got lots of food. We don’t need some stupid garden. All it sounds like is a bunch more work for us. Can’t we just watch TV or somethin’ instead?”

Donnie blinks, and realizes that it’s a stupid idea. A stupid idea that won’t do anything to impress his siblings- sibling- and won’t interest them- him- at all.

It’s not a weapon. It’s not a defense. It’s not even a breakthrough.

It’s just a garden, and one they don’t need.

Donnie’s idiotic excitement dies, and he pushes the idea far, far back into his mind. Where it’ll stay, because it’s not needed.

Mikey is yelling at him, and Donnie doesn’t listen. He’s tired, and he doesn’t want to hear anything Mikey has to say to him.

“I’m sorry!”

Donnie doesn’t care. It was a stupid idea anyways.

He says as much to Mikey, and pulls his hand out of his brother’s. Why Mikey lets him go, despite obviously not wanting him to, Donnie can’t tell. Their older siblings wouldn’t have.

Donnie walks out of their new living room, through their new home, and into his new lab. But while the layout and surroundings might be new, the motions of retreating from a fight are old.

He shuts the door, and locks it on automatic. It’s the only way to keep his brothers from messing with his experiments.

Except, there’s only one brother here, and Donnie has no experiments anymore.

Donnie swallows the thick guilt about what he’s just done, what he has done, and what he’s doing- and tries not to think at all for a while.

When he goes out later, to apologize, to explain himself-
Mikey isn’t there.

And Donnie thinks *oh, I guess that was to be expected.*

-/-

The hours after that are blurry. Donnie doesn’t recall them all quite right, the edges fuzzy with anxiety and guilt. And shame as well, for shutting Mikey out over something so stupid.

He can’t keep even this one part of his family together, can he?

It’s a heavy thought, that one. And it drags Donnie far down into despair, and leaves him floundering.

Where would Mikey have gone? Back to their brothers? Maybe. Or maybe not. Why would he, after everything they’d done to get away…

Donnie calls Mikey’s phone only once, and then hangs up as he hears the ringtone echo through the station.

Useless. Pointless. Just a stupid fight and it may as well have cost him everything he had left.

Donnie tries, and fails, to come up with a plan of action, and ends up sitting in the kitchen with a mug of tea. Like his father had done with him, when he was much younger.

Donnie recalls then that his father hadn’t done that in years with him, and the memory of their drifting relationship only serves to weigh him further down.

Mikey comes back, long after Donnie lost track of time, and for a split second Donnie can’t believe his eyes at all. Mikey came back. They’d fought, and he could have left, but he came back.

It was such a stupid fight, too. Just a regular quarrel between siblings. It was *normal,* and yet, it’d felt like the worst thing that could have happened.

Then, Mikey surprises Donnie, and apologizes the same time as he tries to. For a different reason, but not really. Neither of them wants to fight anymore, and they don’t want to bring that sort of thing into their new home. The war is over, they’ve left their brothers behind for the moment, and it’s time to move on. So Donnie says he’s sorry, and Mikey does as well.

Donnie realizes, after they’ve sat and talked and communicated better where their boundaries and issues lie, that he doesn’t actually… remember the last time someone did that to him. Said sorry to him, *or* listened to his opinions. It’s a startling, and frustrating, and saddening realization.

That seems to be a trend lately. It’s just one thing after another, figuring out the things that’d been *wrong* with how their lives have been up until recently, and how Donnie hadn’t even noticed the wrongness until he was away from it.

But is he actually away from it? He’s still reading the texts, still listening to the voice messages. He still feels like he’s drowning in guilt, whenever he’s not distracted by Mikey or the garden.

Donnie does his best to focus on the garden and relearning how to have a relationship with his brother, and not the pit in his chest that continues to stay, even now that they’ve left the lair.
It’s hard though. Because Donnie… he can’t completely ignore his phone, or the pit. The hardest messages to ignore are from Leo and April. Leo’s, because… Donnie’s reflexive response to just do whatever Leo is asking him to is a strong one, added with the ever present guilt and shame that his brother’s words make well up in him…

And April’s because… well, she’s April, and Donnie misses her deeply.

But. He can’t contact her. It’s a hard thing to admit, even in private, but he’s not exactly sure… how much he can trust her anymore. Because though Donnie likes to think he and his friend are closer than his brothers are with her, he’s not actually entirely sure how true that is. Especially now that their family has been divided like this. Donnie’s brothers, they’ve known her just as long, and April’s relationship with Raph had gotten particularly strong while they were on the farm, and Leo is her leader and sensei now, and…

And then there was the crystal incident, and… Za’naron.

It’s hard, but Donnie can’t reply to April’s texts or calls, and all his arguments as to why sound weak even to his own ears.

Donnie reads and listens to and memorizes every message sent to him, and replies to none of them. The pit in his chest gets larger, and he spends even more effort on focusing just on the garden and Mikey.

On the bright side of his and Mikey’s argument, at least they now know that they have four less people looking for them. The Mutanimals are on their side, or Leatherhead is at least, and maybe that’s more than enough.

It’s enough for Mikey, it seems, because after getting back into contact with his friend, Mikey’s mood improves considerably. Donnie is envious of his brother’s good spirits, and wishes he had someone like that to confide in. April’s name is the first on his tongue, usually speaking, but with this sensitive sort of topic…

Would she even agree with him? Believe him? She’d seen a fair chunk of what their brothers did-though not all of it, not even close- but still hadn’t said anything.

Maybe she’d brushed it off as brother drama, like Donnie had for years. Maybe she just hadn’t noticed at all. Maybe what was happening to his family was normal for brothers. Maybe Donnie was overreacting and had made an enormous and terrible mistake-

Maybe he needed to take ten deep breaths and not think about that anymore. Step outside for a bit instead, and take some time to himself.

He hasn’t done that in a while. Gone scavenging on his lonesome. It’s been two and some weeks since they’d run away, and Donnie hadn’t gone out at all excluding the one night for retrieval of gardening supplies. Mostly, and he’s having an easier time admitting this lately, it’s because he’s scared. Scared that if he goes out, his brothers will magically find him the second he does, and then…

Well. There’s all manner of horrible scenarios in Donnie’s head, and he does his best not to think about any of them. He’s not ready to deal with his older brothers, and he doesn’t even want to entertain the thought of facing their judgement at the moment.

Donnie’s body feels heavy, even as his mind feels fuzzy and disconnected, as he prepares to step out of the station. He takes his bo staff and his standard arsenal of throwing weapons, and a large
rucksack that’s empty and ready to be filled with whatever he finds. If there’s anything too big to carry back, he’ll just hide it and return with the Shellraiser later.

Mikey isn’t around tonight, so Donnie doesn’t have to say goodbye or explain where he’s off to. Mikey had poked his head in earlier to say he was spending some time with Leatherhead and Mondo, to just goof around for once. Donnie had heard the silent nervousness to Mikey’s explanation to where he was going, and the tentative worry for disapproval or denial.

Donnie had smiled, and reminded him to be back before sunrise. The responding sunshiny grin had been worth the buzz of anxiety Donnie had over Mikey going out like he was, and Donnie had done his best to repress it.

Mikey is the best at sneaking around, as Donnie has realized and remembered recently. Even if their brothers and their father had never given that part of Mikey any praise, Donnie is doing his best lately to give credit where credit was due. Mikey would be fine, especially with an overprotective and oversized friend there to watch him. If their brothers showed up, Donnie could trust Leatherhead to step in.

Really, it’s Donnie who needs to worry about being caught, as he ascends to the surface. He isn’t the best at sneaking around, and he doesn’t have any protective friends to watch his shell. The only things he has going for him is his anxiety induced paranoia, and his ability to calculate a throwing star’s direction faster than most people could blink. If he got cornered by anyone, at least he could make a big enough distraction with a flurry of metal that he’d be able to run away.

It’s a small, mostly useless comfort, but Donnie goes to the rooftops anyways.

Alone above the city, his anxiety isn’t so bad, and the heaviness to his movements lifts. He takes a deep breath in, and starts running.

He has a mental map for every useful stop points in their new territory. It’s not quite as plentiful as their old one, and nearly crosses over with said old one at some parts, but Donnie can make the best with what he’s got. It’s part of his genius, taking nearly anything and using it best it can be used.

Donnie flips over the edge of an alleyway, and skims down the building’s sides to the ground. There are a couple of good electronic stores here, and he can make this his first stop for spare computer parts before moving on. With the rate he goes through parts, it never hurts to have extras of his extras around.

Of course, he’s actually been going through his stash a lot slower lately. It probably has something to do with cutting down the exposure to destructive individuals.

A sudden well of shame and guilt nearly upheaves Donnie’s beginnings of a good mood, and he has to forcibly shove it down as he starts into the garbage disposal. He left the station to not think about those emotions or the pit in his chest, not dwell on them further even as he finds a near-pristine external hardrive in the trash.

The joy he might’ve felt at the find is dimmed by his now low mood, and he shoves it into his bag with lackluster movements. Whatever, he’ll figure out how to feel happy about it later, whenever he gets to cleaning up the bugs on the drive that got it thrown out.

Donnie gives the bin another cursory once-over for more useful tech, and finds none that he doesn’t already have three or five of. He shuts the lid with a bang, not caring for the noise since no-one is around, and goes to climb the building again.
Of course, because it’s just his luck- he starts back around the corner only to run right smack into someone.

Donnie’s defensive instincts flip out, and he recoils fast as he can from the person as they fall backwards. His bo is suddenly in his hands as he does, and he flips down his third eyelids to conceal wherever he’ll target an attack. He skids to a halt a full ten feet back from his opponent, and melts quick as he can into the shadows of the alley.

Then, he feels stupid, because what the hell-

-it’s just Casey, grumbling loudly as he gets off the ground and dusts himself off.

For what feels like a solid ten seconds, Donnie can’t correlate the scene in front of him with his own perception of reality. Because what? How did Casey of all people find him?

“The fuck are you doing here?” Donnie says, because he’s so deeply confused he can’t even filter his language.

“Could ask you the same thing, asshole,” Casey replies, peeling a dirty wrapper off his pants. He shoots Donnie a glare, and for the first time, Donnie notices Casey only has his hockey stick with him. No vigilante gear in sight.

“No, seriously. How did you find me?” Donnie asks, moving past his confusion and into panic. Because if Casey is here, then that must mean- “Did you come here with my brothers?”

“Should’ve figured you wouldn’t go too far, this place isn’t even over a few miles out,” Casey says, not answering Donnie’s question as he looks around the alley. “I mean, heck of a walk, but not so much a drive. Or run, considering the mileage you guys get.”

“Casey,” Donnie says firmly. “Answer my question. Did you or did you not come here with my brothers?”

“Man, the fuck are you hiding from them anyways? None of you will explain shit,” Casey grumbles, still not answering Donnie’s questions, and he kicks a balled-up newspaper as he looks over at Donnie. And maybe Casey can see how rigid Donnie’s posture has gone because, finally, he rolls his eyes and says, “But no, I didn’t bring your bros. I came here because April told me not to.”

Donnie blinks, opening his eyelids again, and slightly lowers his staff in confusion. Again. “Excuse me, she told you not to come here, and you did anyways?”

“Because no one’s telling me jackshit about what you four are fighting about!” Casey spits abruptly, and Donnie hears actual anger in his voice. “You an’ Mike ran off without a word, and Leo an’ Raph are spinning their wheels trying to find you- and then April comes up to me and says a bunch of really vague shit about keeping your location a secret, and fuck. I’m sick of it!”

Casey smacks his hockey stick’s wide end on the ground, and still seems angry as he glares at Donnie. “I came here because if no one’s going to give me damn answers, or answer my damn texts, then I’ll get them my damn self! And shut up- I know that wasn’t grammatically correct! Fuck off!”

Donnie sets aside his reflexive correction, and lets some of his defensiveness ebb. If Casey is alone then, and April has found them but protected them… then maybe not everything is lost?

“…so what now?” Donnie asks carefully, extremely wary of what Casey will decide to do. Now
that he has their general location, he could practically bring Donnie’s brothers right to his doorstep. Leo and Raph know the signs of an underground lair; it wouldn’t be hard for them to find Donnie and Mikey’s. It’s a troubling thought, and the way Casey is thinking things over is more so.

“Shit. I don’t know. You could talk to me?” Casey suggests, waving a hand vaguely. His anger slips away, and he sighs loudly. “All four of you are acting weird as hell and I’m really tired of it. It’d be nice if you told me what’s going on, because hey, I’m kind of really involved with all your guys’ collective shit, and it really sucks when you all have great big fights and tell me exactly nothing about why.”

Donnie isn’t sure how to approach that. Everything that’s happened… can he really summarize it in a way that’s understandable? And more importantly, would Casey even believe him if he tried to?

Casey is Raph’s best friend. That’s a solid fact about their group dynamic. And while he and Donnie had gotten close on the farm, just for a while there, they’d… drifted afterwards. Returned to the older version of their group, where he and Casey barely spoke at all.

And Donnie hadn’t tried to change that. He’d been too busy stifling himself with guilt and stress to even think about relationships. Even with April.

“How do I know you’re not going to go straight to Raph with this?” Donnie says warily, and his tightening grip on his bo is only half unconscious. “I have no reason to trust you to not.”

“Uh, I guess… it’ll depend on what it is,” Casey replies, leaning on his hockey stick. “If it’s like, life-threatening shit, then I probably will. But if you aren’t in danger, and you really, really don’t want me to… guess I won’t.”

Donnie’s grip on his bo staff slackens, and he’s not entirely sure if he just heard correctly. “Really? You promise?”

Casey shrugs, and seems to be trying to look nonchalant as he does. “Sure. Buddies keep secrets for buddies, and that’s what we are. I won’t tell Raph squat if you don’t want me to, ‘cause this seems pretty serious from my view.”

Donnie then realizes that despite the casualness of his words, Casey was actually worried about him and Mikey. Enough that he went against April’s word, and kept their location secret from his best friend. He’s come here in the dead of night, without his gear to fight, which he never does anymore, and clearly isn’t looking to forcibly drag anyone anywhere. He… came to talk, and likely nothing else.

Donnie lowers his staff completely, and tries to keep his head from swimming with both confusion and relief. He’ll settle for the latter at the moment.

“It’s… complicated,” Donnie says slowly, trying to choose words that’ll best explain the situation. Casey is still closer to Raph than he is with Donnie, so there’s a firm chance he won’t believe a word that Donnie has to say. It still sounds fake to Donnie sometimes, even with his own experiences to back it up. Because why would their brothers ever hurt them like that? It doesn’t make sense.

“Isn’t everything these days?” Casey drawls, and Donnie notices then that his friend has deep circles under his eyes. Donnie supposes that not even Casey Jones is immune to post-war sleep deprivation. Or mourning symptoms.

The remembrance that his father is dead shoots through Donnie’s mind suddenly, like it has on and
off for weeks now, and it’s a hard thing to pull his brain back on track. Explaining things, he needs to focus on that. He can do that. Grieving and feeling the pit widen in his chest can come later.

Donnie dryly, and semi-humorlessly, chuckles at Casey’s words. “Yeah, I guess so. Um. See. Things haven’t been… great, with my family lately. Mikey and I… we needed a break from it.”

“How so? Running away without notice and then not answering your phones for weeks?”

And there’s Casey’s anger again, and Donnie wavers for a moment. Maybe he should just give up and not bother trying at all.

He shakes off the negative thought, and tries again. “It- It wasn’t good of us to do that. I’m sorry. We just- we didn’t know if you’d- I’m sorry. I couldn’t tell anyone anything, because… I wasn’t sure if you’d even believe me. About my brothers. And how they’ve been-” For a split second, Donnie doesn’t want to say it, but he has to. And as the words finally do come out, they feel like bile on his tongue. “About how they’ve been treating us pretty much like shit. For a really long time, actually. And maybe you haven’t noticed, or maybe you didn’t care, but we couldn’t take it anymore, and-”

“Ah, wait, I’m gonna stop you there,” Casey interrupts; killing the spiral Donnie was working himself into by accident. Casey is grimacing, and looks even more frustrated than earlier. “This? This right here? Yeah, I just realize this is going to involve a lot more feelings than I originally thought and hell if I’m going to do that like this. We’re getting drinks.”

Donnie can’t form a response for a solid beat, and it takes him an embarrassingly long time to switch tracks again. “Excuse me. What?”

“Drinks. Alcohol. Liquid courage.” Casey explains as he stands straight again, swinging his hockey stick up onto his shoulders. “If we’re going to talk about feelings, then we are going to do it while drunk. Like all men do.”

“I’m a mutant,” Donnie corrects automatically.

“Tomato potato, we’re getting smashed either way.”

Donnie can’t believe this is where the conversation is going. He was having an anxiety attack dammit, can’t they go back to that? “Where the heck are we going to get drinks this time of night? And where would anyone serve a mutant anyways?”

“There’s a depot like, not even three blocks from here,” Casey says, jerking his head leftways. “I passed it a few minutes ago, and it’s definitely still open. Plus, you gave me that nice little fake ID card a few months back, remember? And I got money on me, so we’re in business. Drinks are on me tonight, but you owe me.”

Donnie wants to protest, but then realizes he doesn’t have a reason to. Casey is going to pay, Donnie won’t be seen, and his friend is willing to listen while he supplies drinks that Donnie has only tried a few times before. So in two words, to summarize how few cares Donnie has to give at this point…

Fuck it.

So, Donnie stows his staff away, gives into peer pressure, and follows his friend towards the liquor store.
When Casey comes back out of the depot, large, heavy bags swinging in his hands, Donnie realizes he needs to make another stressful decision about how much he’s going to trust Casey.

Getting drunk out on a rooftop sounds fun in theory, but Donnie’s entire existence depends on him being aware and ready to run at any given moment. If he got ‘smashed’, as Casey puts it, on a random rooftop, he very likely wouldn’t be able to get back home safely. Too many variable outcomes involve him being seen, or caught, or dead- and Donnie doesn’t want to meet any of those ends. Which brings up the only other choice he has, since doing this anywhere else would be skirting potential exposure.

Casey whistles long and low as they enter the station, and even as Donnie's constant thrum of anxiety heightens at revealing this precious concealed location, he feels some amount of pride for what he and Mikey have accomplished.

“Nice digs,” Casey says, making his way through the stray planters everywhere in the station. “What’s up with all the plants though?”

“It’s… a new experiment,” Donnie says slowly. “It’s a food crop of my- our own design, since it would cut down how often we need to retrieve fresh produce from grocers, and improve the air quality of the station. Mikey and I are working on it together.”

“Both of you?” Casey questions. “And Mikey hasn’t made you flip your shit yet?”

Donnie automatically rolls his eyes at Casey’s good-natured jab, even as he feels hesitantly confused. He doesn’t hear any of the judgement or scorn he’d been waiting for, and he covers the small amount of surprise he has with a shrug. “We’re trying things differently now. It’s… better like this. For both of us.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

“Huh,” Casey says shortly. Then he nods, and seems to just accept Donnie's words. “Cool. Nerdy, but cool. So where’s the kitchen again?”

Donnie points at the largest exit from the main room, being the living room, and Casey heads into it with the bags. Donnie sets down his still-mostly-empty bag by the sofa, adds Casey’s hockey stick to that, and then hesitates at putting down his own weapon.

It’s stupid of him, but doesn’t feel comfortable just disarming himself like that. Not with the elephant still in the room, and his new home’s location being held in Casey Jones’ questionable hands. Donnie really, really wants to be able to blindly trust this- because it feels like he can’t do that with anyone anymore- but he just isn’t sure. And Donnie hates being unsure.

Casey comes back out of the kitchen, pushing past the drapes Mikey and Donnie had hung in the place of an actual door. He has the box of four coolers to start with, and Donnie reads nothing but nonchalance in his posture. Donnie hadn’t heard Casey calling anyone in the kitchen, and at the rate Casey texts, Donnie knows he wouldn’t have had time to send a truly clear message to anyone, and Donnie is the only one in his family that ever bothers to use the tracking system in the T-phones, never mind that Donnie disabled Leo’s and Raph’s before he left, and…
Casey had said he wasn’t going to tell. That this was strictly confidential, unless life-threatening. He hadn’t said it quite in words, but it still relayed the message well enough. Donnie can trust Casey. For now.

It’s a hard thing to let go of it, but Donnie leans his staff beside the hockey stick, and goes to sit down with Casey on the couch.

Because Casey is Casey, and Donnie informed him very clearly how fast his body processes and breaks down alcohol, his friend had bought more than enough for the two of them.

Four coolers, six beers, one large bottle of tequila, one medium bottle of rum, and a two litre of coke. It’s a lot, and though Donnie isn’t usually one to literally try drowning his problems, he’s attempting to focus on the ‘liquid courage’ part of things, since hell if he doesn’t need a lot more of that for this.

Donnie still skitters around addressing why he and Casey are doing this, and avoids the topic long as he can. It’s not long enough, unfortunately.

Two coolers and a half-watched television show later, Casey brings in the beer and says, “Okay. We’re pussy-footing shit, and it’s just stupid at this point. Plus, I’ve waited really patiently in my opinion, so I think I’m owed at least a half-assed explanation.”

And Donnie had been so enjoying the fuzziness of alcohol in his system. Casey’s demand brings a sigh to Donnie’s lips, and sobers him mentally and physically. “Fine,” He says wearily, holding out a hand for a beer. “Give me one of those, and we’ll talk.”

The coolers had tasted like limes, but the beer tastes like shit. Donnie doesn’t have much of a taste for it, seems like. He drains the can anyways, because his system eats through the sensations fast enough the effect will hit him immediately, and he really would rather feel brave than scared right now. His scientific mind reminds him through the soft haze that alcohol is a depressant, and will only make things worse if he’s not careful, but Donnie is well beyond caring about that. He’s taking risks all over tonight as is, so what’s one more?

So Donnie sets the can down on the table, next to his two bottles and Casey’s single one, and tries to pull his admittedly-messy shit together long enough to give a coherent explanation about his family drama, and not fall into an anxiety attack or disassociation episode midway.

Donnie has been learning all sorts of new and wonderful psychiatry terms lately, since he’d begun researching how to help with Mikey’s problems about physical contact and triggers, and by extension learning about his own issues and triggers, and isn’t it just amazing how fucked up everything really is about them?

His own little brother, scared of sudden movements and certain tones of voices. Scared of sudden movements and certain tones of voices specifically from their brothers, from Donnie. Donnie had done it again too, just yesterday in fact, and it’d been horrible to see Mikey shrink away from the contact. Donnie doesn’t try to touch Mikey’s back of head or face anymore, not without explicit permission and warning. Because those were Raph’s favorite spots to hit him. Just a good old smack or punch to get Mikey back on track, remind him he wasn’t allowed to daydream or act goofy while they were on patrol or training or apparently anywhere at any time, because Raph did it constantly, and Mikey goes right back to those moments with the right triggers and Donnie hates it.

That specific stress point comes spilling out too fast for Donnie to register how far he’s gone off track, and he’s left with Casey staring at him. Beer can limp in hand, and genuine and complete
shock in his expression.

Donnie’s frustrated rambling dries up, and he ducks his head. “Sorry. That wasn’t where I meant to go. But that’s… that’s one of the reasons we left.”

Casey stares a moment longer, then takes a slow sip of his beer. Donnie chances a glance, and Casey seems… thoughtful, and maybe a bit disturbed.

“Is that really true?” Casey asks finally, quiet and confused sounding. Donnie jerks a nod, and doesn’t look at Casey.


“You know the worst part?” Donnie says, because he’s definitely heading for tipsy now and feeling angry and wanting to get this poison out of himself finally- “I did it too, sometimes. Leo and Raph did it more, way more, but I did it too. I’m not guiltless here. None of us are. And I didn’t even start trying to fucking fix it until a few days back. He just- it happens so much, Casey. He’ll be completely normal, and then I’ll be in his space and he just freezes. Like- like some kind of prey animal. And it’s fucked up that I look at my brother and see that sort of imagery, but it’s really hard not to. Fuck, and that’s not even addressing how bad the psychological effects we’ve had on him are. He thinks he’s stupid, Casey. He thinks he’s actually stupid, and fuck- I definitely helped with that one. I perpetuated it because I was having a hard time with Leo, and I took my anger out on him because it was easy, and that’s not fucking okay. None of this is okay.

“And I didn’t even really notice, let alone comprehend, how not okay it was, until we left,” Donnie finishes, miserable and angry still. He’d done that to his brother, increasingly so over the past years, and yet again, Donnie can find his own hand in the process of breaking his own family. Mikey didn’t deserve that. He might’ve brought stress- god, so much stress- into Donnie’s life, but at least Donnie had half-way deserved that stress. Mikey hadn’t ever done anything, really, to warrant so much shit from their family.

Casey is silent, and Donnie feels like this is the point where his friend will decide to keep listening, or bail out. One or the other, and Donnie knows that there is a very real chance that Casey will pick the latter. Why would he believe Donnie anyways? Especially about Raph’s treatment of Mikey. Picking them over his best friend? Yeah right…

Casey sets his beer on the table with a sharp sound, stands up, and walks away. It’s not towards his hockey stick though, so Donnie’s brief jump of fear isn’t confirmed. Instead, Casey goes back into the kitchen, and returns with two glasses and the tequila bottle. Casey sets them down on the coffee table with loud thunks, and then stares at them, hunched over his knees and looking sick.

“I … I don’t know what to say,” Casey mumbles, looking at the table, then at Donnie, and then back at the table. His hands ball into fists, and he sucks in a harsh breath. “Fuck. This is just-fucked up.”

Donnie nods, and keeps eyeing Casey’s reactions. And in those reactions, he sees that Casey’s eyes are wide and have anger burning in them.

“Fuck,” Casey says, because it’s the best and simplest reaction, even in Donnie’s opinion, and he slumps back into the couch. Casey’s anger drains away, and it’s replaced by something like exhaustion. “Well. That was incredibly awful to hear, and you said that was only one reason. So lay the rest on me. I’m ready.”

“…you’re still going to listen?” Donnie asks, still wary of Casey’s trustworthiness.
Casey sighs, and leans heavily against the arm of the couch. “Yup. Seems like. We’ve come this far, and I’ve got the hard shit here for when we need it. Go for bravo or whatever, we’re too far into this to bail out now.”

Donnie swallows thickly, utterly disbelieving of what’s happening, and nods weakly. “Sure. Let’s- let’s do that.”

Casey grabs his beer again, and gives Donnie the go for it gesture.

So Donnie does.

--/

Among all the other wonderfully fucked up things about his family, besides Mikey’s treatment from Raph, there’s the matter of how Leo treated Donnie.

And as much as Donnie convinced himself otherwise, for so long, it’s hard to not see it now that he’s stepped back. Over and over, his brother would emotionally manipulate Donnie into doing things. Into pushing himself to the breaking point, and then over it, because Leo thought that was what he should do. What he had to do, because his brother said so.

The retromutagen, especially. Donnie has finally perfected that solution, but not before he’d gone through months, months, of sleepless days and nights. He’d barely stepped out of his lab even to use the washroom, let alone sleep and eat. And then Leo, despite knowing that, had come in and told him off for failing to fix yet another problem for their family.

“And he’d followed me out of the lab and said- and I’m quoting him here—” Donnie says, pacing still because his anxiety over actually voicing these things is driving him nuts. “—‘you know how much this means to Sensei’. And then I’d said, ‘I know, I’m trying as hard as I can’. And then he’d said— ‘well try HARDER’.”

“Try harder, try harder,” Donnie hisses, rubbing his face angrily as the fury from back then bubbles up hot and stinging. “His solution to an unsolvable problem I’d been slaving over for months, was to try fucking harder. Never mind that I’d been doing just that, every single night. Never mind that he did and still does nothing around the lair other than bark orders and nit-pick everyone else’s sub-par martial arts abilities. Because, because, fucking maybe I don’t have time to train, because I’m busy solving everyone else’s problems all on my own! And every time I’d try to sit down and do something other than break my brain over everyone else’s issues, he’d come in and say something or other that would just make me feel like shit, and then I’d go right back to whatever I’d been stuck on, because fuck, I can’t let my clan down, now can I?”

Casey’s still listening to Donnie’s ranting, and his expressions keep flickering between frustration, anger, and sometimes briefly a sort of sad confusion. Donnie keeps pacing restlessly, anxiously, and Casey pushes the small glass of tequila across the coffee table towards him. It’s only filled a quarter ways, but it burns in Donnie’s throat regardless.

How many has he had so far? He doesn’t remember. He doesn’t care. He’s mad and pissed and maybe very tipsy. And he just does. not. care. anymore.

Casey hasn’t told him to stop yet, hasn’t refuted or rebuked any of Donnie’s claims. Maybe he’s listening, maybe he’s waiting for Donnie to pass out so he can call Leo and Raph. Donnie’s
paranoia and alcohol fueled mind says the latter will happen without a doubt, but Donnie, again, doesn’t fucking care anymore.

He has so much stress in him. So much stress. He’s completely and utterly done with the stress he has pent up. He wants it out. He wants it gone and burned up, and if it takes alcohol and senseless ranting to do that, then so be it.

The pit inside of his chest widens and yawns as he keeps going, and lo, Donnie keeps going anyways. He doesn’t care. He does not care. And maybe if he says that enough times, it’ll be true, and the things he’s saying about his family, about his brothers, will stop tasting like burnt iron on his tongue and he’ll be able to say them and not feel like a piece of shit for saying them.

He’s supposed to love his brothers. They’re all he has left anymore. He’s supposed to love them explicitly and without issue. That’s how family works, that’s how their father taught them family works. Of course their father is dead and Donnie broke his family anyways, so what does that matter anymore? What does anything matter anymore?

“Hey, wait,” Casey says, raising a hand as Donnie keeps pacing. “Back it up to the part where you broke your family. The fuck is that about?”

Donnie laughs, and it comes out harsh and bitter. “Because I did. I did this. I’m the one who took Mikey and ran away, I’m the one who got it in my head that our family was wrong, I’m the one didn’t fucking fix this before it got so bad—”

“Hey, Dee, chill for a sec, what do you mean—?”

“If I’d just tried harder—” Donnie says, ignoring Casey’s attempts to interrupt. “—to just fix things, head Leo off before he- he got like this, or stood up for Mikey against Raph, or actually managed to talk to my father, or never had that stupid fucking fight to begin with— maybe I could have prevented everything.”

Casey’s watching him pace, eyes wide and confused, and Donnie feels like his chest has sucked everything inwards, even as the words coming from him bubble out of that space, and he’s had far too many drinks to prevent them from spilling out.

He could have prevented this. Tracking everything back, months and months ago, he could have prevented this. It all leads back, the threads of misfortune and misery, to the point where Leo had told Donnie they needed to leave the city, and Donnie had refused.

He’d been cocky. He’d been so self-assured. He’d been a fucking imbecile. He’d looked his leader, his brother, and now his Sensei, dead in the eye and had refused his plan of action. And then it’d just spiraled from there.

Leo’s injuries. His persisting weakness in his leg and lung capacity, even months after. And beyond just that- their father’s defeat at the hands of the Shredder, in the sewers. His retreat into a feral state, just to survive. The time they’d wasted, healing Leo and healing their father. Wasted and lost, costing more lives in New York, and costing them battles at later dates, because it’d taken months for Donnie’s father and brother to recover, and maybe if they’d never been injured like that, Leo wouldn’t have lost those pieces of himself trying to cope with such severe trauma, trauma that Donnie might as well have caused himself, and maybe Raph wouldn’t have acted out so badly towards Mikey if Leo hadn’t gone so absent and different like he had, and maybe then Donnie wouldn’t have had to enact such drastic measures and break them even further apart than they already were, and their father- their father would have been at full strength, maybe, for all the fights he went into and lost later on, and maybe he could have won those fights, won
them and come home again, including his final one, if only Donnie had just listened to his brother-
-it’s his fault, everything is his fault, their dead father their broken brothers their split home and
the grave miles and miles from New York-
-if only he’d listened, if only he’d nodded and said yes and not stubbornly, stupidly insisted they
stay and fight, then maybe their family wouldn’t have been broken, maybe their father would still
be alive-

And Donnie doesn’t even notice until Casey’s has pulled his hands away from his head, that he’s
been clutching his skull and yelling for the past few minutes.

Donnie’s ears are ringing, and his chest feels hollow, and he realizes all at once that he’s been
speaking without any filter. Everything he’d carefully concealed and ignored has clawed its way
out of him, and now Casey knows. Knows what Donnie’s done.

“Jesus Christ,” Casey breathes hoarsely, looking at Donnie like he’s an explosive waiting to go
off. He keeps a strong grip on Donnie’s shaking arms, and seems like he’s struggling to form a
better response than just that. “How long have you been holding that in?”

Too long, Donnie’s mind says, and then he just breaks.

“It’s my fault,” Donnie says, and his voice cracks as he does. “I- I broke our family. The one- the
one time I really should have listened, I didn’t, and it- it cost us everything, and I’m- I’m so sorry-”

And he can’t get anything out past that point, because his chest finally does give out, and Donnie’s
throat can only produce a harsh sob.

Casey whispers “fuck” one last time, and releases Donnie’s arms to pull him into a hug. And
Donnie lets him, because right now he can’t do anything other than just hold tightly onto his friend,
and try not to drown as everything falls apart.

-/-

Casey, as it turns out, is actually pretty good at listening. And Donnie, as it also turns out, really
needs to just flat out talk about everything.

It isn’t even a conversation. It’s just Casey letting Donnie vent as much as he wants, and providing
a literal and metaphorical shoulder to cry on.

Donnie is still crying on and off. It’s humiliating, but he is definitely drunk at this point, and oh he
cares so very little for pretenses anymore. So very little. The absolute least.

So Donnie talks without a filter, for probably the first time in a very long while. Usually he edits
everything he says, choosing and selecting words carefully so he can avoid a conflict. But, there’s
alcohol swimming in his stomach, someone is actually willing to listen to him this time, and
Donnie is… so tired of filtering. Of hiding what he really thinks.

As he talks, his brain jumps all over itself, picking up different threads of frustration and misery
and self-blame that have been stewing for months, if not years. He’s dumping on Casey, but his
friend is still listening, so Donnie keeps going despite feeling guilty for it.
He feels guilty about everything lately, so why not add one more thing to the pile? He can take it. He’s got the experience. Too much experience.

He feels guilty that he didn’t fix his family, that he ran away from them instead, and even as Casey tells him it’s not his fault, Donnie can’t accept that. It is. It is and he feels horrible for it.

He’s their everything, it feels like. Their doctor, their electrician, their technician, their carpenter and scientist and… everything. He does everything for his family, and he still abandoned them regardless. And just when they probably needed him most, because their dad is dead and that’s Donnie’s fault too, and-

“It’s not your fault,” Casey insists again, even as Donnie shakes his head. “You can’t- you can’t take all the credit for him dying. I mean- there’s no way you could have predicted any of this happening.”

“I should have been able to,” Donnie mutters. “I should have and I could have, and fuck- I could’ve prevented everything if I’d just listened. They probably hate me for that.”

“What, no they don’t-”

“I abandoned them, Casey. I packed up and left, and won’t answer any of their calls, and I’m- I’m the reason-”

“Shut up, shut up. No you’re not. Jesus Christ- you are not the reason your dad is dead.”

Donnie mutely shakes his head again, because he is, and hunches over his knees as his eyes start to burn. Casey sighs, and gives up trying to convince Donnie otherwise on matters, and just puts an arm across his shell instead. It’s a small comfort, that touch, but it’s a good one as Donnie rides out his umpteenth swell of grief and regret.

Then, because Donnie’s brain is large and just so much fun with alcohol in it, his thoughts jump to other points in his mind. So many points. He has too much in his head, and it’s all crawling out now that someone is willing to hear all the stinging and poisonous thoughts that have crowded together in Donnie’s mind.

He tells Casey that their father didn’t say goodbye to them. He had a chance, and he hadn’t taken it. Splinter- and the name rolls so much easier off Donnie’s tongue than father does these days- had known he was going to die, and he’d said nothing. They could have prevented it, planned for it, and if not that-

-then maybe they could have at least said goodbye. Then maybe Donnie could have said goodbye. And the fact that his father didn’t even try to burns and hurts so much worse than the tequila and tears do.

Maybe they hadn’t had much in common, maybe Donnie and his father had drifted more and more as he grew up, but Donnie had loved his father. Still loves him. Even after this.

Donnie misses his dad, truly and deeply. He misses him even though he only said goodbye to Leo, only left Leo anything of himself, only ever paid attention to Leo-

“Leo was his favorite,” Donnie says, finally, after thinking that thought for so long. He says it aloud and it’s like releasing something that’d been begging to get out since forever. “Because-fuck. I don’t even know why. Like how I don’t know why he chose Leo to be the leader. At the end, he actually told Leo it wasn’t even because he had the qualities of a leader. No, it was just because Leo was meant to be the leader. What kind of bullshit is that? Picking someone for
something because they’re meant to be that something. Not because they have good qualities, or because they have the right training, or fucking anything other than destiny. I’m so sick of destiny talk. It’s bullshit. And apparently, Leo was destined to be the fucking favorite son all along, and maybe I never even mattered to my father at all. Just- just one more kid to take care. Or something. Probably not, but- I’m angry. He could’ve told us, could have said goodbye, and he didn’t. He only… he only said goodbye to Leo. And then he just gave up. Left us.

“What kind of father does that? What kind of father just-gives up on his life, and leaves without even saying goodbye? And- and all the shit he let Leo and Raph get away with… god. He let them… he let them do so much. To us, me and Mikey. I mean, he was always on Raph’s case for his temper, but fuck if he ever did anything when Raph was taking it out on Mikey. Or me. Or when Leo was snapping at us or- or demanding I push myself harder to meet his standards, he never said anything. He was-” Donnie’s throat clenches around the word, and he forces it out anyways. “- he was neglectful, and absent, and he never did anything to connect with me or Mikey. Ever. I can’t… I can’t even remember the last time he said something meaningful to me. It was only ever training talk, or stupid small talk, never anything that meant anything.”

There’s a rum and coke drink on the table, and while Donnie forgets when Casey went and got it for him, he drinks it anyways. Slowly, because he’s past the point where he wants to drown everything, and now he’s just riding it out. The pop and rum tastes a lot better than the tequila did, and Donnie takes the drink slow.

Maybe his father had never tried to connect with him because Donnie couldn’t measure up like his siblings. Maybe Splinter had never spent time alone with Donnie because he didn’t see enough worth in it. Donnie didn’t like training, didn’t like meditating, and he wasn’t as good at those things as his brothers. Maybe his dad had loved him, but not liked him. Maybe that was why he didn’t say goodbye.

Maybe it was because Donnie had failed their family. Failed to stop the invasion, failed to heal his brother right, failed to do anything right…

“I’m a failure as a doctor, a ninja, and a brother,” Donnie mumbles, miserable and sorry for himself. “And a son. Fuck.”

“You’re not,” Casey says, and he starts to make the motions to shove Donnie, but the gesture turns into a pat on the shoulder instead. Donnie likes the pat better than he would have the shove. He’s sick of being shoved around. He’s too tired for it anymore.

“I am,” Donnie insists.

“You’re drunk, and depressed, and a sad fuckin’ mutant. But you’re not a failure.”

“You don’t get it,” Donnie mumbles sadly, because even though Casey is his friend and isn’t exactly stupid, he obviously doesn’t get it. And then Donnie slides sideways onto Casey’s shoulder, and Casey doesn’t shove him away for that. Donnie would probably fall off the couch if he did, and he’s grateful he doesn’t have to meet the floor just yet.

“No, I don’t get it,” Casey says quietly. “But I think I’m starting to.”

There’s a blur between being on the couch, and Donnie mumbling sadly about how his older brothers were the ones who got all the attention, all the special care, and then he’s tossing the coffee table across the room because Donnie might be sad but he’s also angry with his father. Angry that he’d purposefully withheld information over and over, and each time he’d only revealed it when he wanted to. Not when Donnie needed it, not when all of them needed it.
Like the hands. The healing hand techniques. Just out of the blue one day, his father had suddenly been able to fix any injury by muttering a bunch of words, and why hadn’t he told Donnie about that? Why hadn’t he said something, when Donnie was memorizing medical textbooks at thirteen forwards and backwards, because they were all freaks of nature and no one would help them if they got sick. Why hadn’t his father revealed his miracle cure when Donnie had been beaten up by a mutant ape, or when his arm had been wrenched out of its socket, or when any of his brothers had had a similar injury? Why hadn’t he said anything to Donnie, while Donnie had been fighting against the odds to pull together enough medical knowledge to keep his brothers alive and well?

And telling them that he had nothing left to teach them, when Donnie had known that wasn’t true. He knew it then, and he knows it now, and it frustrates and confuses him and makes him see red. Because hey, seeing as they’re all now without a guardian of any sort, it might have been nice to know every trick he never taught them, because the world still wants them dead and that’s never going to change. Not now, not ever. And maybe it was to prevent them from following a path like the Shredder had, or some misguided attempt keep them from ever becoming the monsters people called them as, but it didn’t change the fact that he’d kept information that could save their lives one day, and let it die with him.

Leo was the only one their father ever taught the healing techniques to. He hadn’t even tried with Donnie, even though Donnie was their doctor, and not Leo. It was always Leo who got those things from their father, special clan knowledge that none of their other siblings were allowed to know because leaders only.

Maybe their dad had just loved Leo that much more, and hadn’t even thought he was doing anything wrong.

And yet.

Donnie misses his dad. He misses his brothers. He misses his home.

Even if it was really bad sometimes, and just barely okay at other times, at least they’d been together. Donnie had run away with Mikey, built them a new home and tried to create new lives, but he still wants to go back sometimes. To when it was good, those moments and days where it was like they were kids again, and it was less complicated, less wrong.

“I hate him,” Donnie whispers, harsh and low. Because even with drunk senses and the safety of a listening ear, he’s still scared to say it. “I hate him for keeping all that stuff from us, and not saying goodbye. And I hate him for not stopping Leo or Raph when they’d hit Mikey, or yell at me, or—everything they did to us, and he never even tried to stop it. I don’t know if he even noticed. I miss him though. I miss him… so much…”

They’re leaning against the wall now, on the floor opposite to where Donnie had tossed the table and their empty drinks. The room is a mess and Donnie is still crying, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care at all anymore. He’s tired and he’s hurting and he just wants it to stop, just for a moment.

He wants his dad back. The one that’s still living in his memories. The one that had a kind smile and soft words and would make everything okay by holding Donnie in a hug. The one that hadn’t watched them run right into war, and done nothing to stop them.

“I’m sorry,” Casey whispers back, still letting Donnie lean his full weight on his side. “I… I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” Donnie mumbles, and he raises a wobbly hand to wipe at his eyes. Casey hasn’t made
any comments about the crying, and he doesn’t start then. He lets Donnie keep being pathetic and miserable, and Donnie can’t thank him enough for that.

“I still love him, though. Still miss him every single day,” Donnie says, blindly looking across the dark room they’re sitting in. Casey had turned off the lights once Donnie had gone past the point of tipsiness and into drunkenness, and Donnie appreciates that. “My brothers too. I miss them all.”

“I know,” Casey says. “You keep sayin’ so.”

“Doesn’t make it any less… painful,” Donnie says, and his throat closes up again.

He’s winding down. He can feel the need to pass out on the edge of his senses, and he’s ready to. Blissful and quiet darkness is so much better than being awake, where everything is too hard to bear almost all the time.

Maybe he is depressed. He’s been holding off putting any one label to himself, because he is an amateur with mental health still. And he always will be, because he can’t get a degree or go to school at all. He has to make do with the internet and salvaged textbooks and his own intuition. Maybe he’s depressed and he’s never going to be able to get the right help, because there’s no coverage for ‘giant mutant turtle’ in any insurance company packages.

Donnie laughs, croaky and tired, and he doesn’t explain to Casey why he is.

Donnie just… misses his family, and misses being able to trust blindly. Misses feeling loved.

Casey’s scrawny, but solid presence, is helping with those things. A lot. Or maybe that’s the alcohol talking, and Donnie is an idiot. He takes comfort in it anyways, and keeps talking about everything pent up inside him.

“You still hate me?” Donnie asks, after things have started dying down in his brain. He feels disconnected and floaty, and the question comes out easily. “You said so multiple times before.”


“Really? I’m honored. And all I took was baring my soul and crying pathetically.”

“You’re still a fuckin’ nerd, though. A sad nerd, but a nerd anyways. A snerd.”

Donnie is definitely drunk, because “snerd” makes him snort, and actually laugh for real. Not bitter laughter, but hey this is kind of really funny laughter.

“You’re a…” Donnie wants to say asshole, but that’s not true right now. “You’re a good friend, Casey.”

Casey turns his head, and gives Donnie a look. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

 “…you’re drunk,” Casey says, shaking his head.

“Yeeeeeah… that too. But still. Thank you for the- the completely ill-advised plan to get me drunk, and then sticking around to listen to my shit.”

“You’re a crying drunk, an angry drunk, and an emotional drunk. The fuck, you’re giving me, like, vertigo or something.”
“Wrong context for that. Wrong- wrong usage in general.”

“Fuck ooooff. I’m- I’m kind of drunk too. Shut up.”

“You shut up,” Donnie mumbles, which only makes Casey laugh for some reason, and it draws another laugh out of Donnie.

Things blur completely after that, and before Donnie knows it or wants to know it- he’s waking up on the floor of the station living room, and feeling like someone put his brain in the blender and hit puree.

He tilts his head towards whatever had woken him up, and he sees Mikey kneeling on the floor by his head. Donnie blinks sluggishly, and his eyes feel sticky and gross.

“You shut up,” Donnie mumbles, which only makes Casey laugh for some reason, and it draws another laugh out of Donnie.

“Evening, sunshine,” Mikey says quietly, giving Donnie a smile. “You smell and look like shit.”

Donnie can only groan, and roll onto his other side away from Mikey. Ugh, everything is too bright already and the living room lights aren’t even on yet. There’s just the kitchen’s light spilling out into the room, and Mikey seems to be the culprit of that fact.

“How long… how long have I been out?” Donnie asks, voice feeling like sandpaper.

“Since last night. You guys slept all day.”

Donnie then hears a muffled groan from somewhere nearby, and figures that Casey feels about as good as Donnie does.

“You guys drank way too much,” Mikey says in a scolding tone, and that elicits groans from both Donnie and Casey. “Seriously. There’s cans and stuff everywhere. I’m kinda surprised one of you isn’t dead.”

“Casey Jones can’t be… can’t be killed by alcohol,” Casey says, clearly trying to sound valiant, but only managing to sound sick.

“Maybe not, but I think it gave it a good shot,” Donnie mumbles. Shot, yes, such a pleasant term for things. Donnie is never drinking again and he blames Casey completely for what’s happened.

Mikey tsk’s at them both, and pats Donnie’s aching skull gently. “You two lumps stay on the floor a little longer. I’mma get you some barf buckets and water, since I’m guessin’ that’s what comes next here.”

Mikey stands up and goes, and Donnie mumbles a “thank you” after him. Alone in the living room again, Donnie struggles with his hazy mind to remember what he needs to do now. Right, Casey. He needs to know if Casey is going to… tell on them.

Such a bland term for such a terrifying idea, but Donnie is too hungover to come up with something fancier.

So he rolls over on his side, again, and faces towards where Casey is flat on his back and covering his eyes. Casey’s bandana is missing, and his hoodie looks more than slept in, and Donnie thinks that his friend might be swearing the same oath Donnie is about never drinking, ever, again.

“So are you going to tell where we are?” Donnie asks, getting straight to the point because everything hurts still and he doesn’t want to bother with anxiety. Yes or no, thanks. He wants this over with.
“…no,” Casey mumbles after a long moment. “No I’m not gonna say anything to your bros. Might- might punch them once or twice. But like- fuck. This is really… shitty.” A pause, and then, “Actually. Yeah, I’m going to punch them both into next Tuesday. Just watch me.”

Donnie doesn’t even grimace at the threats, and he can’t tell if it’s because he’s too tired to, or because he doesn’t care. Maybe, even, a part of him is glad to hear the threats.

“So you believe me?” Donnie asks, throat still scratchy and hoarse. “Raph’s… he’s your best friend. You’re really going to side with us?”

Donnie is wary because, in his mind, which is admittedly biased and highly suspicious, Casey siding with him on anything sounds impossible. Especially when it came down to choosing him or Raph.

“Raph is my best bud, but he is also apparently a huge doucheanoe, and now it’s my job to kick his ass for that,” Casey states boldly. Donnie raises an eye-ridge, because said statement is less intimidating when Casey currently resembles death boiled over. Casey seems to sense the look, and he lifts his arms to give Donnie one right back. And despite the paleness to his complexion, there’s an amount of certainty in Casey’s expression.

Donnie isn’t sure what to do with the certainty, or the fact that Casey actually seems to be… on his side, for once, for real.

“Gonna say some feels-y stuff right now, so get ready,” Casey says, and he keeps his gaze level with Donnie as he does. And before Donnie can respond, Casey takes a deep breath, and says, “I’m sorry I didn’t see this shit when it started to get bad, and that I didn’t see it the whole time it went on. I’m best friends with Raph, but I’m you an’ Mikey’s friend too. And even if I wasn’t, I should’ve stepped in. Because that shit you’re telling me has been going on? Fuck that. That’s not okay at all, and I’m pissed my own best friend did that to you guys. Leo too. And your dad, Christ.”

Casey rubs his face, and turns completely on his side to face Donnie. Donnie can’t summon any coherent amount of words to respond to Casey’s, because he… really wasn’t expecting that. At all.

“You guys’ve been… dealing with so much, and I never saw any of it,” Casey says, and he looks frustrated with himself. Deeply so. “I mean. I only got the one lil sis, and I figured that maybe brothers worked differently, and since you all aren’t exactly human either… I couldn’t tell if it was wrong or not. And I guess… I just ignored it. Should’ve said something anyways. I’m sorry, Don. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

Donnie thought he’d cried himself out hours ago, but looks like he was wrong. There’s a mist over his eyes for a moment, and he blinks it away as discretely as he can. Mortification, thy name I know well.

But it’s a small price to pay, honestly, for Casey’s support. For anyone’s support.

“Thank you,” Donnie manages, and as much as he’d like to make things wordier than that, he’s busy shoving his emotions as far down as he can, and pushing his stomach down with them. Tequila is never going in him ever again.

Casey gives a one shoulder shrug, and nods. His hair musses worse, and just makes him look like even more of a hungover mess.

“How come you didn’t go to April though?” Casey asks after a moment, and he gives Donnie a
questioning look. “You two are tight, but you haven’t replied to anything she’s sent you this whole time. I know for sure, ‘cause she was actually really pissed for a while there. Mellowed out after she found you two, though.”

Donnie vaguely remembers that piece of information being given to him last night, and recalls how it’d felt to hear it. Mostly, his rush of relief and gratitude for April’s trust and protection had been shoved aside by his panic about Casey, but it’d been there. It’d been there and Donnie, for a split second, had felt unburdened by at least one of his countless worries.

And then the reasons of why he hadn’t been talking to her in the first place had come back to him, and he’d shoved the freeing feeling away for later.

There’s too much to explain, about April and his increasingly complicated relationship with her, at least from his view, so Donnie settles with saying, “Same reason for me not talking to you. Sort of. I wasn’t entirely sure if you guys would be… trustworthy.”

Casey grimaces at that, and Donnie automatically hurries to cover his insult. “I’m sorry. It’s not- it’s not that I don’t trust you guys, but with this, and our brothers, and the hiding-”

Casey shushes him loudly, and puts a hand over his face as he grimaces deeper. “No- no apologizing. My head hurts too much for that, and you did it plenty last night. I get it, and I’m pretty sure April got it too. This is a *sensitive subject*, and we gotta treat it right. Or something. She said that, not me. I mostly just want to punch someone right now.”

“Right now?” Donnie questions, because despite their serious conversation topics, they are still lying on the floor surrounded by empty cans and bottles. And very, very hungover, if he might add.

“…maybe not *right* now. But soon. Like, whenever I can stand up and not *throw* up.”

Donnie instinctively feels like he should be stressing still, be worrying himself into knots about April and their brothers, but he is very hungover and very tired of doing those things. So instead of doing that, he laughs at Casey’s pain, then regrets laughing because he is also in pain, and puts his anxious thoughts aside for later.

“You are both the *most* irresponsible people *ever.*” Mikey says when he comes back, two plastic bowls under his arm and two plastic cups in his hands. He gives Donnie another scolding look as he hands two of the items Donnie. “And to think, you’re supposed to set a better example than this for your innocent younger brother. For shame.”

“Mikey, shut up,” Casey mutters darkly. “You’re about as innocent as downtown New York.”

Mikey sticks his tongue out at him, but places the cup of water and the bowl next to Casey’s head anyways. “I’ll have you know I am the *most* innocent. The absolute innocent-est.”

Donnie wants to roll his eyes at Mikey, but he’s too busy pushing himself up onto his elbows, and then sitting up, and trying not to throw up the whole process. His mouth tastes like he’s eaten something rancid and months old, and his stomach tries to react accordingly. “Casey,” Donnie manages to say, leaning heavily against the foot of the couch. “You have the *worst plans ever.* I’m never letting you talk me into this again.”

“That’s fair,” Casey replies in an equally miserable tone. “I’m never letting me talk *me* into this again.”

“So either of you up for an evening jog? Some training? Maybe a spontaneous dance party?” Mikey asks, and Donnie can just *hear* the shit-eating grin he’s got. “We could get IC kitty and
some lasers for it!”

“Stop enjoying our pain,” Donnie mumbles, weakly swiping at Mikey’s ankles with his leg. Mikey lets Donnie land the blow, and just laughs at how light it was.

“Nope!” Mikey replies brightly, and that earns a groan from Casey and Donnie both.

Despite his obvious amusement at their severe and self-inflicted pain, Mikey stays quiet the whole time it takes for them to get back on their feet, and actually helps out a lot. Even going so far as emptying and washing Casey’s bucket once he tries, and fails, to sit up.

Eventually, and it’s an arduous process getting there, Casey is upright and not liable to die on the side of the street as he heads home. It’s a good thing that he’d texted his dad and sister that he was spending the night, and then the day, and then the next night with a friend. Otherwise, there would have been a large mess for them all to deal with, and Donnie doesn’t need yet another one in his life.

Casey still resembles death when he finally makes it to the door, and Donnie follows after him, swaddled in a blanket that he isn’t taking off until he stops feeling clammy and ill. Casey’s bandana is still missing, similar to how Donnie’s mask is, and they’re both too tired to search for their trademark looks. They got lost somewhere in the transitions between crying and yelling and then crying again last night, and Donnie doesn’t think they’re going to find either for a while.

There’s a split second pause at the exit of the station, and Donnie’s goodbye is on the tip of his tongue when Casey tugs him into an abrupt hug. It’s a surprise, but it only takes a second for Donnie to return the gesture.

“Take care of yourselves,” Casey says, giving Donnie a tight squeeze. “And call April. She’ll wanna hear about all of this.”

“I will, thank you again,” Donnie replies, and he gives Casey just as tight a hug.

As they step back from one another, Casey gives Donnie a jerky nod, and then says, “Cool. I’m going to go beat up your brothers a bunch now, so you guys just hang tight until I sort this out.”

Casey starts to walk away, and Donnie grabs his shoulder before he can. “Nope, no you are not.”

“Why the fuck not? They deserve at least a little bit of punching.”

Donnie grimaces, and then sighs. “Maybe. Maybe they do, but… I don’t feel like you punching my brothers will fix this.”

Casey shrugs off Donnie’s light grip, and slouches with a scowl. “It’ll fix me being pissed with my friends,” He mutters under his breath, and Donnie finds himself smiling wryly. He hadn’t expected Casey support in this, and the overwhelming support he has shown is still something Donnie is trying to wrap his head around.

“I… I have to actually talk with my brothers,” Donnie says, even though he still very much dreads that plan of action. It has to be done, though. Eventually. “We can’t just solve this by punching each other. It’d probably just make things even worse than they already are.”

“Which is why it’d be me punching them right now, not you,” Casey says insistently, and Donnie just shakes his sore feeling head. Casey huffs, and hunches his shoulders a bit more. “Fine. I won’t try to solve this for you. But I definitely can’t guarantee I’m not gonna slug them at least once, next time I see their faces.”
Donnie considers telling Casey he can’t punch his brothers at all, but…

“Just once,” Donnie allows. Because while he’s hungover, and mostly past the emotional break he’d had last night, there’s still anger in him. Tired, hurt anger, and the idea of acting it out physically is a tempting option for release.

“Each?” Casey asks, a note of hope in his voice.

“…each.”

“Sweet. I’ll call later, whenever I’m done cussing them out.”

“Are you going to do it while you still look like a corpse walking?” Donnie asks teasingly, because Casey does look like that, and has a very obvious lilt to how he’s walking.

“Shut up. Maybe.” Casey then grimaces, probably feeling a migraine twinge again. “Okay, maybe not tonight. Tomorrow though. I’ll get them. I swear.”

Donnie rolls his eyes, and wonders just how badly that conflict is going to go. Probably terribly, and he’s doing his best not to care. “Good luck with that, Jones.”

“Thanks, but I won’t need it,” Casey replies haughtily.

Donnie shoves Casey’s shoulder, and Casey shoves back, and then things feel normal again. Sort of, at least, because they’re both hungover and angry, and there’s a big change coming for their group. But Donnie is choosing to ignore all those things, and just enjoy having a warm blanket over his shoulders and the support of a friend.

Casey salutes Donnie one last time, and disappears out into the tunnels. Donnie lingers until his friend is gone from sight, and then he returns to his… very messy living room, which he is going to have to clean up. Donnie sighs, kicking a bottle out of his way as he goes, and figures it’s not such a bad price for what’s come out of the night. Yes he’s hungover, yes his brain feels like mush, yes he had to reveal a lot of things he never wanted to tell anyone ever-

But it doesn’t feel as bad as the pit had, which has closed a fair ways in his chest. His anxiety is dulled and he doesn’t feel the need to worry over a hundred little things at the moment. All in all, not the worst plan Casey has ever had.

Donnie catches Mikey’s voice in the other room, and peeks through the kitchen’s drapes to see who Mikey is talking to. And, to Donnie’s deep surprise, he’s on the phone.

“A-huh? Really?” Mikey says, swinging his feet as he sits on the kitchen table. He hums into the phone receiver, and seems to be listening intently. “No, he didn’t. Huh… and? No, no I will…”

Donnie doesn’t think it sounds like Mikey is talking to their brothers, and Leatherhead doesn’t have a phone to call with, far as he knows, so who…?

Mikey hangs up after saying goodbye, and then turns a serious look towards Donnie. Donnie swallows, and stands a bit straighter.

“That was Casey,” Mikey says, putting his phone down on the table as he does. “He says you told him a lot of really bad stuff last night, and I’m pretty sure most of that stuff isn’t stuff you’ve told me. He’s also says we’re gonna need to talk about that stuff, or he’s gonna come back and hold you to the couch until we do. And I agree with him.”
Donnie blinks, and then lets his tense shoulder drop again. He rubs his icky feeling cheek tiredly, and nods. “I guess we could talk about… some of that stuff.”

“Nah, bro, all of that stuff,” Mikey says firmly. He drops off the table, and approaches Donnie, and Donnie looks Mikey in the eye as he does. His brother doesn’t look angry, but Donnie is wary. Then, Donnie admonishes himself for feeling that way. Because they’re supposed to be trying things differently now, and being wary of his brother’s anger isn’t a part of that different.

“Hey,” Mikey says, putting a hand on Donnie’s blanket covered arm. His serious look changes into a sympathetic one, and he gives Donnie’s bicep a squeeze. “I’ve told you lots of stuff already, so you should return the favor. Otherwise we’re gonna get nowhere with all this, and… I want to hear what you have to say. Really.”

Donnie looks at Mikey for a moment longer, feeling old and wrung out and bone deep exhausted- -and then he closes his eyes, sighs, and lets his head drop a bit.


And as Mikey pulls him into a hug, firm and familiar, Donnie lets his blanket fall to the floor and returns the embrace.

He’s ready, now. Ready to talk to Mikey, and ready to move forwards. He’s ready to try trusting again, and he’s ready to try speaking truthfully again.

And after they’re done talking, done exchanging words that’ve built up in both of them, and tried their best to make sense of the snarled mess those words are- Donnie goes to get his phone, and opens it up to contacts.

He hesitates for a moment, because it’s late at night, and there’s no guarantee anyone will answer. Then, he dials the number anyways, and holds his phone to his ear. Listening to the dial tone ring, waiting patiently for an answer or not. The line clicks, and then-

“Hello? Donnie?”

Donnie smiles, and he feels better already just for hearing her voice. Until that second, he hadn’t known how much he’d really missed her. “Hey, April. Sorry I’ve been…”

“It’s alright. I understand why you did.” April says, and Donnie can hear in her voice that she means those things. “How have you been, though? Are you feeling alright?”

Donnie evaluates his mind, his body, and where he is at the moment. He’s hungover, but it’s not so bad now that Mikey has made him tea and turned all the lights down. His stomach hurts, but there’s warm food fixing that already. And he’s in his lab, his new one, in his new home with his younger brother who’s giving him space to do this. His younger brother who listened to what Donnie had to say, and gave him a ten minute hug afterwards, because Mikey cares that Donnie was and is upset, and is trying to fix that best he can.

Donnie is warm, and safe, and now he’s got three people who will listen to him. Believe him.

So Donnie says, “I think I’m feeling pretty good.”

And he means it.
i feel many emotions over donatello, mostly because I have been in a very similar state of mind before.

the self-blame, the endless questioning, the action of tying it all back to yourself and not others. it's hard to leave that behind.

i'm still not completely past it, but i'm trying.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The youngest child is always the last. The last to learn things, the last to grow up, and the last to find their place in life.

That should not include being the last to be respected, or heard, or loved.

Chapter Notes

a moment of your time, please.

i'd like to just draw attention to the fact that in the episode where they entered mikey's mind, out of all the emotions and factors to his surface personality... Anger was the biggest.

i feel most of us forget that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mikey’s throat burns, itchy and hot. Or maybe that’s his head. Or maybe it’s just both of them at the same time.

His fingers tap restlessly against the wooden counter, his feet starting to jitter too. He’s supposed to be listening to someone else, but right now all he can hear are echoes and memories knocking around his head that just won’t stop.

He swallows thick and bitterly, and tastes his own anger. It’s like bile on his tongue and he hates it just as much as he hates the scenes playing through his head.

Raph’s hands, Leo’s words, vice versa and combined, and Donnie’s listlessness, the blank way he’s always opting out, always drifting away just when Mikey needs him most, and he hates those things so much, but he also hates how Donnie does that because he can’t handle what’s been said and done to him, and how Mikey’s sometimes the cause of him doing that he’s not blameless and how it all still hurts, all those things, and they’re both so fucked up and it’s not fair because they left they left and this shouldn’t be bothering Mikey anymore-

“Michelangelo?”

Leatherhead’s gravelly voice snaps Mikey out of his spiraling, infuriating thoughts, and he blinks back to where he’s supposed to be.

They’re in Murakami’s shop. Leatherhead carefully squeezed into the room to lean halfway onto the counter, enjoying soup and sushi as he visits with a fellow old man and the rest of them. Mondo darting around behind the counter with Murakami, dressed in his apron and cooking clothes specially fitted for him, showing off what the old chef has been teaching him the last few months.
Mikey sitting at the counter, spacing out and building up stupid, pointless anger that he should’ve just left ignored.

All of them are staring at him.

Mikey violently shoves away his anger, and gives them an innocent look. “Sorry! Yikes, I totally zonked out,” Mikey says, wincing comically as he rubs the back of his neck. “What’d I miss again?”

Leatherhead gives him a measured look, and replies, “We were just wondering if you would also like to try Mondo’s new dish.” He gestures one large hand at Mondo, who’s holding up a bowl of soup from the pot he and Murakami have been attending to this whole time. “I’ve had a sip, and it’s very good. I highly recommend it.”

“Is something troubling you, Michelangelo?” Murakami asks, turning his head towards Mikey, and it feels like the older human is staring at him despite having no sight. “You’ve been awfully quiet tonight, most uncharacteristic of you.”

That’s right. Murakami is right; it is out of character for Mikey to be quiet around people. He just can’t shut up, ever, because he’ll run his stupid little mouth until his voice is hoarse or someone shuts him up by force. Raph had done that, usually. Whenever he got sick of Mikey’s words, sick of Mikey’s opinions, sick of Mikey—

“I’m a little tired, I guess,” Mikey says with a shrug, keeping his swells of anger well and hidden. No one needs to hear those things. They’re… not him, not okay to show to people.

Anger is gross. It hurts people and it hurts for Mikey to have. Better he just never show it at all.

Leatherhead’s hand on his shell is welcomed, because it gives Mikey something to focus on that’s not his own stupid, stupid emotions. “If you are too tired to stay out much later, we can leave,” Leatherhead offers with a rumble. “You are going through a very trying time, Michelangelo. We won’t ask you to push yourself unnecessarily.”

The obvious and warm comfort leatherhead is extending to Mikey gives him the strength to push down the anger, to shove it far far far down where it can’t touch him anymore or poison his thoughts. And he smiles for his friend. “Nah, I’m good,” Mikey says, normal and bright again. “It’s actually ‘cause I’m so craving some of that soup there, so gimme gimme, Mondo!”

Mondo beams, and brings over the bowl and platter to Mikey. “I’ve been workin’ on the recipe for weeks, bro,” Mondo says proudly, squaring his small shoulders and presenting the dish. His thick tail waves happily behind him as he does. “Mr. Murakami’s been great about it, too. I didn’t even know about half the ingredients he showed me!”

“That is because they are spices, and most Americans do not seem to know about those things,” Murakami says with a laugh.

Mikey grins, and takes the hot bowl of soup off the platter to sip from it. Spoons are kind of useless for him pretty often, because most ones are so teeny tiny in his hands and never manage to hold all the food he needs them to and hey, maybe there really was something to his brothers always saying he has a big mouth.

The soup burns his tongue a bit. Mikey swallows it anyways, because it burns less than the resurging anger in him.

But if he doesn’t acknowledge it, doesn’t speak it, it’s not actually there. And he’s sticking to that.
“Delicious, more please!” Mikey exclaims, holding the empty bowl out to Mondo. He hadn’t even tasted it, really. He’s not tasting much of anything right now.

Mondo beams again with all his little white teeth, and rushes off to fill up Mikey’s bowl. At least Mikey’s friend is happy, even though he doesn’t have parents either. They’d tossed him out the moment he’d shown his mutated face, and Mikey… still feels kinda bad for the guy. Sure Mondo’s got the Mutanimals, and Leatherhead is an A++ old man to chill with, but… it ain’t anything close to having a mom or dad. Mikey doesn’t know how Mondo could lose that and keep going-

Oh wait.

Yeah he does.

For a moment, grief overtakes the anger, and Mikey swims in his rush of sheer loss.

His dad, tall and forever untouchable, always there always strong always watching-unbeatable. Except no he wasn’t. He got killed, same as anyone else could, and he wasn’t actually always there, wasn’t always watching, wasn’t always… his dad.

His dad had been more so his Sensei, and Mikey had never been his favorite student. Ever.

Well, there goes his grief, and in its place-

Hello, anger, Mikey thinks dark and bitterly, long time no see.

And he swallows it all back down again, and does his best to ignore and pretend and space out in the right way that’s expected of him. He plays at being the Mikey he’s supposed to be- bright, cheerful, silly, perfectly happy all the time- and doesn’t let slip again for the rest of the night.

He hates being angry, and he hates showing it even more. Especially to his friends. They don’t deserve that, not when they’ve stayed with him the whole while since he and Donnie broke up their family. Anger hurts people, and Mikey doesn’t want to hurt any of his friends. At all.

But maybe he doesn’t hide it as well as he thought- which is weird, because none of his brothers have ever noticed- and Leatherhead stops him as they part for the night.

“If you will not talk to me about what’s troubling you,” Leatherhead says, keeping his voice low enough the still talking Mondo and Murakami can’t hear. “Then please talk to Donatello, at least. Your brother will listen, Michelangelo. It’s what family is for.”

A momentary, and very inappropriate, bubble of laughter tries to escape Mikey. Yeah, right. When did any of his brothers listen to him?

Donnie does, has been, he’s trying, Mikey reminds himself forcefully. Donnie is trying, and it’s just Mikey’s who’s not speaking about some of his crappy thoughts.

Maybe he should try talking about the anger, just a little.

“I… guess,” Mikey says finally, awkwardly skirting having to outright admit he’s got something bothering him. “I dunno. If Donnie’s up for it? Maybe.”

Leatherhead gives him a great big hug, just for that, and Mikey tries to hold onto the affection of that gesture rather than the squirming emotions in his chest.

Mikey exchanges fist bumps with Mondo and Murakami before he goes, and he grins like he
doesn’t have weird exhaustion and aches tugging at his body. He heads back to the station, following the new paths he’s been familiarizing himself with for quickest travel from their new home. It’s late in the night, nearing morning, and even though Mikey doesn’t really want to…

He’ll give talking a shot. He’s talked about other hard stuff, mostly with Leatherhead, so how much harder could this topic be? Never mind that he hates even thinking about it, right down into his bones, and never mind that he doesn’t think Donnie even knows how angry Mikey can get.

Never mind all that; they’re on a fresh start, a blank slate, a brand new adventure where it’s just them and they actually talk instead of poking and snapping all the time.

Mikey brings up his confidence with shaky force- it’s getting harder to do that lately and he has no idea why- and ducks into his new home to share something with his brother. Something he’s been ignoring and hiding and pretending doesn’t exist at all for a long, long time.

The smell of alcohol hits him immediately.

And then he finds his brother. And Casey.

And Mikey can’t compute the situation he’s seeing before him.

And then the anger comes back, bright and hateful, and Mikey barely, just barely bites it all down into submission again.

Donnie brought Casey into their home, without telling Mikey. He got drunk and then passed out with their friend, the one night Mikey was really going to talk to him. He trashed their living room that Mikey helped build with him, like it didn’t mean anything at all.

Donnie is well and truly asleep, and Mikey stands alone in the dark with bitter, bitter anger on his tongue. His brother won’t be listening to him at all tonight, obviously.

Mikey snarls without sound, and storms out of the living room. Leaving Donnie and Casey to the fun they’d gone and had without him, and carelessly slamming his door shut behind him.

He crawls into his bed without bothering to brush his teeth, or get Donnie and Casey into actual places to sleep, or even covering them up with blankets so they don’t freeze on the floor-

-and he ignores all those things he should be doing, and instead tries not to let the twisting, snarling knots in his chest keep him awake all day.

-/-

Mikey wakes up the next evening, and feels like a dick.

It’s not Donnie’s fault Mikey was having a crappy night. He didn’t know Mikey was going to try talking about gross stuff he’s never even hinted about before. And heck, like anyone can keep Casey from doing what he wants, including worming his way into your home and starting a party.

Donnie and Casey are still passed out where Mikey left them last night, and he sighs at the both of them. There’s only a faint hint of his residual frustration, and it’s easily enough ignored. He starts by waking Donnie up, and from there he does his best to forget he’d ever been so mad at his
Mikey starts poking at the mess Donnie and Casey made, while the two of them go have a *private moment* as Donnie sees Casey off, and he finds a mostly still full bottle of alcohol.

He stares at it, lying on the carpet with its cap on and most of its liquid safely inside. He considers it for a moment, wondering what he should do.

Then he picks it up, and puts it in his room before Donnie comes back. Why he does, he’s not really sure. It probably has to do with the dull buzz of hurt he’s still got; because even though he’s trying not to be, he’s frustrated Donnie called Casey over and had a party together without even bothering to text it was happening.

Mikey feels left out and more than a little ignored. He hasn’t felt that in a few weeks, and it’s not a fun thing to feel again.

It feels too much like how it felt at home, in the *lair*, with their *brothers*, with their *father*- and Mikey shoves the hurt anger deep, deep down into himself and forces his brain to forget about it. Donnie didn’t do it on purpose. Probably. Casey tended to whip Donnie into all sorts of moods and frenzies, and who could focus on anything else when hurricane Jones was blowing through? Not Donnie, that’s for sure.

And then Casey calls Mikey, when he’s wandering the kitchen and looking for any other leftover alcohol, and Mikey suddenly feels like even more of a dick.

“He *says it’s his fault your- fuck, that he’s the reason your dad is dead,*” Casey says in a low, harsh voice; putting stones and glass in Mikey’s stomach. Gone is Casey’s vagueness from earlier, the maintained hungover humor that he and Donnie have been sharing. Maybe he hadn’t been as out of it as Mikey had thought. “*He cried all over the place, Mike. All over me, and you know it’s bad if he’s done that. Did you know about any of that shit?*”

Mikey’s head is kinda tilting a direction he doesn’t like, and he has to swallow around a lump in his throat. “No,” He says, somehow still steady. “I didn’t know that… at all.”

“Well. *He spent like half the night talking about it, so I think it’d be a good idea you make ‘im talk about it again. Other stuff, too. Bad stuff.*”

“What bad stuff?” Mikey asks, and a part of him doesn’t want to hear the answer. And he’s right, he doesn’t want to hear about how Donnie’s been keeping all these things in; blaming himself for their dad’s death, Leo’s coma, and countless other things Mikey is pretty sure he had no control over. And yet, Donnie had said it was all his fault, and slapped a claim over some of the worst shit that keeps Mikey awake most days.

Donnie hadn’t been having a party with Casey. He’d been having a vent session that should’ve happened months ago.

Mikey wonders why Donnie never told him the things he’d told Casey. He wonders that, while listening as Casey rambles on about things Donnie had said, about things he’s going to go yell at their brothers, and Mikey arrives to a conclusion.

Donnie still doesn’t trust him, doesn’t think Mikey could handle hearing those things.

An insidious whisper in his brain says it’s because Donnie thinks he’s too stupid to get it, too much the youngest brother to understand big things like self-blame and grief and shitty thoughts.
Mikey stomps on that thought and ignores it.

He takes Casey’s advice, after hearing what his friend swears is just the bare bones of what Donnie’s got all smushed up inside him, and corners his brother immediately. They are talking, and then they are hugging, and Mikey is going to show Donnie he’s perfectly capable of handling this.

Except.

He’s not sure he actually can.

Because when Mikey finally gets Donnie onto the couch, listening and waiting, and he actually hears what Donnie has to say… he falters.

Mikey hadn’t known about any of these things, hadn’t even thought they might exist. Hadn’t thought about how much pressure they’d been placing on Donnie, or how Leo’s words and their father’s words and all of their words had hurt him so much. He’d known it’d been hard, but…

He hadn’t known just how hard it really was. Not entirely.

Maybe Mikey played a part in those things- twitchy and ignorant and just doing whatever the hell he pleased because hey, he was always getting scolded anyways, what was one more brother yelling at him- but largely it’d been their brothers. Their father.

And Mikey’s anger burns.

Because Donnie, who is always tall, always unfaltering in his dedication and hard work, is just too wrung out to give much more. He says in a wavering voice that there’s just not enough of him left. And he’s hunching over his knees, words tumbling out fast and painful, and the way his voice cracks is breaking Mikey’s heart and nearly his control.

Donnie is missing his mask and has bags under his eyes and looks pale as they physically can be and is just so sad. And Mikey isn’t sure how to fix that. He isn’t sure how to respond to Donnie’s words, his stories about how long he’s been alone and hurting and feeling like no one loved him, and Mikey’s sadness and anger and whirling confusion fight each other in his head.

Regret makes its way out of the fight, and Mikey pulls Donnie into the tightest, most loving hug he can manage while he represses every other thought he’s been having. Donnie’s abrupt break down is the priority right now, not Mikey’s steadily growing anger issues.

Donnie actually sobs for a bit, and it’s the worst sound Mikey never ever wanted to hear. Donnie is just so broken sounding, the way he’s talking about always feeling tired, and always wishing things would just stop for a while so he could actually rest for once. He’s shaking and still crying and Mikey can’t do anything other than cling tighter to his brother and say he loves him, and he’s sorry.

It takes a while, and a lot of very tight clinging on Mikey’s (useless) part, and then Donnie drag himself back together enough to wipe away his tears. He manages a weak smile at the lame sounding reassurances from Mikey- “Don’t worry, Dee. If you’re really that tired, I swear I’ll do your half of the dishes tonight.”- and then, with Mikey’s encouragement, goes to make a phone call he really needs to.

They don’t talk about Mikey at all. Mikey doesn’t try to bring his own emotions into things, period.

Donnie can’t handle that, not right now. Mikey’s stupid feelings aren’t big enough to need talking
about yet; and they *are* stupid, because why is he bothering with stuff that he’s already kind of talked about with Leatherhead, and then sworn he wouldn’t think about anymore.

Donnie’s got his own problems, and he’s the one in need of help right now. Not Mikey. Mikey won’t put yet another burden on Donnie’s shoulders, not after hearing about all the other ones that’ve been making him into atlas.

Mikey’s fine on his own, so he’ll keep to himself what he’d wanted to talk to Donnie about.

--

Mikey gets more nightmares than he wants to admit.

He’s always had a super active imagination, and it shows in just how vivid and detailed his dreams can get. Sometimes it’s neat, and he enjoys being able to recount every step and turn his dream self takes while he sleeps.

But sometimes it sucks. Really, really sucks.

Like dreaming he’s back in that moment, on that night, and watching his dad fall off a building and not get back up.

Mikey can’t jolt himself awake, even though he *knows* he’s dreaming, he *knows* this is just a stupid memory, and he has to watch his dad fall and hit the ground with a horrible, horrible *thud* and he’s too slow, too slow to do anything, because his dad’s chest is already torn open and gushing blood and he’s not even *breathing anymore* he’s just gone and they’re too late too late and it was all pointless and he was just too slow-

And Mikey’s lungs falter as he falls out of the nightmare, and he can’t do anything other than cough and gasp for a solid minute.

He’s crying. He’s crying and everything hurts just as much as it did in that moment. The realization that his unbeatable father had been beaten, and that he wasn’t coming back this time. Splinter is gone, and they won’t be getting anymore miracles.

Mikey used to think everything would work itself out, no matter what happened. They’d always find a way, always beat the odds. Always go home together. Always have their dad.

In the end, they lost to the odds, broke their home, and buried their father.

Leo had said they’d won the battle, ended the war. In Mikey’s opinion, he thinks they lost it completely.

After all, what did the Shredder have left to lose at that point? Karai didn’t want him, the Foot had abandoned him, and it’d just been him and his hench-guys. Mikey and his family are the ones who lost everything, not the Shredder.

Mikey sniffs, and wipes his tears onto his pillow. Turning into the dull comfort he gets from having privacy to feel like shit, and sheets that still have a slight scent of his old room.

He considers for a moment, going to Donnie and asking to talk about their dad, about how he
misses Splinter even though he’d been so absent in the last few years, but Mikey doesn’t move to get up.

Donnie is still recovering, and it’s just a stupid dream, just some stupid feelings.

Mikey’s nearly an adult now, he can handle some dumb nightmares on his own. He has for… years. Since the war had started to get bad. He hadn’t gone crying to his brothers for- mockery, scorn, dismissal- for comfort then, and he won’t now. Especially since Donnie is still precariously balanced with his own issues.

Mikey rolls over; smearing the last of his tears onto his pillow, and shuts his eyes to will himself back to sleep.

-/-

Mikey keeps out of Donnie’s way for a while, but also circles his brother and does whatever Donnie needs him to.

Whether it’s taking a bit more of their shared chores, or being extra quiet that night, or just stepping out of the station for a bit to go burn off aggravating energy so he doesn’t bother Donnie- Mikey does it, and tries to be everything he hasn’t been over the years.

He wants to be a good brother, especially right now. He wants to mend the relationship he has with Donnie, and make it stronger than before. No more driving Donnie into break downs, please. Mikey’s seen enough of that for a lifetime and then some.

Sure, Mikey is still struggling with nightmares and frustrations and anger, but he’s got a handle on that. No sweat, he’s been doing this long enough now he’s an expert.

Except.

Text messages still come from their brothers, even though Mikey has noticed they’re slowing down. But it’s still enough. And with the weeks still pilling on- six, six weeks now and counting- they’re getting more desperate. More angry.

Raph is so mad at him, so scared for him; he wants them both back home and safe again. Where he and Leo can watch out for them.

Raph is also confused, and wants to know what the hell they’ve been telling their friends. Apparently, none of their friends want to talk to Mikey’s brothers anymore, and Raph and Leo just don’t get why.

Mikey reads a text that’s damn close to a plead, begging Mikey and Donnie to reply and at least call them- and Mikey has a horribly inappropriate moment of sharp laughter.

The laughter happens again when he finds a text from Leo, talking about how disappointed their father would have been, the two of them running away without explanation and turning all their friends against their brothers.

It happens a third time, when Raph leaves a breathlessly furious voicemail, about Casey and April turning on him and Leo and how Donnie and Mikey are still missing- and Mikey just can’t
anymore.

He throws his phone across his room, not giving two shits about the sound of hitting the wall, and barks one more laugh before breaking into a muffled scream.

He’s just so angry at them all.

They don’t even see it, and its right in front of them, and they still don’t see it. They don’t get that they hurt Donnie, hurt Mikey, and that no, they’re not coming home no matter what their brothers plead and yell at them. That their dad was a neglectful asshole who only ever paid attention to them, and Mikey is having a hard time balancing that jealousy with his grief these days and it’s just turning into one big mess of anger.

He used to be so good about keeping his emotions under control. Only the happy ones were ever allowed out, or the sad ones in the right moments when it was okay to cry and whine a bit. Not anger. Never anger.

Raph gets to be angry, but not Mikey. Mikey has to be the happy one, the silly one, the stupid one-

Mikey bites his lips hard, and muffles his furious scream into his hands.

Why is it suddenly getting so hard to keep the anger out? Or rather, keep it in. Why is it suddenly such an issue to control a stupid, hurtful emotion he doesn’t even like having?

So his brothers still want them back. So they’re still looking for them. Great, good for them.

Mikey’s head is buzzing with anger, and he has nowhere to aim it, so it just keeps buzzing.

They don’t get what they did. Raph and Leo. Can’t tell or acknowledge it even with their whole friend group being pretty clear about things. Mikey doesn’t think they’d get it even if he screamed it in their faces.

They want them back home, ‘safe’ with them and under their watch again. The thought makes Mikey’s scales crawl and bile rise up in his throat. Because no. No more.

And maybe their father would’ve been disappointed- so what? He was always disappointed in Mikey anyways, getting distracted and unable to follow what was happening and just being a general nuisance that interrupted Splinter’s time with Raph and Leo. Mikey doesn’t care right now what their father would’ve thought- he’s dead and he can’t give Mikey infuriatingly distant looks of disappointment anymore.

Mikey misses his dad, misses his brothers, misses how things used to be-

-but right now, he’s more so angry about all those things, and tries to keep silent as the rancid emotions claw at him for release.

He doesn’t let them get that release.

He shoves his phone back under his bed, again, and has to ignore it for three days straight just to get his head back on right.

-/-
“It wasn’t your fault, Donnie. You can’t keep blaming yourself for it.”

“Za’naron wasn’t your fault either, so you can’t blame yourself for that if I can’t blame myself for Splinter. Dying.”

“…that was different.”

“It wasn’t really you.”

“A part of it was, though. I’m the one who gave in.”

“Yeah. Well. I’m the one who didn’t listen when I should have. So guess we can both blame ourselves a bit.”

“Donnie…”

Mikey hovers out of sight, practicing his ability to not be, and listens to his brother and April have the same conversation they’ve been having over and over the last while.

He hears April sigh, and shift on the couch. “This isn’t healthy, Donnie,” April says gently. “You can’t keep holding onto those things, or… it’ll never get better.”

“I can and I will,” Donnie mutters stubbornly. “Because they’re true.”

“They’re not—”

“Yes they are! I’m the one—”

“You’re one kid, one person, and you had no control over what happened to master Splinter. It’s not your fault; it was never your fault.”

Donnie falls silent for a moment, and it’s a drawn out sort of silence.

“Then why…” Why do I feel like it is?

Donnie doesn’t actually say the last part, but Mikey hears it anyways. It kinda sucks how clear he can hear it, and Mikey doesn’t know what to do about it anymore than he has the last week of trying to get Donnie to feel okay again.

Donnie sighs, and it’s an exhausted sound. Mikey looks up at the ceiling of the hallway, and thinks quietly that Donnie doesn’t ever not sound exhausted.

“…I don’t have an answer, Donnie,” April says in a hushed voice. “But I know it wasn’t your fault.”

And there’s the sound Donnie’s been making on and off lately, soft and broken. Mikey shuts his eyes and tries not to hear it too well.

Donnie’s crying again, in quiet gasps as he tries to not, and Mikey opens his eyes as April starts to shush his brother. Whispered things about how they’ll get through this, it’s not Donnie’s fault, and they’ll work it out somehow, some way…

“It’s okay, Donnie. Just let it out. I got you. I got you…”

Mikey takes the moment to peek into the living room, still silent and invisible. April’s got Donnie in a hug, and Mikey’s brother is hiding his face in her shoulder. April’s words and hug already
seem to be calming Donnie down, and…

She’s doing this so much better than Mikey had. April knows what she’s doing, and Mikey
doesn’t. She knows what to say, what’ll calm down Donnie the quickest, and… just knows how to
be a better support in general.

And Donnie seems to trust her more, too. Letting this out every time April asks him to, without
complaint or protest. He’s always ready to talk to her, but not…

Not Mikey.

Mikey swallows something too close to jealousy for comfort, and turns away from his brother and
friend.

They deserve some privacy. He’d just been listening in for a moment, checking in on how their
latest talk was going.

But April’s clearly got this, so Mikey leaves them to it. He’ll go do some quiet exercises, maybe a
run above ground for a few hours. He won’t be such an annoyance if he gets rid of his excess
energy.

He takes his skateboard with him as he leaves, going through the second exit so he doesn’t disturb
April or Donnie. Mikey’s got his standard equipment on him too, nunchucks, smoke bombs, etc.,
even though the paranoia of his brothers finding them has started to ease off.

April and Casey both know where they are now, and Mikey is seriously considering bringing
Leatherhead around sometime soon; so unless someone actually shows his brothers, and Mikey
doubts any of their friends will, Leo and Raph aren’t finding the station any time soon. If they
could’ve, they already would have.

That comfort is a small one, though. Because eventually- and that eventually hangs heavy in the air
sometimes- he and Donnie will have to talk to their brothers, if only to bring closure to the shit that
drove them all apart.

Mikey doesn’t know how he’ll handle that. He doesn’t know how to approach the idea at all.

But him not knowing how to do stuff is normal enough, right?

Right.

-/-

The station is occupied at the moment, so guess that means Mikey needs to shove off for a good
while. Enough time for April and Donnie to wrap up their conversation and for Donnie to pull
himself back together.

Mikey skates aimlessly for a while, not really thinking of anything in particular. He doesn’t really
notice until he’s getting close, but he’d unconsciously drifted towards the Mutanimals’ hideout as
he went. Mikey considers his options for a moment, and then starts heading towards Leatherhead
and Mondo’s location in earnest. Spending time with the two of them should make it easy enough
to shove his dumb mood aside; it’s always easier to do that for other people, instead of just himself.
He kicks his board up into his hand, and ducks in through the main entrance of the hideout. It’s not locked up, so that obviously means Mikey’s allowed to come in. His mood lifts the closer he gets to the inner rooms, and he manages to put a near spring in his step as he heads in.

Then-

He hears a voice that makes him freeze.

His heart stops and his fingers go numb, and he stands there like an idiot deer in the headlights; stuck in the last doorway into the center room of the Mutanimals’ base.

His skateboard slips from his hand. It clatters against the floor too loud to be ignored.

Raph turns around, following the sound and forgetting the conversation he’d been having with Slash.

Everything slows down, and Mikey can’t breathe.

“Mikey?” Raph says, eyes going wide. Then- “Mikey!”

And Mikey is already running by the time Raph even moves his feet.

He doesn’t even bother grabbing his skateboard, he just runs, and he doesn’t look back. Because he knows if he does-

He might listen to the things Raph is yelling after him. He might not be able to keep running away.

Raph’s voice echoes through the streets as Mikey runs, and neither of them are even trying to be stealthy anymore. There’s no reason to beyond ordinary humans maybe hearing them, and when isn’t there yelling in New York? It’s just normal, so normal no one even cares that there’s yelling outside their apartments- so why should Mikey?

With that hysterical thought in mind, Mikey pours on the speed and does his best to disappear. He blocks out Raph’s calls after him, and narrows everything down to his path ahead.

“Mikey! MIKEY! Just wait a second- where are you going?!”

Away from you! Mikey thinks, shrieks, inside his panicking mind, and then does.

He throws down a bunch of his smoke bombs, and disappears.

He leaves Raph coughing and cursing in the street below, while Mikey climbs into a boarded up building. They’re in one of the less attended to districts, so there are plenty of these buildings to find. Mikey replaces the boards across the window once he inside, and makes it look as though nothing has touched them since they went up.

He steps away from it when he’s done, tunnel vision draining away. He feels shaky in a way he hasn’t since he was fifteen and new to life or death situations. Like he’s a newbie all over again, just as inexperienced as the night he and his brothers first went out on their own.

Raph is still yelling outside. Hollering after Mikey and demanding he show himself.

Mikey takes a few more stumbling steps back from the window, and then recovers enough to become silent again.

The building he’s in looks like it used to be an apartment. Probably. All the rooms are stripped
down and there’s no carpet on the rotting wooden floors.

Mikey doesn’t go farther than the back wall of the room he’s in- a kitchen, maybe- and ends up slumping against the far wall. Sinking to the floor and suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

Raph is still yelling. Still looking.

Mikey doesn’t think he’s got the concentration right now to sneak away, so he does the next best thing.

He goes quiet, and stops existing.

He stares at the window, boarded up but no sound proof, and waits for the yelling to get closer. He waits with his pulse thrumming in his ears, and lungs trying to take heaving breaths that he won’t give them.

Mikey should be standing, ready to flee, but he can’t get back up. He just sits there on the floor, and stares at the window. Terrified.

Oh god he’s so scared. And he’s such an idiot.

He should’ve checked in with the Mutanimals. He should’ve called ahead and said hey I’m dropping by, any chance the brothers I’m kind of hiding from right now are around? Yes? Thanks, I’ll make sure to avoid them. It would have been just that easy, and yet- Mikey hadn’t done it. One stupid little step, just to make sure he wouldn’t come face to face with his brother.

He’s an idiot. A complete and utter moron.

Raph’s yelling has stopped, finally.

Mikey stays where he is, curled up tightly around his knees and staring at the window as he internally berates himself.

Mikey’s not sure if he actually breathing anymore.

He isn’t sure if he wants to.

The minutes without Raph’s yelling tick by, and slowly, Mikey unwinds enough to think outside his fear and self-incrimination.

That was too close. Way too close.

He’s a fucking idiot, running around blindly like there aren’t still people looking for him. He’s always too careless, too thoughtless. Just like his brothers always told him he was.

Mikey’s made up of too much stupid and not enough caution, and he almost blew everything. If Raph had caught him, then everything he and Donnie have been building up would’ve been ruined.

Such. An idiot.

Mikey lets his head fall back against the wall that’s decades older than himself, and shuts his eyes. Listening to everything around him, and waiting.

He doesn’t manage to move again for a long while. His legs won’t respond until he’s thoroughly, thoroughly sure that his brother is gone. And then it’s just him and his shitty thoughts, all the way home.
He doesn’t go looking for Donnie when he gets back. April is gone, he knows that much from the absence of talking in the station, but he’s not going to go to his brother. Not yet.

He’s got enough voices telling him off for his dumbass mistake already, all up in his head where he can’t escape them.

A lot of them sound like his brothers.

Mikey slams his bedroom door, because he can and he feels like it and Donnie isn’t the type to go looking for reasons behind slamming doors. It’s just a sign of which part of the house you should be avoiding right then.

And that curdles Mikey’s stomach. The thought that even though they’re working so hard to change, he’s still using the same tactics they did at home. Still acting like their siblings.

Well, too late to un-slam it now. He’s already gone and done it. Just like he went and nearly got caught. Just two more mistakes he can’t take back.

His t-phone has been pinging with texts nonstop, one or two calls going straight to voicemail. Mikey doesn’t bother looking at the messages, and turns the thing off completely. It goes under the mattress right after.

He sits in his room, by his bed and with only one lamp on, and isn’t sure what to do next.

He has to tell Donnie. And even if he doesn’t, Donnie’s probably already gotten a rush of texts from one or both of their brothers about it. Donnie probably already knows, and is probably already angry at Mikey.

Well fuck him; Mikey’s already angry at himself. He doesn’t need anyone else yelling at him, because he’s got plenty in his head as is.

The anger bubbling in the back of his throat makes his head hurt, and Mikey shuts his eyes. He puts his head between his hands, and pushes hard against the sides of his skull. The dull buzz in it keeps up, and he just ends up feeling like he’s got a headache.

He drops his hands, and stares at the wall across from him. Shame and frustration join the anger, and he starts to feel twitchy.

He’s such a fucking idiot. He knew it before this, and he knows it even better now. The whole experience is just a repeat of every other fuck up Mikey’s ever made, and hey, it’s even worse this time because he’d been actively trying to not fuck up the last while.

Before he didn’t care. Because that was normal and he couldn’t escape it no matter what he tried. He cares a lot more now, because he likes not being yelled at all the time; likes not getting smacked over the head or insulted every time he so much as breathes.

He likes spending time with a brother that’s not constantly angry, or disappointed, or annoyed at him. One that doesn’t treat him like he’s useless or a hang on or just the moronic youngest brother that no one wants around.
But it looks like that’s about to change.

And maybe he deserves that, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t hate it.

Mikey’s hand brushes something hard and cold underneath his bed, and he looks down. The bottle of tequila, which he’d previously wrapped up in a wad of towel he’d left in his room, is peeking out from under its hiding space.

Mikey looks at it, and considers what he should do.

On impulse- because that’s all he ever does, acts on stupid stupid stupid impulses- he pulls it out and uncaps it.

If Donnie can drink, then so can he. And if his brother doesn’t like it, then whatever. Mikey’s already going to be in shit, so might as well add one more thing for Donnie to yell at him about.

The first sip makes him choke, because it tastes like the stuff he uses to clean the kitchen.

It burns all the way down, and Mikey coughs for a solid few seconds as his eyes water.

He takes another sip anyways.

Mikey drinks most of what was left in the bottle- which was a fair amount, considering how much Donnie and Casey had seemed to have drunk- and then sits in his room feeling even shittier than before.

It’s not fair. Why is that he’s the fuck up? He’s not the one who was always shouting at people or ordering them around. He’s not the one who put all his attention into two sons and not the others. He’s not the one who gave unsubtle looks of disappointment or slipped barbs into his words every time he spoke about one specific person. He’s not the one who hits people.

Mikey’s not the one at fault for all that stuff. He’s not the one who did all that. And what did he do to deserve all that shit anyways? When had he fucked up so horribly that no one could even talk to him anymore without insulting him?

Why did his brothers hate him so much? Mikey didn’t do anything wrong, he just is how he is and he can’t change that. Couldn’t then and can’t now and won’t, because what’s wrong with wanting to think about nicer stuff? What’s wrong with wanting to lighten the situation when everything is a great big pile shit constantly, and none of them have had a night without fighting in years?

What the hell is so wrong with Mikey that everything he says has to get shut down or ignored? At what point did everything he said just become nonsense to everyone else? At what point did he get designated as everyone’s verbal and physical punching bag?

Fuck them. Fuck them all.

Mikey’s head aches with all the fury he’s channeling, and he’s not sure when he left his room.

It figures that Donnie comes out of his lab, for once, just in time to meet Mikey in the hallway.

Donnie has his phone in his hands, and he looks up at Mikey with wide eyes. Mikey knows what Donnie’s going to say before he does, and Mikey glowers at his brother.

“You- you almost got caught?” Donnie asks, and they both know there’s no need to give context to that statement. Donnie’s lips go thin, and he closes a hand around his phone. “Mikey, that was way
“Shut up,” Mikey bites out, cutting his brother off from almost definitely saying ‘are you stupid?’
“I know already, don’t bother telling me off for it.” His head feels wrong and soupy with anger and alcohol, and he just doesn’t have any filter left. “Just- just leave me alone! I know I fucked up!”

Donnie looks at him, rising out of a half hunch. He spots the bottle Mikey had forgotten he was still clutching. “You’re drinking the tequila” Donnie says, lips tugging downwards, and there’s the disappointment Mikey was expecting. “Mikey, you shouldn’t be doing that. It’s-

“It’s what?” Mikey barks, because he doesn’t care, he’s already going to be in trouble and he doesn’t care if he gets in more for talking back. “It’s stupid? Thanks, I kind of already knew that, so piss off!”

Donnie is looking at him with apprehension now, and slowly crossing his arms. “No, I was I going to say that it’s a depressant, and it’s not a good thing to be drinking when you’re not emotionally balanced. Mikey, that wasn’t a good idea.”

Mikey’s laughter comes out of his throat in a way that hurts, and he does not care. “You always say that about- about whatever I decide to do,” Mikey says, biting and furious and so far beyond giving a shit. “All of you do! You all just shit on me for everything I sug- suggest doing, and then you call me stupid for even thinking the ideas! So fuck you, fuck you and your long- long stupid words, I don’t give a shit anymore!”

Donnie’s eyes are wide, and his mouth has dropped open. “Mikey, is that what you think I’m-”

“I don’t care what you’re on about, I don’t care!” Mikey cuts him off, swinging his arm through the air in a harsh gesture. “None of you ever cared what I was on about, so why should I give a shit about you?”

Donnie’s arms come uncrossed, and Mikey takes a quick step backwards to get out of range. Bad idea, because everything tilts as he does, and he stumbles. Mikey feels that Donnie is still looking at him, and he knows if he looks back he’ll see disappointment, maybe annoyance, maybe any of the other countless looks his brothers always give him when he’s acting particularly stupid.

“Mikey, we should sit down,” Donnie says, slow and careful like he’s trying to explain things to Mikey in a way he’ll get it. Like he’s an idiot. “If you need to… talk about this, we should.”

“You never listen, none of you do,” Mikey mutters, and he, acting on impulse for the umpteenth time tonight, tries to bring the tequila to his lips.

Donnie’s hand stops his rising arm.

Mikey snarls, and yanks his hand away. Or, tries to, but Donnie’s hand has formed a vicelike grip on his arm and won’t let go.

“Mikey- Mikey stop and think for a second, this isn’t helping, you’re just making it worse-”

Always worse, he’s always just making it worse and screwing things up because he’s an IDIOT, because he can’t get anything RIGHT-

-never thinks never plans never does anything except make stupid stupid stupid mistakes-

-no wonder none of them wanted him around, they all think he’s useless and a nuisance and just plain stupid-
“Shut *up!*” Mikey shouts, yanking against Donnie’s grip again. He *hates* being held in place, he *hates* being held against his will, he *hates it when people grab him like this because it’s always followed by a- “Let me go! You don’t- you don’t even *care.*”

“Mikey, just let me *talk to you,* we’ll- we just need to sit down, you’re not making any sense-”

“You *always say that!*” Mikey screams, *still unable to free his arm, still stuck in place and unable to escape.* “All of you! You- you all think I’m an *idiot!* I’m not; I’m not an idiot so stop talking to me like I am-”

Donnie’s hands grip tighter around Mikey’s arm, and just get *tighter* even as Mikey tugs and tugs and tugs to get away, and-

“Mikey- *just listen for two seconds-*”

-Mikey’s *other arm* is still free-

“-I’m just trying to *help you-*”

-and Donnie still won’t let go, and he’s still yelling everyone’s yelling and Mikey *can’t get away.*

He gives one last *yank* on his arm-

-*it doesn’t come free-*

-and he raises his *other* arm, and-

-*Donnie’s voice and hands and everything too much too much-*

-Mikey’s fist makes contact with Donnie’s cheek.

The tequila falls out of both their hands, and hits the floor with a dull thud. Its open top spills what was left of it onto the throw carpet they’d laid out in the hallway.

Its making the spot by Donnie’s feet wet. The spot where Donnie’s feet are, which lead up to his legs, which lead up to his shell-

-*which is on the floor, because Mikey hit Donnie hard enough he fell over.*

Everything slows down, as Donnie stares up at Mikey. Eyes wide with shock, and confusion, and *hurt.*

Mikey can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. His hand hurts and he *can’t breathe.*

Donnie slowly raises a shaking hand to his cheek, and blinks at the pain of touching it.

And Mikey-

Mikey *howls.*

*He fucked up.*

*He fucked up he fucked up he fucked up he fucked up he fucked up he fucked up hefuckeduphefuckeduphefuckeduphefuckeduphefuckedup* is the *fuck up-*

Donnie’s eyes go even wider, and he struggles to stand up fast enough. “Mikey, Mikey *no-*”
Mikey stumbles back—out of range out of reach—and his scream cuts off as he does—shut up shut up no one wants to hear—and he runs.

His door slams behind him, and he locks it with numb fingers. Shaking fingers. Fingers that can make a fist that he used to hit his brother.

It’s not the same as training. It’s not the same because he’d done it outside the dojo, outside a spar, outside of a battle, during a real fight between them and with intent to hurt.

Donnie’s own fists hit the door the second he’s locked it, and Mikey hears the knob shake as his brother tries to get inside. Donnie is yelling and Mikey can’t hear any of it, his heart and mind already too loud as he backs away from the shuddering frame.

“Mikey—Mikey please, open the door. Open the door—I know you didn’t mean it, so please—”

Mikey shakes his head at the door, and keeps backing away until his shell hits the wall. He slowly, agonizingly slowly, sinks to the floor, and sits. And stares.

His hands are shaking still. He can still feel the impact of punching Donnie.

Mikey inhales sharply, and feels like something is cracking.

Nothing changed. He left with Donnie and tried to do better and nothing changed. He’s still a fuck up, they’re both still broken, and he hit his brother.

He got angry, and let his anger out, and someone got hurt.

Someone always gets hurt when anger is let out. Usually it’s Mikey who gets hurt. Usually it’s Raph who lets it out.

Mikey let go of his control, and Donnie got hurt.

He’s just like his brother. He’s just like Raph, except worse, because Mikey was actually trying.

And Mikey feels sick.

“Mikey! MIKEY! Open the door! God damn it—OPEN THE DOOR—”

Mikey puts his hands over his mouth, and feels burning tears spill out of his eyes.

Donnie’s wide and hurt eyes play through his mind again, and a choked sob finds its way up his throat.

“Please, oh god, please open the door Mikey. Please, please open the door—”

Mikey can’t move and won’t let himself move.

He’s not opening that door. He’s not opening it or exposing Donnie to— to Mikey again.

Donnie’s stopped banging on the door, and there’s nothing making sound anymore except for Mikey’s hyperventilation.

He still can’t breathe. He’s sucking in air and he still can’t breathe.

There’s nothing except that for a long, long moment, and then Donnie’s cracking voice comes through the door again.
“Mikey, please. Open the door. I’m- I’m scared of what you’re thinking right now. Please… I know you di-didn’t mean it.”

Donnie’s voice breaks and Mikey feels something in him do the same.

“…oh god, I don’t know what I’m doing. Fuck- Mikey, I know you didn’t mean to. I’m so- I’m so sorry I held onto you like that, I-I-I was panicking, and you were upset and I… I didn’t know what else to do, Mikey…”

Mikey stifles a sob, and feels like he’s swimming in guilt. Drowning in it.

“You’re not an idiot, I nev- I wouldn’t- I’m sorry, Mikey. Oh god I’m so sorry. Please, please open the door. Please…”

Donnie is crying. He’s crying and it’s a sound Mikey never, ever wanted to hear again.

“…I’m sorry… Mikey, I’m so sorry… please open the door… I’m sorry…”

Mikey can’t take hearing that, can’t take hearing the hopeless desperation Donnie has in his voice. He just can’t.

He’s already done too much damage as it is.

Somehow, somehow, Mikey drags himself towards the door on numb legs, and fumbles with the lock.

He gets it open, and Donnie is there. Standing and staring, and blinking thick tears out of his eyes.

Mikey’s own tears respond in sympathy, and fall down to dampen his mask even more. “I’m sorry,” He says, hoarse and shaking and so, so sorry. His breathing hitches and he feels himself crumpling. “‘m sorry.”

Donnie takes a sharp inhale, and the sound conveys so many things all at once, emotions and thoughts and actions-

-and then he grabs Mikey in a hug.

Mikey’s arms, without his permission, grab Donnie back and don’t let go.

They take a few stumbling steps backwards, and somehow make it to the floor against the hallway wall. It’s just the two of them tangled together, stubbornly stupidly refusing to let go of each other. There’s no one else here to see anything, or make judgements, or be angry at anyone.

It’s just them, and Mikey’s big brother is still holding onto him like a lifeline that’ll disappear the moment he lets it.

And Mikey sobs.

He mashes his face into Donnie’s neck and shoulder and sobs. Because he’s so sorry, he’s so so so sorry. He didn’t mean to, he didn’t want to, he’d never do that- except he did and he’s sorry-

“Shh, shh shh shh, it’s okay, Mikey its okay, I’m fine it’s fine-”

-he’s not him, he’s not him-

“You’re not, Mikey you’re not Raph, you’re just-”
“...you’re not, you’re not a fuck up. I- I love you and you’re not a- shh shh shh, you’re not, I swear you’re not. Mikey, Mikey look at me, look at me.”

Donnie’s hands turn Mikey’s face upwards, and for a moment Mikey’s instincts scream at the sudden touch, but it’s just Donnie. It’s Donnie. And his brother is looking at him with nothing but concern and grief and love.

“Mikey, you’re not- you’re not stupid, or a fuck up, or-” Donnie breaks off, blinking gloss out of his eyes. “-or unwanted. You’re my brother and I love you, I’ve always loved you. Every- every damn second of our lives, I’ve loved you and I never felt otherwise.”

Mikey stares at his brother, trying to process the words Donnie is saying. “Then why-” Mikey’s voice breaks and his eyes blur even worse. “-then why did you always- always call me an idiot, or- or stupid, or tell you didn’t want me- me anywhere n-near you-” He can’t see anything at all and everything hurts. “-why did all of you say that you didn’t want me-”

Mikey’s voice gives out, and he starts sobbing again. Thick and horrible tears rolling down into his mask that he shoves out of the way to mash at his eyes and wipe away his stupid, stupid weakness-and Donnie’s arms just pull him closer.

Mikey just sobs harder, words and thoughts tumbling out as he cries. And Donnie just keeps holding him.

His brother is making shushing sounds, running a hand up and down Mikey’s shell while he does. Mikey thinks his brother is saying things like “I always wanted you” and “I’m sorry” and “Mikey, I love you, I love you-” but Mikey’s head and heart are too loud to let anything real come through.

Mikey just keeps crying and crying and crying. Until he’s done.

Then they sit there, cramped in a desperate two way clutch. Mikey’s vision finally clears itself, and his head and eyes and pretty much everything else hurt.

He can see the spilled tequila, all the way at the end of the hall. And then he feels sick again.

Distantly, he feels Donnie’s arms tighten around him again as his breath hitches in a half sob.

Even more distantly, Mikey thinks about how none of his family has done this is years. He loves Leatherhead, downright adores his friend, but it’s not the same as getting a cuddle from his brothers. From his father.

Mikey doesn’t remember the last time his dad even hugged him.

That brings another fresh wave of grief and anger and sorrow up from his core, and Mikey shudders as he tries to shove it all back down. “Why didn’t- why didn’t dad- why didn’t he love me?” Mikey choke out. “Why didn’t any of you love me? Al-always calling me stupid, or- or telling me to leave, or saying you didn’t want me around- and he never- he didn’t even expect me to do well at anything, he just- just waited all the time for me to fail-”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Donnie says, low and fast, clutching Mikey closer. “But I’m sorry. Mikey, I’m so, so sorry. You’re great. You’re amazing. You’re smart and good and I love you, okay? Don’t think otherwise. Please, please don’t think otherwise. I can’t- I don’t- I don’t know what to do, Mikey. I’m- I’m just sorry and I don’t know what to do anymore.”
Donnie presses a kiss to Mikey’s forehead, a gesture he barely feels, and his brother says “I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry, Mikey-” in a hushed voice, like it’s a prayer. Donnie says it again and again, and Mikey just turns his head into his brother’s shoulder and lets himself be held.

They don’t leave the hallway for a long time.

-/-

“…I had a handle on it,” Mikey says, hours later and with a voice that hurts. Shame is still running a throbbing tempo behind his eyes, in pulse with his headache. “I. I don’t like being angry. I don’t even like having anger; let alone… talking about it.”

Donnie’s quiet presence, on the other end of the couch, leaves the air open for Mikey to continue. And he does. “It’s… it’s nasty, and it makes me feel gross, and…” Mikey blinks away memories that rise up. Memories from before they’d left. “People get hurt when you- when you let it out. ‘s why I never do. And besides… Raph’s the angry one. I’m the… stupid one.”

“You’re not, though,” Donnie says, and that’s one of the few things he’s said while Mikey gets things out. “You’re just as smart as the rest of us, and Raph’s just an asshole.”

Mikey scoffs. “Not as smart as you.”

“That’s-” Donnie sighs, and shifts his position on the couch. “That’s different. We went over that already.”

Mikey ducks his head, and can’t look at his brother. Another thought rises up in him, and he speaks it. “How come you didn’t talk to me about…” Mikey waffles between how he should address their deceased parent. Splinter? Sensei? Whatever. “…our father. How come you talked to Casey and April, but not… me.”

Donnie is quiet for too long, and Mikey’s stomach twists. He knew it, he knew it-

“It’s because you don’t think I’m smart enough to get it, right?”

“Wha- no!” Donnie exclaims, starting out of his silence. Mikey still won’t look at him, even as his brother moves closer. “Mikey, I didn’t want to talk to anyone about that. I- I just- Casey made me, okay? And April is… April. She asked, and he forced me to, and it’s just…” Donnie seems to search for the right words, for once, and it takes another beat before he does. “It’s just different with them, alright? And it’s nothing to do with you. It was just… easier, somehow. And… truthfully, I never wanted any of you to know what I thought about our father. Especially you, Mikey.”

“…why especially me?” Mikey asks warily. He’s not sure if he wants to hear the answer, or any of the following insults.

“Mikey, could you look at me?”

Mikey lifts his head slowly, and cautiously meets his brother’s eyes. Donnie looks tired, red eyed in a different way than normal. But he’s also giving a weakly encouraging smile.

“I didn’t want you to know especially… because you were the only brother I had left,” Donnie says, and his smile nearly slips for a moment, in turn with the flash of regret and grief in his eyes.
“I didn’t want to- to tell you what I’d caused, if you hadn’t figured it out already, because I didn’t want to lose you too. I- I thought if I told you, you’d… stop wanting to be here with me.”

Mikey blinks, and finds himself shaking his head in jerky shakes. “No- no I’d- I wouldn’t leave you, Dee,” Mikey says, because he wouldn’t, not now not ever- “I wouldn’t do that.”

They’ve already lost so many people; he couldn’t turn his back on Donnie now.

“I know,” Donnie says, wincing in on himself. “But tell that to my anxiety.”

A part of Mikey knows he’s supposed to laugh a bit at that, maybe crack a joke of his own… but he’s all out of that stuff right now. He’s too tired.

He can do something else, though.

“I don’t blame you,” Mikey says, abruptly enough that Donnie seems confused for a second. He pushes on anyways. “I don’t blame you for Splinter dying, or what happened to our family. So don’t think I do, or ever would.”

Donnie just stares at him for a long breath, and then his shoulders slowly slump. In relief, not despair. It’s so much better than the slump he has when he’s given up.

“Oh,” Donnie says, and Mikey can hear the resounding relief in his brother’s voice. Donnie nods his head, and blinks away wetness in his eyes. “Okay. Thank- thank you, Mikey.”

The last part comes out as a whisper, and Mikey nods his head, and blinks away wetness in his eyes. “Okay. Thank- thank you, Mikey.”

Donnie just stares at him for a long breath, and then his shoulders slowly slump. In relief, not despair. It’s so much better than the slump he has when he’s given up.

“Okay,” Donnie says, and Mikey can hear the resounding relief in his brother’s voice. Donnie nods his head, and blinks away wetness in his eyes. “Okay. Thank- thank you, Mikey.”

The last part comes out as a whisper, and Mikey nods slowly. He thinks Donnie is also exhausted from all the emotional feelings talk, and Mikey is right there with him. No more of that tonight.

“Can we just make dinner and go to bed now?” Mikey asks, wondering vaguely if he’ll be told off for changing the subject to food. “I think I’m all talked out.”

“You? Talked out? I never thought I’d see the day,” Donnie says with a soft laugh, only for it cut off when he sees how Mikey is shrinking on himself.

“Yeah, ha, I never do shut up, do I?” Mikey mumbles. Always talking, always rambling, always going on and on about things no one even listens to him say…

“That’s not what I meant,” Donnie says, and his hand reaches out to grab at Mikey’s- only for it to stop just before touching. Hovering there. Donnie looks at Mikey, and Mikey hears the silent question.

Mikey opens his hand, and lifts it to meet Donnie’s. Their hands clasp together tightly, and Donnie says, “I’m sorry. That wasn’t supposed to be mean. I won’t say it again.”

 “… thanks,” Mikey says, swallowing down his tremulous thoughts and emotions.

Donnie’s hand tightens around his, and slowly pulls Mikey close enough for a hug. Mikey lets himself be pulled over, and wraps his arms around Donnie as his brother does the same to Mikey.

“I think that food idea is a good one,” Donnie says after a beat. “I’m pretty hungry, actually. I don’t think I ate tonight at all.”

Mikey scoffs quietly, and thumps his head against Donnie’s shoulder. “You suck at taking care of yourself, Dee. Gonna waste away one of these days.” Mikey knows that one is toeing the line, because they don’t need to actually say it to both know that if they’d stayed in the lair… there
would’ve been a real chance of that happening.

Mikey hugs his brother a little tighter, and tries to push away that image.

“Mgh, don’t I know it,” Donnie mutters. He turns his head, and Mikey feels a soft kiss to his forehead. “Think instant noodles and easy vegetables would be good? I don’t have enough energy for real cooking.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mikey agrees, and he starts to pull away from their hug. Donnie stops him though, with a gentle grip on Mikey’s shoulders. Mikey glances up, and meets his brother’s eyes again.

“For the record, and from now on,” Donnie says, strong voiced and with certainty. “I don’t think you’re stupid, and I’m never calling you that again. Ever. As far as I’m concerned, the word is gone from my vocabulary now and forever.”

That startles a laugh out of Mikey. “Now that is just stupid,” Mikey says, disbelief and some kind of achy emotion running through him. “You can’t just delete that word; you use it on, like, half the problems we deal with.”

“I can and will and have,” Donnie says stubbornly. Then, tone shifting to something softer, “Mikey, I’ve made a lot of mistakes. Particularly with how I treated you. I need to make up for it, and if giving up one word that’s done more damage than I ever thought it would is something that’ll help, then I’ll give it up and never say it again for the rest of my life.” He smiles, and there’s a hint of humor to the expression. “Besides, when have you ever known me to go halfway with anything? It’s all or nothing here, and I’m going to give my all.”

Oh.

Mikey can’t find a response to that. He can’t do anything other than nod shakily as something warm and painful and loving fills up his chest, and nearly makes him start crying again.

Scratch that, he already is.

“Oh, Mikey,” Donnie says gently, and wraps Mikey in another hug. “Shhhh, it’s okay. Just let it out, it’s okay.”

Mikey sniffs pathetically, and hides in his brother’s shoulder for a while longer. He stifles the last of his tears, and somehow pulls everything back together enough to push past the old pains and breaks in himself, to look at the new things taking their place. The warm things brought to life by having his brother say that he’s sorry, and that he’ll do anything to fix what’s happened to Mikey, and how Mikey now feels like he really matters. To Donnie. Like he’s not just the brother their family never wanted, or the screw up youngest no one ever listened to. He feels like he’s loved.

It’s not a feeling he ever wants to lose again, and he tries to say that, only for it to come out incoherent and rambling. Donnie just shushes him and says he knows, he knows and they won’t. Never again.

No more hurting and being hurt.

-/-
The tequila bottle is smashed with vigor and vengeance. Mikey whoops as he hears the glass shatter against the wall of the tunnel. It’s a good sound.

“I am never letting Jones anywhere near us with that toxic liquid ever again,” Donnie says in a matter of fact tone, accompanied with a disgusted sniff. “It brings nothing but misery and tears to anyone who drinks it.”

“True that,” Mikey says, hands on his hips and feeling much better just for that small act of destruction. Sometimes, he supposes, anger is allowed out if you do it right.

As he has come to discover- and is no longer allowed to ignore- bottling it all up and not speaking about it all just makes things ten times worse than they need to be.

He and Donnie had a talk about that. A very long talk. A talk that took all night and well into the day, mixed in with all the nasty things Mikey has been keeping locked up inside and pretending didn’t exist.

It’d felt like pouring murky water out into the open, filled with all the rotting thoughts Mikey had inside him. All the emotions and memories he’s been ignoring for so long.

Donnie hadn’t had answers for some of them. The ones about their dad and why he never seemed to expect anything of Mikey at all, and the ones about Raph and Leo and why they always treated Mikey like a useless piece of junk no one wanted.

He’d had some though. Mostly for himself, and those answers were mostly apologies.

Mikey countered a lot of the apologies with his own, or insistences that that specific moment or interaction he had been an idiot, or annoying, or was just being a general fuck up-

But Donnie had very, very sternly told him to shut up when he tried that, and to stop saying those things.

“And that includes thinking those things, Mikey,” Donnie had said, still stern. “If I’m not allowed to think shitty things about myself, then neither are you.”

Mikey had tried to counter that, but hadn’t been able to.

Well, no harm in that. If they’re instating a ‘no shitty thoughts about yourself’ rule, then it’s a good one. Mikey even wrote it onto the fridge whiteboard, displayed with their other new rules.

Most of them are about minding each other’s spaces and needs, and some are about which subjects have to be talked about specifically. They’re both guilty of bottling things up, and whoops, looks like they’ll have to police one another about doing so.

Mikey doesn’t mind that rule too much, and Donnie doesn’t either.

It’s a good rule. It’s a rule that makes sure they communicate when they’re feeling particularly bad, and makes sure they go to one another for support for those moments.

Donnie hasn’t made fun of Mikey’s issues once the whole while. Even when Mikey started talking about the dumb nightmares he gets, Donnie had listened intently, and given nothing but reassurances afterwards. No mockery in sight.

Mikey still catches himself waiting for a verbal or physical blow sometimes, but that’s getting to be less and less. He kinda hopes it’ll be not at all sometime soon.
Everything else is great though! They’re both talking and spending time together, they’ve got awesome friends who are doing everything they can to support the two of them, and they’ve got a home all to themselves; one that’s full of plants that make everything smell great and furniture they picked out themselves and new memories they’re building together.

Now that Mikey has most of his anger out, (most, because he doesn’t think he’ll ever get it all out), and his skull isn’t buzzing with repressed emotions all the time, he thinks it’s the happiest he’s felt in a long, long time.

All good things! He’d like it if things would stay that way, at least for a while.

He’s tired of fighting. Tired of dealing with one crisis after another. They had a talk about that too, about being tired of things like that. And about why Mikey suddenly couldn’t control himself so well anymore. Why all the anger came crawling out, even though he’d put so much work into pushing it all down.

Funny thing about trauma, if you stand still long enough for it to catch up, it will. And then the whole game changes.

No more war means no more distractions, and that means they can’t ignore the things that happened over the years any longer. Kind of hard to do that when there’s nothing left to deal with, other than the pieces leftover.

Emotionally speaking, they’re both kind of really fucked up. Mentally speaking too. It’s going to be a long time before that’s not a thing anymore.

But whatever, they’ll get through it. They always do, so why would this be any different? Especially since they’re both going to do their absolute best to be the support they need.

It’s just them now. No dad, no big brothers. They’ve got friends but it’s just not the same.

They’ll figure this out, through talking and googling things and making a lot of tea and popcorn for movie marathons. All good ways of figuring out why something hurts so much, and then moving away from the hurt.

They’ve got this. They’re the B-team- and that’s their name now, not their brothers’ for them, they’re taking it back and making it their own- and they’ve totally got this.

They’ve got each other, and they’re not letting go of that.

Mikey skips back into the station, because he can and no one will make fun of him for doing so, and heads towards the kitchen to grab a couple sodas. Donnie’s setting up the TV for another movie night, because they don’t have training and don’t want to do training anymore. They can decide what they want to do and no one else gets a say in it.

It’s a pretty awesome feeling, that one. Sure they got all sorts of unresolved issues still hanging in the background, but freedom still tastes like freedom and Mikey loves it.

Mikey opens the fridge, grabbing the six-pack of mini-Sprites they nabbed from the grocers the other day. And of course, he pops open the freezer to get kitty from her home. No way could he forget the third member of their household on a movie night.

Ice cream kitty mrowrrowrow’s at him as he takes her out, and it’s a bit of a challenge to balance her while she squirms in her newest bowl. He keeps her steady though, and heads back out through the drapes with the first round of snacks for him and Donnie.
“You ready? I’m so hyped to see this movie,” Mikey says as he sets kitty on the coffee table. Said coffee table has taken a couple beatings lately, and he pats a couple scuff marks on its surface. Good coffee table, great job keeping up with their emotional drama. He should get it a doily as reward.

Donnie isn’t answering him, intently focusing on his phone as he stands motionless by the TV. Mikey’s own phone has remained under his mattress since he put it there, so Donnie’s been the only one seeing the messages from their brothers.

“Donnie?” Mikey asks, standing up straighter. “Hey, something wrong?”

Donnie finally hears him, and looks up from his t-phone.

Mikey’s good cheer disappears when he sees the expression on Donnie’s face.

“Mikey,” Donnie says, breathless and quiet. “We have to go back. It’s Raph.”

Chapter End Notes

based on similar experiences i’ve had.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

To tell a child who they're meant to be, that they have a single destiny, a single future, is to set them up for failure.

Chapter Notes

hey, so.

this was literally one of the most arduous chapter i've ever tried to write, i spent two whole weeks trying to, so if y'all would leave some good comments on this forty+ page update, it'd really be appreciated.

also, as of now, i have created and released a narrative soundtrack to the first four chapters of this fanfic on 8tracks. listen here if you want to get an audio experience to go with this series.

whenever i get done with the A-team's side of things in here, i'll release the soundtrack for that. look forwards to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“From now on,” Leo says, continuing despite the shocked noises Raph and Mikey are making. “I’ll be our Sensei, and I’ll expect your respect for that position. It was our father’s dying wish, and I’ll see that I carry it out.”

He sits straight, head held high, and squares his shoulders for the new responsibility he’s just accepted. It’s been long enough spent mourning; he needs to stand back up and continue to be the leader he is to his family. Their father is gone and Leo spending his nights and days missing him won’t help anyone.

He needs to be strong. He needs to be unfaltering. He needs to be the Sensei his father knew he would one day be.

This is destiny. He needs to meet it head on, for the sake of his remaining family.

Raph might take some talking into it- he always does with these things- but at least Leo knows Donnie and Mikey will accept the change in things. While Raph remains someone Leo has to watch for the occasional insubordination, their younger brothers are reliable to always follow orders in the field. It eases some of the worries in Leo’s mind, of something going catastrophically wrong again and this time he’d lose everyone and not just one person-

Donnie nods vaguely, and seems off in his head again. He’s obviously agreeable to how things are going to change, which won’t be much if they’re truthful. Donnie always can see the bigger picture to things, and Leo appreciates that he understands how it’ll play out from now on.
Mikey meanwhile is still giving him a confused and somewhat doubtful expression. “Are you sure that’s what Splinter said?” he asks, stressing his words.

“Yes,” Leo replies confidently, zero hesitation in him. It’s the truth. It’s the truth and it’s the last truth his father ever told him. “He told me,” His throat clenches for a brief moment. “a few hours before we went to rescue Karai and Shinigami.”

Mikey opens his mouth for a moment, and then closes it. Staring at Leo. Donnie remains quiet, eyes focused on something past Leo.

Meanwhile, Raph’s expression slowly shifts, from confused to awe in a strange way, and then he says a quiet, “Huh,” and scratches the back of his head. “You know, I kind of knew it’d happen someday, but… wow.”

Leo smiles warmly. “I know. It was a lot to take in, but I’m proud to do this. It’ll be a bit of an adjustment, even for me, but… this is what he wanted.”

This is what their father wanted. For him, for them, for all of their futures.

It’s a heavy burden, but he’s more than willing to bear it. After all, it’s what he was always destined to do.

He’ll always miss his Sensei, miss being a student and having someone to look to for advice. But, everyone has to grow up sometime, and this is his time to do so. Leo’s been heading for this point his entire life, and all that’s left is to accept it.

He does. He accepts it, and he’s ready. Ready for the responsibility of being a true leader, a Sensei. A mentor to his whole family.

He can do this. He’ll do exactly what his father wanted him to, and he’ll do it without hesitation. This is what the rest of their lives are going to look like; him, at the head of their family, and his brothers, following his lead as they embark on whatever comes after their war.

Leo keeps smiling as Raph starts teasing him about testing his skills one more time before really accepting Leo’s mentorship, and Donnie and Mikey remain quiet as they digest what Leo’s told them. They’ll accept it fully soon enough, no rush. After all, they’ve got their whole lives ahead of them to do so.

But then Leo wakes up one evening, weeks after that first one, and finds Donnie and Mikey’s beds empty.

-/-

It takes a while to notice it. After he gets up, Leo goes straight into the dojo. A short prayer to his father’s altar, and then he gears up for an early evening solo training session. Just to warm up, to erase any lingering fatigue from a restless day’s sleep.

He likes training. It’s simple, straight forwards. More familiar than his own name is. Even when nights or days happen where it feels like his world’s been flipped upside down, or he’s struggling to find even ground to stand on, there’s always training. There’s always the sound of his swords slicing through the air, constant and comforting until he sheathes them.
He loves training. Loves it. There’s nothing else so simple, so easy to control. Every move planned, every step placed as it’s needed, every intake of breath steady and patterned.

It’s just him, the dojo, and his swords when he’s training alone. It’s possibly his favorite state to be in, out of all the states he’s been in. It’s definitely better than his worst ones.

He stops somewhere around eight. Exactly one hour of training complete and done with. Leo’s legs and arms burn pleasantly, and he feels collected in his wits. Ready for another evening with his brothers, their friends and whatever the night will bring.

He goes into the kitchen after a rub down, and finds that there’s still no one else awake. Not unusual, since Mikey tends to sleep through most of the evening these days, and Raph refuses to rise before eight thirty. God knows when Donnie will; either he’s already awake and has been awake all day, and will crash soon enough from a sciencing spree. Or, he’ll stumble out of whichever room he passed out in, grab coffee, and disappear back into wherever his head is this evening. Leo rarely knows, and doesn’t ask unless it’s vital to a mission for Donnie to be in good form. Their father always seemed to trust Donnie to know what he was doing anyways; Leo sees no reason to change that method of handling Donnie’s eccentricities, now that he’s the one in charge.

Raph joins him in the kitchen five minutes past the half hour, and blearily steals a piece of Leo’s cold dinner leftovers.

“You know when Mike’s getting up?” he asks after a yawn. Raph bites into the quarter of grilled cheese he stole, chews, and swallows. “I want real breakfast food for once.”

Leo shrugs, and sets down his most recent sci-fi novel pick. He only got it a week ago, and he’s taking his time to savor. “Maybe you should go wake him up. He shouldn’t sleep in so long anyways, it’s not healthy.”

“Mgh, yeah, guess I should. He’s such a little shit when he first gets up, though.”

“Like you’re not,” Leo comments blandly.

Raph shoots him a glare, which Leo ignores, and then stalks back out of the kitchen. Apparently, Leo’s brother’s need for warm food overrules his annoyance with having to deal with a sleep-stupid Mikey. Leo will have to snatch off that platter of whatever Mikey whips up, before Raph and their brother eat everything.

Donnie should really show himself soon, otherwise he won’t get a share of it at all.

Leo finishes the last bits of his grilled cheese, just as Raph comes back into the kitchen.

“Did he say somethin’ about going out at all tonight?” Raph asks. “Because he’s not in his bed.”

“…not that I remember?” Leo says, thinking back to the previous night. All he gets is Mikey’s usual string of nonsense; all of it melding together into a cloud of meaningless noise.

“Text him. I’m gonna poke in the lab and see if he’s bothering Donnie again.”

Leo nods, and stands up from the kitchen island. Raph and he separate, going opposite directions in their home. Leo hears the lab doors pulled open as he ascends the stairs into the bedroom hallway, and he heads towards his room to get his t-phone off the desk where it’s been charging.

On a whim, he stops to open the door into Donnie’s room; just to see if Donnie’s asleep and Mikey’s been messing in the lab unsupervised.
Leo opens the door completely when he sees no one is in bed, and scratches his throat idly. Odd, since he hasn’t heard any explosions or yelling from the lab this evening so far, and neither of those is ever absent when Mikey starts interfering with Donnie’s things, while Donnie is still present.

Leo turns to walk away, and then pauses in the open doorway.

Wait.

…has Donnie’s room always been so empty looking?

Leo hears footsteps approaching, and he steps backwards into the hallway again. Raph comes towards him with a terse grimace, and before Leo can ask him about the contents of Donnie’s room and if he’s imagining things, Raph says-

“They’re not in the lab, and the door out to the garage tunnel was open. The Shellraiser’s gone.”

Leo’s brow furrows. That’s… weird. “Are you sure they’re not in there? You know how lost Donnie gets in all those machines of his-”

“Yeah, but there’s something about that too,” Raph interrupts. His grimace gets deeper. “You ever notice that his lab isn’t as crowded as it used to be?”

“…what?”

“Like. Most of his shit is gone. Gone, gone. Not wrecked or pushed to the side, but… missing.”

Leo stares at Raph, trying to make sense of that sentence. Maybe Donnie’s just spring cleaning and Mikey is helping him, as unlikely as those scenarios are. But… what about his room? Donnie never gets rid of anything in there; he’s always packing it away into some nook or cranny to save for later, claiming they never know when they might need something.

Leo steps out of Raph’s way and points into Donnie’s bedroom. “You should look at this, then.”

Raph turns towards the open doorway, and moves closer to it. He reaches in, and as he turns on the light, Leo’s suspicions are confirmed.

The shelves of Donnie’s room are strangely empty, only a few books and miscellaneous objects left on them. His bed is neat and made, in a way it never is. His stacks of laptops are all gone.

Leo doesn’t see Donnie’s bo staff anywhere, and his brother hasn’t left it behind anywhere in nearly two and a half years.

Mikey isn’t in his bed. Donnie’s stuff is missing. The Shellraiser is gone.

“Raph,” Leo says, feeling a little displaced from things. “Go look in Mikey’s room again. I’m texting them right away.”

Raph goes to look, and Leo goes to grab his phone. There are no texts from either of their brothers, nothing to explain where they might have gone. Leo sends a quick message to them both, asking where they’ve gone off to, and why Donnie’s rooms are so empty.

Raph comes back before Donnie or Mikey replies, and he’s starting to look the way he always does when he’s angry as well as worried.

“There’s nothing but garbage in there,” Raph says, which isn’t unusual, because Mikey’s room has
always been a trash heap, but- “Literally just garbage. Everything else is gone.” Which is weird. Like Donnie’s empty room, lab, and the missing Shellraiser are weird. “Even that stupid stuffed bear he’s got is missing, and he never lets that thing leave his room.”

An uncomfortable feeling settles in Leo’s stomach.

Leo’s messages remain unanswered, but he sends another text anyways.

What’s going on? Where did you go?

Still no answer.

“Maybe they told April or Casey?” Leo suggests, taking his eyes off the small screen in his hands.

“Maybe,” Raph says in a way that means he doubts they did.

Leo frowns, and texts their friends anyways. Both of them reply within a few minutes, and say the same thing. They don’t know where Leo’s brothers have gone. Leo doesn’t truthfully answer their questions about why he’s asking; no sense in worrying them just yet. Not when there’s a high chance that Mikey’s just convinced Donnie of some convoluted scheme, somehow involving all their things disappearing, and the two of them will just come home soon enough. Or, it’s Donnie who’s gone and gotten a harebrained scheme in that unfathomable skull of his, and the two of them are off getting into b-team shenanigans. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Leo still feels a curl of worry in his gut, even with those assurances to himself, and shoots his brothers one last polite text reminding them to not be late for midnight training. Hopefully, it’s nothing; just his brothers getting up to trouble and not anything more.

Leo keeps that thought close to his chest, and doesn’t let himself worry too deeply. If he knows his brothers, they’ll probably resolve whatever’s going on on their own, or call for help if they can’t handle it. That’s the knowledge uses to soothe his concerns, and he lets it push the majority of them away.

And then Raph finds the note.


Me and Donnie are taking a vacation a break from home for a while. Just a few weeks or something. I’m really sorry but we just

We’re fine. There’s no bad guy or mind control or something something evil plot whatever. It’s just us b-team younger bros taking some time to ourselves. We’ll be back soon.

Or whenever we sort out our shit which will be who the fuck knows when, like ha ha you wouldn’t believe the stupid stuff I got up in my head it’s one big fucking disas

I can’t tell you where we went, and we didn’t tell anyone else. It’s a private thing for us, we just need a little time a secret retreat thing, like from anime or something. Chill time from home and chill time for you two from us. Win win, right? I’m sorry, I know it’s a bad time but we just

Sorry we didn’t give you a heads up but we were pretty sure you wouldn’t let us we wanted it to be
Leo calls Mikey right after finding the nearly illegible note, the crossed out words making everything else that much harder to read.

He doesn’t get an answer.

He calls again.

No one answers.

He calls Donnie.

Donnie doesn’t answer either.

He calls them both again, and again, and again.

Neither phone line is picked up. All Leo gets is the dial tone and then voicemail. Again and again.

Raph calls their friends meanwhile. April and Casey, the Mutanimals- even Karai, and by extension, Shinigami. Not one of them knows anything about what’s happened.

April comments she’s been getting less texts from Donnie lately, seen him hardly at all. Leatherhead- using the communal phone of the Mutanimals’ hideout- says he hasn’t seen Mikey in a while either. It’s not a comforting sign.

After the first two hours of calling and texting, to their brothers as well as their meager social group, Leo is beginning to get annoyed. A little hurt as well.

Donnie is more than smart enough to take care of himself, and Mikey is… well, Mikey. He made it through Dimension-X; he can make it through a couple nights on the streets of New York, especially with Donnie along for the ride. Leo knows that they’re not likely to be in any real danger, even with the military still side-eyeing them for the Tokka incident, and Don Vizioso’s anti-mutant sentiments. Between the two of them, they’ll be fine however long they want to drag out this misadventure.

But, Leo is annoyed that they picked up and left without warning, without asking him permission. Their Sensei, their leader. He’s the one who makes final calls in this family, and the last two people he really expected to go AWOL have up and disappeared with hardly a goodbye. The messy note Mikey left them isn’t nearly enough of an explanation to anything.

And, he’s hurt. Because a vacation from the somewhat stifling walls of the lair would be nice, and they haven’t done anything as a group in a while. Leo feels excluded, considering that Donnie and Mikey will probably cook up all sorts of shenanigans together, and he’s been left out of it. Raph, too. Not very fair of them, since the four of them have always shared experiences equally. Including the fun ones.
They could have at least *hinted* that they were thinking of doing this. Really. It wouldn’t have been that hard to give him and Raph a heads up. A *surprise*- sure, that’s one way of spelling purposeful exclusion.

Leo is mildly worried, but mostly annoyed and surly. If anything, he expects Donnie to get sick of Mikey’s over-exuberance sooner than later, or Mikey to get bored of whatever long-winded science spiel Donnie has gotten caught up in tonight. They’ll come home soon enough, since he knows the two of them are such polar opposites they can’t share close quarters for more than a few hours without snapping.

One way or another, they’ll be back soon, and then Leo can sit them down and give them a thorough talking-to about desertion without warning, and disrespect to authority in general. Maybe he’ll ground them, too. He can do that now; he *is* Sensei.

“What’s the smile for?” Raph asks moodily, glancing away from a comic he’s likely not really reading. He’s as annoyed and put-out as Leo is, the two of them sitting in the living room as they while away the hours until their brothers return home.

“I’m going to ground Donnie and Mikey for a whole week,” Leo says smugly. “whenever they get back, because I can and they deserve it.”

Raph considers that for a moment, and then grins. “Sounds about right. Forgot you could do that now.”

“It’s a perk of being Sensei,” Leo replies.

“Don’t go gettin’ a big head over it, though. And don’t try that shit on me.”

“I won’t if you don’t force me to.”

Raph’s good humor slips for a moment, and Leo sees that they’ve neared the line between seriousness and joking.

“Sure,” Raph says, going back to his comic. “whatever you say, Sensei.” He says the last bit with more than a hint of sarcasm, which Leo benevolently lets slide. He’s got enough problems with their brothers at the moment; no point in picking a fight with Raph right this second. If he did that every time Raph was rude to him, they’d never get anything done.

Leo chooses to brush away his concerns about his brothers and their issues with listening to his orders; returning to the novel in his hands. He’ll address Raph’s belligerent mini-rebellions sometime later, as well as Donnie and Mikey’s impromptu runaway attempt; which can’t last much longer than tonight and possibly tomorrow. They’ll drive each other nuts until they come home, and then everything will go back to normal once Leo’s punished them sufficiently for worrying their family.

The situation is still well under control, despite the first few hours of mild panic and anxiety. He’ll just wait for them to come home, talk to them about their poor choices and recklessness, and then they’ll all settle back into their routine again.

Simple, and all he has to do now is wait, and keep Raph’s temper under watch. Nothing unusual about their evening, just the two of them, except…

The lair is oddly empty, missing Donnie and Mikey’s presences.

Leo turns the page of his novel, and doesn’t think about that.
Leo texts his brothers once more before he goes to sleep, reminding them that what they’re doing is irresponsible and inconsiderate to the whole of their family. His other texts and calls remain ignored, and the final text does as well.

He’s a little miffed about that. Just because they’ve decided to take a trip doesn’t mean they should be ignoring him. It’s dangerous to them all to fall out of contact, not to mention plain disrespectful to Leo’s position as their Sensei.

He tucks those annoyances aside, and goes to sleep a little before the sun rises fully aboveground.

He wakes up expecting… he’s not sure what he’s expecting, but a quietly empty home isn’t what it.

Donnie and Mikey’s beds are still unslept in, and the Shellraiser is still gone. Leo’s phone has no texts from anyone other than his friends, asking if Donnie and Mikey have been located yet.

Leo expected his brothers to come home, at least one of them, sometime during the day or late afternoon. Donnie, because he never strays from his work in the lab longer than a few hours, or from their multiple vehicles needing attention in the garage. Mikey, because Leo’s youngest sibling is prone to lackadaisical jumps in interest, and is surely missing his games and TV by this point. One of them. Both of them.

Neither of them are home.

It’s just Leo, up at the same time as he always is, standing in a large, silent home. Alone.

He frowns, but tells himself that his siblings are due home soon enough, even if they’ve lasted on their own longer than he thought they would. Maybe their tolerance of each other’s eccentricities has gotten better without him noticing. Maybe they’re just being stubborn. Leo doesn’t really care; he just wants them back home where he can keep an eye on them both.

He goes through his hour long solo session. It’s not as calming as he’d hoped it to be, but he’s fine regardless. By the time Raph wanders out of his bedroom, twenty minutes past the half hour of his usual waking time, Leo is collected in his own mind again.

Raph gives him a mildly exasperated look, edging towards frustration. “They’re still not home?”

He asks, clearly having checked the same signs as Leo.

Leo shrugs. “No. I texted them again, but I haven’t gotten a reply even once.”

Raph narrows his eyes, and heads for the fridge. “Assholes. They could at least text back. Or I guess Donnie could; he’d probably give a better explanation than Mikey.”

Leo hums agreeably, because that’s a true enough assumption. “Pass me the milk? My coffee needs more than I thought.”

“Uh… can’t,” Raph says, lifting the carton out, squinting at the inside. “It’s kind of basically empty.”
“What? But Mikey said he went grocery shopping just a few days ago.”

“He probably thought he did, but forgot,” Raph says with a roll of his eyes. He tosses the carton into the trash and goes looking in the fridge again. “Probably got distracted somewhere along the way, jeeze. And those two think they can make it on their own…”

Leo grumbles, and sips his not-milky-enough coffee. Mikey had been saying he was on top of all the grocery runs; all the evenings he’s been in and out the past while should have given him ample time to pick up what they needed. Likely speaking, Leo and Raph’s brother had been lying about actually being on top of things, and been just goofing off instead.

Leo adds milk to his list of items to take care of, and finishes his coffee. He’ll reprimand Mikey when he gets back for lying about his chores, particularly about one they all depend on.

There’s no hot food, again, and he and Raph have to settle for cereal without milk and dwindling leftovers.

Leo texts Mikey once for the forgotten chore subject, and then again as the night goes on; all without a single reply from either b-team member. The ignoring thing is definitely on purpose, which is really starting to bother Leo. They could at least say when they’ll be home, or where they’ve gone to hide and play.

Honestly, sometimes he thinks he’s the only one their father managed to raise with any sense of social awareness. Or any sense of responsibility.

Leo feels very often like he’s the only one to take their clan code, family code, anything code seriously. Their father’s word, as well. He doesn’t understand why Raph so often rebels, or Mikey flat out ignores, or Donnie just doesn’t even notice. The ways of their inherited clan, of their father’s teachings, are everything to Leo. Something to hold onto now that Splinter has passed, to provide stability and guidance. And yet his brothers still wander from them.

It’s confusing and irksome. But, Leo supposes that it’s just another sign of why he was destined to be the next clan leader, and his siblings were not. Clear as day, he’s better suited to the role.

Now if his brothers would just listen to him properly, everything would be perfect.

Leo spends the rest of the evening and night fielding concerned texts from April and Casey. They’re not getting answers from his brothers either and they’re actually starting to really worry. Leo reminds them not to; he knows his brothers better than anyone, and he knows they’ll be home soon. There’s nowhere else for them to go, and no one besides their small social group to reach out to. The moment they do, Leo will know minutes later. They can only avoid him and Raph for so long like this, without causing serious worry in their friends and annoyance in Leo and Raph.

Either they’ll come home tonight, or they’ll reach out to one of their mutual friends and reveal where they’ve gotten off to. In any case, it can’t be much longer until his siblings come home.

Leo hopes it’s soon, since Raph has begun stalking around moodily, rather than just sitting and reading. The punching bag is getting a fair amount of use the longer the night goes on, and Leo has a feeling Raph will have a lot to say to their wayward siblings, once they’re home. They all know worrying Raph just makes him mad, and the longer you worry him the madder he’ll get. It’ll just get more dramatic the longer things drag out.

Likely how things will play out is their brothers will come home, Raph will snarl and smack them a little for making him worry, Leo will give them a stern lecture of responsibility and dedication,
the two of them will be grounded for a week, and then Donnie and Mikey will apologize for having worried them so much. After that, it’ll all go back to normal.

Leo is confident in that scenario, even as his texts go unanswered and April and Casey begin expressing real concern.

-/-

Leo is confused why he wakes up the third night, and finds still only Raph in the lair with him.

The Shellraiser remains gone. Donnie and Mikey’s things remain gone. They remain gone.

Leo is just plain annoyed at this point. How much longer can they really stand each other and keep up whatever ridiculous plan they have going? Not to mention the increasingly frustrating radio silence on their end.

_You’re being incredibly immature, not even replying to our texts_, he texts Mikey. And, _I thought out of the two of you, at least You’d be sensible enough to know when to cut the shenanigans_, to Donnie. It’s a little passive-aggressive, but Leo feels he’s in the right at this moment in time. They’re being ridiculous, and he and Raph are suffering through unnecessary worry for it.

Not to mention they’ve missed multiple training sessions. How are they supposed to remain a well-oiled machine if one half of their team doesn’t even show up for training? Just because the Shredder is gone doesn’t mean they’re _safe_. They have to stay in shape, keep their reflexes sharp.

Donnie and Mikey don’t reply to his texts, and don’t come home either. Leo feels his annoyance grow about that, as well as his small pool of worry.

But that’s nothing compared to the steady climb of temper that Raph has going on. Three days, not a peep, and Leo is stuck with Raph alone as his brother reaches his tipping point. When he gets worried, Raph gets _mad-_ he gets mad about everything, it sometimes feels- and he tends to take it out on either whatever’s causing him worry, or the nearest person/object.

The punching dummy must feel special, getting so much attention.

Leo stays outside Raph’s range, and rolls his eyes as his brother grumbles and gripes.

Finally, on the wayside of late evening and after another unsatisfying breakfast of cold food, Raph throws his hands up and says, “I’m going back to the Mutanimals. Mikey’s probably been hanging around there, and maybe he’s let slip to Leatherhead where they’re hiding out.”

Leo considers the idea for a moment, and then decides to agree. It’s a solid enough guess; the idea of Mikey going to his favorite friend’s home and accidentally blabbing where he and Donnie have snuck off to. To add to that, Leo will check in with April again in case Donnie’s done the same with her.

His concern dies down, now that they’ve got a plan of action. Sometimes, even though their behavior’s purpose escapes him, Donnie and Mikey are predictable in where they’ll fall. It’s why they’re the B-team, and Leo and Raph are the A-team. Simple reasoning.

Mikey hasn’t been to the Mutanimals’ home at all, as it turns out. No phone calls either.
Raph kicks a nearby skate ramp as they get that news, startling Mondo Gecko enough he leaps to the other side of it. Leo just frowns and crosses his arms, staring up at Slash.

“Are you positive they haven’t been here,” Leo asks again. “And that they didn’t, say, tell you to cover for them if they have?”

Slash’s own arms are crossed as he glares down at Leo. Leo refuses to shrink under the glare. He knew Slash when he was still Spike; munching on leaves and acting as Raph’s confidant. He’s not scared of the tortoise.

“No, they haven’t, and no, we haven’t.” Slash growls out. “I wouldn’t keep that sort of thing from you, never mind from Raph. If they’d been here, you’d know already.”

Leo keeps frowning, nearly glaring himself, before he lets the expression drop. “Okay. Sorry for the suspicion, but… we’re just really starting to worry. They won’t reply to our texts at all.”

Slash’s own expression softens, and he puts a large hand on Leo’s shoulder. No one’s done that since his father died, and it feels somewhat uncomfortable. “I understand you’re feelin’ worried, Leo. Raph, too. I’ll keep my eye out for Don and Mike for you, and give word soon as I have a location or sighting, promise.”

“That’d be really appreciated,” Leo says truthfully, even as he subtly shakes off Slash’s hand. “Thank you for that, really.”

“And you will tell us the moment you see them, correct?” Leatherhead rumbles from his position beside the skate ramp, near Mondo. The large croc mutant is giving Leo a serious look; one that means he really does want Leo to tell him the moment they find his brothers. Leo figures it’d be best to do just that, because while Leatherhead has mellowed over the years, his protectiveness of Mikey remains a real trigger for his anger. At least it’ll work in their favor, the croc mutant’s desire to see Mikey and Donnie safe being the same as Leo and Raph’s.

“Of course,” Leo agrees easily, giving an encouraging and confident smile to Leatherhead. “And then I’ll send Mikey your way right after, alright?”

Leatherhead nods slowly, accepting Leo’s words of comfort.

Raph, however, growls out, “Yeah, right after I’m done knockin’ the little turd’s head straight again. Donnie’s too, if this keeps up. God.”

Leo sighs at Raph’s, as usual, aggressive language and poorly hidden concern. It’s been grating on his nerves, almost as much as his own worry has been. And really, talking like that in front of Leatherhead probably isn’t the smartest move. If Leo can control his own worry, then Raph should be able to, too.

They make a stop by April’s home on the way back to their own, to check in if she’s heard anything from Donnie as well as to just say hi, but find her room dark and empty. No other lights are on in the apartment either, which means Kirby is sleeping and they’re not welcome.

It strikes Leo a little odd, that April is gone so late in the night without even a greeting their way, but he settles for just shooting a questioning text. She doesn’t reply immediately, which makes him frown. Does anyone on this team respect his authority anymore? He’s beginning to doubt it. And it’s odd feeling, too. They’ve come so far as a team, been through so much and come out stronger for it. It’s bizarre how they’re falling out of sync; first Leo’s brothers, then April…

The feeling that he’s losing control of his own team, not long after becoming their Sensei, is
another tick on Leo’s list of frustrations. He’s worked so hard for so long- and just when he’s achieved what he views as the final step, they start tearing up his hard work?

His father trusted him to keep their family together, to guide his brothers and friends. The fact that his team is trying to break away like this, break up everything he and they have worked for- it’s just not something he can tolerate quietly.

He’s worried about his brothers, and partially about April, but he’s starting to be more so angry with them. He doesn’t understand why any of them are doing the things they are, and that lack of understanding just makes his anger harder to tamp down on.

Raph bumps into Leo as they get home, and his brother snaps “watch it” as he does. Which makes Leo’s eyes narrow, and his own carefully controlled temper hitch for a moment.

“Just because you’re worried, doesn’t mean you get to be rude, Raph.”

“Piss off,” is Raph’s imaginative response, stalking away further into the lair.

Leo’s mouth forms a flat, unimpressed line, and his words are just as. “I already have two brothers being troublemakers at the moment, I don’t need another.” When Raph keeps walking, Leo raises his voice. “That means you, Raph.”

“Oh go fuck yourself, Leo,” Raph snaps back over his shoulder. “I got enough problems; I don’t need you nit-pickin’ everything I do, too. I’m not your lackey.”

“No, you’re my student, and I’m your Sensei, and you’re supposed to listen to what I have to say,” Leo’s tone gets sharper with each word, like the prickly feelings in his chest do. “Whether you like it, or not.”

His brother pauses, and turns to give a narrow look. “I told you not to try that shit with me,” Raph says in a low tone. “Splinter might’ve said you got all that authority, but I’m not gonna roll over and let you make me fall in line. I’m not Donnie or Mikey.”

Leo scoffs. “Like either of them are doing that at the moment.”

“Maybe they’ve got the right idea.”

Leo’s flat grimace turns downwards.

“What did you say to me?”

“I said,” Raph says, taking a step back towards the lair entrance. “maybe they’ve got the right idea. You’re kind of a jackass when you get it in your head like this, fearless. So maybe you might wanna step off before you lose another student of yours.”

Leo scoffs. “Like either of them are doing that at the moment.”

“Maybe they’ve got the right idea.”

Leo’s flat grimace turns downwards.

“What did you say to me?”

“You heard me,” Raph says, teeth bared, his entire posture asking for a fight. “Back off.”

Leo takes a slow breath, and then steps down the stairs. He strides slowly across the stone floor, right into Raph’s space as his brother does the same. Leo is taller, so he looks down at Raph as they don’t break eye contact.

“Are you really so desperate to be the rebellious second son,” Leo says, slow and pointed. “that you’d spit on what- what your own father, our father, told us? The very last thing he ever told us?”
The flash of pain and grief Leo sees in Raph’s eyes is what he intended to put there. Raph doesn’t get to act like he’s the only one angry, or hurt, or worried; not when Leo is just as. Their father’s word is something Leo still holds higher than anything, and to have Raph defy it so openly, after all the grief they’ve gone through since Splinter’s death- it’s not something Leo can let slide.

Raph’s shoulders rise as his teeth clench, and Leo more than expects the tide of fury that follows.

“You take that back,” Raph hisses through his teeth.

“Am I wrong?” Leo asks, because he’s tired and tense and Raph doesn’t get to act like this. Not without someone pushing back against all his antagonistic behavior. “You were always looking for a reason to push the boundary of his rules, and now you’re looking to do the same with mine.”

“Shut up.”

Leo pushes on, because he’s been keeping himself so tightly wound and clashing with Raph has always pushed him over the limit. Their brothers are missing, their friends are no help, and Leo needs an outlet. Raph gets to lose it- so why can’t he? “Our father made one, one last request, and you can’t even respect that. No, you have to keep pushing and keeping and keep looking for another reason, as always, to start yet another fight with someone-”

Raph’s shoulders shake. “I said shut up.”

Leo’s lips curl back, and he keeps going. Keeps going with all the hot-terrible things that’ve built up inside him for years. “-because you’re bored, or tired, or grumpy, or hell, just feel like it, because you’re the second son who’s just jealous he didn’t get to be the first son, or the leader, or hear the last request our father ever made to us-”

Leo cuts off, because Raph punches him in the jaw.

-/-

Leo doesn’t talk to Raph the entire fourth day. Raph doesn’t talk to Leo the entire fourth day.

Neither of them makes any effort to breach the bitter, frustrated silence in their home.

Leo’s jaw, chest, and shoulders hurt from where Raph laid into him. From the way Raph limps slightly in and out of the kitchen- the single moment of eye contact between them the entire night- Leo knows his brother is also smarting from their fight.

They haven’t fought like this a long while; most of their disagreements remaining in words only. Physical fighting hasn’t been brought into things for possibly years. Mostly, it was Raph and Mikey who got physical in their arguments. Or, it was Raph who got physical; Mikey just ran his mouth until he got shut up.

Leo is properly angry now. Angry with Raph, for causing extra trouble Leo does not need to deal with right now, and angry with their brothers for causing this fight in the first place. It’s Donnie and Mikey’s fault, disappearing and stirring up discourse in their family. If they’d just stayed home, stayed in line, then Leo and Raph wouldn’t be fighting, and neither of them would be angry with their brothers.
Leo’s bruised jaw throbs when he touches it, and it feels like his rising and receding temper.

Four days without even a *how do you do* and Donnie and Mikey stubbornly remain out of contact. April continues to be AWOL, *another* person Leo can’t keep track of, and Casey’s texts and calls keep being useless check-ins to see if there’s any new info. The Mutanimals’ are unhelpful, Karai won’t answer her phone, and Shinigami only picked up hers once to tell Leo they’re *busy* and can’t talk-

Everything is falling apart, and Leo blames his younger brothers for causing it all the happen.

“What would *you* do, father?” Leo asks the altar, rubbing his throat scars. They itch tonight, like the ones on his leg so. They always itch when he starts getting really stressed out.

He looks at the pictures of his father, at the one center of the altar, and waits for an answer.

None come to him.

Leo stares at his father’s photograph for a moment longer, feeling the ebb and flow of grief that strikes right to his core, and then turns away.

He goes and sits where his father always did, Splinter’s favorite meditation spot in front of their tree. A part of him is comforted by the action, and another is saddened that he is even allowed to sit in this spot now. A part of him remains angry; a part of him is hurt and tired.

 Mostly, he’s frustrated, and he just wants his brothers to come home so things will go back to normal.

Leo closes his eyes, and tries to meditate away the worst of his anger. It only works to a point.

He sends another few texts to Donnie and Mikey, reminding them they have to come home, that they should know just how much grief they’re causing everyone with their increasingly ridiculous stubbornness, and that the longer this goes on, the worse the consequences for them all will be.

After they’re sent, he finds he doesn’t really feel better for writing those things out. He reminds *himself* that his words are justified, that he’s in the *right* - but it doesn’t really matter either way. He gets no answer.

The fourth day ends like so. Leo goes to sleep, tight and unhappy in his chest. He doesn’t even say good morning to Raph before that, and the messages in his phone do nothing to fix anything.

-/-

The next evening, there’s an unspoken resolution to the argument. Raph wakes up a full half hour past when he usually does, and sits down across from Leo; who has added an extra half hour solo workout session. Neither of them says *sorry*, but the fight is dropped regardless.

They finish the last of the bread together for toast, share the butter bowl by passing it back and forth, and Raph gets the jam from the fridge when asked. Maybe he feels badly for throwing the first punch, like Leo feels badly for going too far with his words.

Leo doesn’t ask. He takes the jam, eats his bland tasting whole wheat toast, and silently agrees to
the ceasefire.

“Casey says April stopped answering her phone,” Raph says conversationally, a little while after breakfast. The two of them are in the dojo; Leo doing slow tai-chi, and Raph doing bicep curls with a weight. “You think it’s because she’s with Donnie and Mikey?”

Leo breathes out slowly as he moves through his steps, thinking on that idea. “Possibly. She and Donnie are close, so I wouldn’t put it past him to have convinced her to do something like that.”

“Hn. I’ll bet Mikey did somethin’ like that with Leatherhead. Slash keeps saying they haven’t been through, but you know… we didn’t get to talk with Leatherhead directly.”

A good point. “Do you think we should try them again?”

Raph grunts, and switches hands. “It wouldn’t hurt.”

They finish the half-hearted workout, and take the Party Wagon over to the Mutanimals’ hideout. The exchange goes about as well as Leo should’ve expected.

Raph’s temper had only just been mildly curbed from their fight, and Leo’s refocused calm slips easier than he wants it to. He admits in private that they’d gotten a tad forceful and sharp with their allies, after the fifth time Leatherhead had growled that he didn’t know where their brothers had gone, or why they’d gone.

An unsettled itch is making itself home in Leo’s spine, standing in the Mutanimals’ base and arguing without any real gain or purpose. That itch persists, prickly and unpleasant, and it does nothing to help Leo’s negotiative skills during the argument.

Leo might’ve snapped a little, and Raph definitely yelled a bit. Even if it resulted in Leatherhead rising up and reminding them how much larger he is than them, and Slash yelling right back at them that they’re all just as worried about Leo’s brothers- a part of Leo feels at least a little better, having gotten a chance to vent a portion of his frustrations. Even if it’d been misdirected.

The itch remains in his spine and senses, even as Leo turns away from the Mutanimals and goes to exit the hideout. He tries to brush it off along with the residual angry feelings festering in his chest, and it only stays with him for another few blocks from the hideout.

They leave no more informed than they had the other times. And, as they drive past April’s apartment, they see no sign of lights on at all. Either she’s asleep early, for the first time in a long, long time, or she’s still out and about and completely AWOL. Leo is betting on the second.

“D’you wanna check for sure?” Raph asks in a subdued tone, leaning out the passenger window. Now that he’s gotten out the more explosive parts of his temper, Leo knows he’ll be less likely to cause any more fights.

“No,” Leo replies, and pushes down on the gas. “I seriously doubt she’ll be home.”

“cause that’d be too easy,” Raph mutters belligerently. Leo hums in agreement, and drives them back home. He’d take them to check in with Karai and Shinigami, but when he’d called earlier he had been told very clearly, and curtly, by Shinigami that they were still busy with something. And then she’d hung up on him, because people were just so polite to Leo lately.

They meander with errands for a while; hitting the nearest grocery stores and picking up the food Mikey had failed to bring home like he was supposed to. They have to actually commit property damage tonight, slicing the wires of cameras to avoid being seen. Usually, it's Donnie’s job to hack
the system and set up a video loop for however long they’re inside.

But then, Donnie isn’t here, because he’s missing just like Mikey is.

The abandonment of their jobs only serves to further ruin Leo’s mood. Raph’s sullen silence notes clearly that he feel the same way. They grab what they need, and don’t talk about their current grievances out loud.

The drive home is quiet; just the groceries in the canvas bags between them making any noise. It’s probably for the best, since their moods would likely spark another fight. Leo’s jaw is only just starting to stop feeling painful. He doesn’t need a twin on the other side.

They get into the tunnel garage, parking the Party Wagon and getting out, just before Raph’s t-phone rings.

When he answers it, Leo sees Raph’s eyes go wide.

“You fucking kidding me?” Raph spits. He yanks back open the car door. “Get the hell back in, Leo. Mikey just left the Mutanimals’ place.”

Leo spares a fleeting moment of confusion, shock- and then burns rubber.

They get there too late, and have no luck scouring the surrounding area for any sign of Mikey. Leo curses loud as Raph does, because it figures the one time Mikey really utilizes some of his skills and brainpower, it’s to keep avoiding his own family.

When Leo marches into the Mutanimals’ hideout, he does so with the intent to chew out Slash, for letting Leatherhead overrule his team leader’s orders, for letting him overrule Leo’s orders about immediately tipping them off of Mikey’s location- but comes up short as Leatherhead looms over him and Raph both.

A stutter in his momentum, but Leo recovers and says, “We had an agreement. The moment you heard from or found my brothers, you were supposed to tell me, tell us both. Not- just let him run off again- do you know how worried we’ve been about him-?”

“You have no right to be,” Leatherhead abruptly growls harshly. And that makes Leo stop for a moment, if only because of the absurdity of that sentence.

“Excuse me?” Leo says, and he means every bit of sharpness to his words.

Leatherhead takes a step into Leo’s space as well as Raph’s, and Leo is reminded once again that he’s much smaller than the crocodile mutant. He takes an involuntary step backwards as Leatherhead’s maw of teeth opens in front of him.

“You have. No right. ” Leatherhead says again, huge fists curling and uncurling; claws on display. Leatherhead’s eyes move slowly to Raph, and narrow with open hostility. “Neither of you do. And…” He turns back to Leo, and in that second, Leo remembers that he’s never actually won a fight against Leatherhead.

“You are both very lucky Michelangelo told me not to do anything.”

“…what the hell are you talking about?” Raph asks, equal parts furious and confused.

Leo’s hand is on his sword before he realizes the subconscious movement; because Leatherhead’s deep throated growl goes right through his plastron. He feels Raph similar tension beside him, and
knows his brother’s hands are on his sais. None of them move.

The large mutant looks down at them for a long moment- and Leo can feel him looking down on them in more ways than one- before saying, “It’s not my place to explain,” and turning his back on them.

Leatherhead leaves, long tail dragging across the floor, and with the parting words of, “Leave my home, and leave your brothers alone. That is all I have to say to you.”

It takes a full minute, after Leatherhead ushers Mondo out of the room with him and it’s just Slash and Dr. Rockwell left- but Raph explodes into the furious shouting he always does. He and Slash both bellow at one another, defending and accusing and taking turns with each, while Dr. Rockwell futilely tries to mediate the growing fight.

“I don’t care if he’ll ditch you guys if you talk- he’s my little brother, he’s your family, OUR FAMILY- Slash I swear to god, tell me what Mikey told Leatherhead or I’ll-”

“-I can’t! Leatherhead’s our heaviest hitter, we lose half our fighting strength if he goes-”

“I. Don’t. CARE.-”

“-well I DO, this is MY TEAM on the line, Raphael-”

“-and this is MY LITTLE BROTHER-”

Leo stares at the direction Leatherhead retreated in, and feels a sickening coil of anger and insult rise up in his stomach. It’s joined by the swirling confusion of what the hell Mikey told Leatherhead to make him so mad, and Leo can’t manage the tide of emotions as they mix together. The spread to his head, and he feels a buzz start in the back of his skull.

He joins the fight with Slash. It’s not much of a relief from the noise in his head.

Leo doesn’t care if Slash was forced into silence- he should have called anyways. Mikey is their brother, and Slash knew exactly what he was supposed to have done. Dr. Rockwell too, who Leo doesn’t forget during the fight. If anyone in the Mutanimals should have seen sense, it’s the primate. And yet, and yet.

None of them called when they should have, and Leo’s brother slipped out of his grasp a second time.

He and Raph only leave the hideout because Slash decks Raph across the face, sending the smaller mutant sprawling on the floor, and orders them to leave. Dr. Rockwell adds a quieter sentiment to that, which is that they leave only until everyone can talk rationally.

Slash snaps at the primate to stay out of things, barely beating Leo to it.

Raph is still snarling and shouting at Slash- Leo doesn’t catch all of it, but it has to do with Slash throwing the trust Raph placed in him back into his face. He grabs his brother by the edge of his shell, resulting in the snarling being turned on him, and hauls Raph to his feet.

Leo glares at Slash, whose large fists remain curled and ready to throw a second punch. There’s a cut across Raph’s cheek, from Slash’s spiny knuckle cartilage, and it’s dripping red steadily across the scales of his cheek.

“We had a deal,” Leo hisses as a final statement. “You said you would call us.”
“Get out,” Slash spits back. “I’m sorry, but get out.”

They get out.

Raph tears into his punching dummy, not seconds after they enter their home, and Leo goes to the dojo.

He draws the weapons he’d been restraining himself from.

Leo’s swords slice through the air faster and faster, cold anger settling in his body even more now that they’re away from the situation. There’s nothing to cut, but Leo acts as if there is. As if there’s an enemy he can’t see, but can cut down anyways, and send the severed limbs rolling across the mats one after another until he gets to the head and then-

His sword slashes across the tree trunk, and Leo jolts out of his haze.

He stares at the gash in the bark; inner wood exposed and splintered. It’s a fresh wound on a trunk that hasn’t been scoured in years. Not since they were children and learning to aim their throwing weapons.

The gash is wide enough to fit his finger. It’ll take years for it to grow over.

Leo dully realizes his arms ache and that he’s out of breath. His scars itch and his knee burns from lack of care with his movements.

Leo sheathes his swords, and turns his back on the damage he’s done to the tree.

His footsteps feel shaky as he leaves the dojo; Leo can’t tell how long he’s been shadow fighting, but it’s been long enough that as he emerges, he finds Raph surrounded by stuffing and sand.

Raph turns a dark and miserable look towards Leo, and doesn’t move from his position sat among the ruins of the former punching dummy. The cut on his cheek has scabbed, and it twists as Raph speaks.

“I’m gonna kill that idiot,” Raph says, low and angry. “Pulling this shit, makin’ Leatherhead turn on us and fucking up everything- I’m gonna kill him.”

Leo’s confusing swirl of offence, anger, and hurt rise in his throat, and he’s inclined to agree with Raph’s temper for once.

-/-

The sixth night comes and goes. Leo spends it with Raph, scouring the whole area surrounding the Mutanimals’ residence. They circle the hideout further and further out, searching for signs of a hidden lair entrance.

They don’t find any, their messages continue to go unanswered, and the night ends with an even sourer note than that. Leo finally decides that going to see Karai face to face might be the only way to get her to talk to him, and goes to see her while Raph goes to see Casey.

Leo drops onto the church rooftop, expecting to be let inside by the hidden sentries on top of it- but is stopped by a black and red ninja appearing out of the shadows.
“Master Karai is indisposed of for the evening,” She says, calm and cool. “You’ll have to come back another time.”

Leo nearly splutters. Really? Still?

“Couldn’t I wait inside for her?” Leo asks, keeping his voice level despite his annoyance. He’s already dealt with so many incredibly frustrating things tonight; he doesn’t want to have to add another check to that list.

“No. When she returns, Shinigami left explicit instructions to keep anyone from bothering the master. I apologize for the inconvenience, kappa-san, but you will have to come back tomorrow.”

That won’t do. Leo needs to have at least one thing go right this week, and being able to talk to Karai might help him figure out how to fix all the other things. “I’m her brother,” Leo says, exasperated. “Can’t you guys make an exception for me?”

The foot ninja’s response is as deadpan as her mask.

“No.”

Leo bites his tongue, tamping down on rude words that want to come out. He nods tersely.

“Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Tell her I was here. Please.” The last part is an effort to get out, the accumulated grievances in Leo’s life putting a strain on his politeness and patience.

“I will tell master Karai you wanted to see her, don’t worry,” The ninja gives a shallow bow.

“Goodnight, kappa-san.”

Leo bows in return, and continues to bite down his frustrations. He leaves the church roof in an even worse mood than he’d been in before.

He stares at his phone when he gets home, at the unanswered conversations in his messages. He hadn’t ever cared before, but now he wishes that Donnie had programmed the t-phones to show when someone read the sent messages; at least then Leo would know they were seeing his texts.

He’s angry, and hurt, and really getting worried. Six days is longer than he’s ever known his brothers to be mad at him, or at Raph. And the longer things drag out, the more Leo feels he’s losing control of his life.

-/-

The seventh night, an entire week into Donnie and Mikey’s disappearances, comes and goes similarly. The lair remains half empty, their texts and calls unanswered, and even with attempts to negotiate with Leatherhead for information, they get nowhere.

Leatherhead growls when Raph tries to speak in the conference call, threatening and deep, and hangs up on them. Slash calls back, but they don’t get anywhere with him either. Slash is stuck between them and Leatherhead, who has made it very clear he’ll leave the Mutanimals if Slash tries to hand over any information about Mikey.

Leo and Raph, especially Raph, push for Slash to reveal it anyways. Once Mikey is home and can talk Leatherhead down, everything will be fine. It won’t be that big of deal for Slash to tell them
about Mikey and Donnie’s whereabouts, especially with their safety on the line.

Slash doesn’t budge.

“Donnie and Mikey’ll show up soon enough, I can’t risk losin’ Leatherhead because I went behind his back. And I don’t even know much more than what Leatherhead told us after Mikey swung through. Pushin’ me for info won’t be worth it. Besides, they’re not in any serious trouble, and how long d’you think they’re really gonna be gone? It’s already been a week. They’ll come back sooner than later.”

They’ll come back sooner than later.

Leo’s been telling himself that all along, but it’s already been a full week. The longest he’s ever known Donnie to hold a grudge is a few hours, maybe a day, and Mikey can never seem to stay angry longer than a few seconds.

It feels so unlike them, doing this.

And Leo still doesn’t even know why they are. Leatherhead clearly knows, and even as Raph tries again to get Slash to tell them, it looks more and more like that knowledge will be kept from them.

They could have at least hinted at why they left. If it’s some petty argument they had and Leo forgot about, then he’ll apologize. If it’s a petty argument they had with Raph, then Leo will make Raph apologize.

It’d be as simple as talking it out, and then things could back to normal.

Leo feels annoyed and worried, the way his brothers haven’t done so.

It’s not like them. It’s not like them at all.

--/

The eighth night, Leo finally gets to see Karai. It’s a brief spot of calm; the stress in his chest lessening just for being with her in the church.

“I just don’t… understand,” Leo confides in her, watching his sister strap gauntlets and hidden knives to her person. He’s been allowed inside the headquarters, but warned Karai will be leaving soon enough. He’ll take what he can get, even if he feels pushed aside and ignored. “They shouldn’t have anything to be angry about with us. I’ve been trying to pick out something that’d piss them off to make them do this… and I get nothing. We’ve been doing just fine. Why would they run off, and then make Leatherhead angry with us, too, if everything was going fine?”

“I don’t know, Leo,” Karai says, sliding her signature tanto across the back of her hips. She turns to face Leo, crossing her arms. “Maybe they really did just need some time away from home, like you said Mikey’s note explained.”

“Yeah, but… that doesn’t explain Leatherhead’s behavior. If it’s really just a vacation, then why turn him on us like that? I just can’t figure it out. None of this makes any sense. It’s all so… out of character for them to do this. Right?”
Karai shrugs. “Maybe. You’ve known them longer than I have, obviously speaking. But I do know they’re capable of taking care of themselves, that much I’ve learned over the years. They’ll probably be back soon.”

Leo folds his fingers together, squeezing his six digits against one another. He stares at the floor under his feet, tracing the carpet designs of Karai’s private weapon inventory. “Everyone keeps saying that… but they won’t even respond to my calls. I’m worried. Aren’t you?”

“…truth be told, no,” Karai replies evenly. “Like I said, they can take care of themselves. I know they’ll be fine from personal experience; don’t forget how many times I tried to off you four when we were enemies still. You should just give them space until they come back.”

Leo grimaces, feeling now familiar worry and frustration rise in his throat. “But I’ve been telling them to come home now, or at least contact us. I’m their Sensei; they have to listen to me about these things. I gave them orders.”

Karai snorts. “Yeah, and how well did that work out?”

Leo looks up from his staring contest with his feet; sending a displeased look in Karai’s direction. “This is serious, Karai. You shouldn’t make a joke about my brothers disobeying a direct order from their leader- who knows how much danger they could get into if we don’t stay in contact?”

Karai rolls her eyes at him, and says, “Leo, they’re big boys. They’ll be fine.”

Leo blusters. “But I don’t know that for sure! They won’t call, won’t text- how am I supposed to really know they’re okay?”

“You could try trusting them,” Karai says, still not treating the situation with the gravity it deserves.

“I do trust them!” Leo snaps, and then he collects himself as Karai raises an eyebrow at the outburst. “I do trust them. It’s just. I want them home, where I can keep an eye on them. I can’t make sure they’re safe if they’re off gallivanting who knows where.”

Karai shrugs a second time. “I don’t know what else to tell you, Leo. Sometimes you can make something happen right away, and sometimes you just have to wait for the next step to presents itself.”

Leo starts to say that that’s not something he can do, they’re his brothers and he needs to find them, ask them what’s going on and why they’re making it happen-

But April walks in through the side door to the armory, and Leo’s thought process derails itself. “April??” He exclaims, staring at his friend, decked head to toe in black and silver gear. She freezes, wide eyes going to him.

April raises a weak wave to him, giving an awkward half-smile. “Oh. Uh. Hi, Leo.”

Leo recovers from his utter shock, and says, “What are you doing here? Where- is this where you’ve been all week? I’ve been calling you like crazy, and you couldn’t even text back once to tell me?”

“I’ve been- busy,” April says, not looking directly at him. Her feet shift on the carpet, arms crossed behind her back, and Leo spots the bright red mark on her shoulder guard right then.
“You joined the Foot clan?” He gapes incredulously. “Without telling me?”

April’s eyes flicker to him, and there’s an unusual intentness to her examination of him. Leo doesn’t know what to make of that; he’s too busy feeling like someone’s yanked the rug a little bit more out from under his feet.

April joined the Foot clan? And she hadn’t even dropped a text with him to ask permission, or give notice, or anything??

“I hired her,” Karai says, interrupting Leo and April’s stare off. “She owes me a favor, I like having someone who isn’t a complete moron work for me. It worked out alright.”

Leo looks between the two of them, dumbfounded and utterly shocked. “But- she’s my student. I didn’t give either of you permission for this- I wouldn’t have given either of you permission for this! My brothers are missing, Karai, I can’t lose any more teammates than I already have!”

Karai raises her brows, unimpressed, and April says something too low for Leo to catch. “What?”

“I said,” April raises her voice. “that last I checked, I didn’t have to ask you for permission to make my own choices.” She continues, despite the stare Leo is giving her. “I needed something to do. I needed something to keep my mind off Splinter, and help with Donnie and Mikey. Karai gave me a job, and… it’s been good. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but the last week has been hectic. I couldn’t have my phone on half the time, and the rest I was training or sleeping.”

Leo keeps staring at April, and it feels like he’s looking at someone who only just resembles his friend.

April has new armor, rather than her old black and yellow tracksuit. Her hair is braided back tightly, and Leo counts least three different types of concealed weapons around her waist; to add to the sword across her hips and the tessen fan on her thigh. She looks more like a Foot clan ninja than she does a Hamato one, and it feels like a betrayal.

“How- how could you do this?” Leo asks, throat tight and his fists tighter. “You didn’t tell any of us, didn’t even bother to try- don’t you care that Donnie and Mikey are gone? This isn’t the time to be running around, or goofing off.”

“I haven’t been!” April cuts him off. She draws herself up, squaring her shoulders and looking him dead in the eye. “I’ve been all over the city all week, with Karai and Shinigami- I look in every neighborhood we go through. I check with every lowlife we beat up if they’ve seen them. I’ve been searching for them since the very first night, Leo, so don’t you dare try to say I’ve been goofing off.”

Leo reels, caught off-guard by April’s defensiveness. Why is everyone like this lately? His brothers never ran off like this before, April never snapped so bluntly at him- what’s even going on with his family anymore?

Leo shakes off his shock. “Still. We need you with us, April, not… what have you even been doing all week?”

“She’s been helping me take back my territories,” Karai interjects before April can speak. Leo’s eyes turn to his sister, who is standing with a straight back and commanding posture. “We have a lot of ground to cover, since most of the Foot’s territory claims were nullified when Shredder started going crazy. Practically the entire city needs to be beaten back into the submission, and
having a well-trained psychic on the team speeds things up.”

Leo gapes for a second time, head spinning to catch up with all the implications of that explanation. “You’re- you’re starting up the criminal activities of the Foot again? April, you’re helping them? After everything we did to take them down?”

April averts her eyes a second time from Leo, turning her set expression towards the sword rack instead. “Karai is different from the Shredder. This is different.”

“This is business,” Karai says, striding across the room towards April. “It’s what the Foot clan does best, and it’s what I was raised to inherit. And I’ll see to it I get every damn scrap of power I was promised, just to give Shredder one last ‘fuck you’.” She glances over her shoulder at Leo, and shoots a raised eyebrow his direction. “And really, Leo, what did you expect me to do once I got control of the clan again?”

Leo is at a loss for words.

He feels betrayed in so many ways. All their efforts to dissolve the Foot clan’s hold on New York, and Karai is undoing all that work deliberately? April knew that, and willingly is helping? And neither of them saw fit to even mention it to him?

He considers both of the women in front of him as close friends, as family, and yet they did this. Just like his brothers ran off without a goodbye, and just like Leatherhead, one of the very first mutants they ever met besides themselves, turned on him.

“How could you?” Leo asks, and he’s not sure if it’s April or Karai he’s talking to.

April still won’t look at him, and Karai’s attention is stolen by a Foot ninja appearing in the open doorway.

“We’re ready, master Karai,” He says in a low voice, bowing as he does. Karai nods, and dismisses him with a wave of her hand.

“We’re going now,” She says, turning back to Leo one last time. “Sorry to cut this short, but I have a limited opportunity to raid an enemy warehouse of a hefty weapon’s cache. If we see Donnie or Mikey, we’ll call, but otherwise our phones won’t be on. Good luck finding your brothers; we’ll see you later.”

And then Karai walks out, following the ninja that had come to retrieve them. April starts to follow, but glances back once more. Her expression isn’t one Leo can’t read properly; showing no hint of what she’s thinking at the moment.

“April,” Leo says, hurt creeping into his chest.

April ducks her head, turning her back on him. “I’m sorry, Leo,” She says stiffly, “but I have to go.”

April walks away, following the same dark hallway Karai had disappeared into. Leo is left alone in the armory, by himself and short yet another two members of his family.

-/-
Leo spends all of evening ten searching for his brothers.

If they won’t contact him, and Leatherhead won’t give him any information, then Leo will just go find them himself.

It’s easier to just keep running all night, over rooftops and subdued streets, than it is to think. First his brothers, then Leatherhead, and now April…

They’re all slipping out of his control, and it makes Leo feel like he’s slipping, too.

He’s supposed to be their leader, their Sensei- and none of them are respecting his authority at all. Maybe Leatherhead isn’t technically under his direct command, but the Mutanimals have always been a backup to Leo’s team. The rebellion is sudden and unexpected, and Leo has to bite down harder and harder on his frustration with the other mutants.

April, too. He’d never expected her to just- go off. Ditch them all and join a completely different team. He’s angry with her for doing that, and for refusing to take back her choice.

The only spot of good in that snarl right there, is that at least Leo knows she hasn’t been hiding his brothers from him. If April is still searching for Donnie and Mikey, than she didn’t have any hand in them disappearing. It’s a slim comfort, that.

Leo finds no suitable spots for his brothers to live. Most buildings are too likely to be intruded in, and he can’t find any traces of an underground lair entrance. And when he goes underground to double check, the sewer tunnels offer no better trails to follow; just damp corridors.

He’s circling outwards from the lair’s location; combing the city for his brothers. Despite the steady search pattern, and the long, long few hours he spends going everything with an intent eye- he finds absolutely nothing.

He’s worried. He’s angry. He’s really starting to get close to being truly furious.

After everything they’ve been through together, after everything he did to make this team work- his brothers and April ditch him.

He’s their leader. Their Sensei. They shouldn’t be able to do this.

Leo goes home to a mostly empty house, tired and aching in his legs. None of his messages have been answered, and Raph is only present for a moment; side-eyeing Leo only once before he locks himself in his room, and starts up a racket with his drum kit.

Leo takes his turmoil of frustrations and goes to the dojo.

His swords slice through the air fast as he can push himself. His knee complains, the tender healed muscles protesting under the long hours of stress- but he pushes through the ignorable pain.

He loses track of time for a bit, narrowing his world to just the steady movements he knows so well. The thoughts of his family defying him, ignoring him, and abandoning him- they fade to a dull buzz on the edge of his mind. It gives Leo, for a time, space outside the growing anxieties in his chest.

He only stops once his arms have started to shake badly, exhaustion catching up with him completely. Leo’s sword tips scratch the mats as he lowers his weapons; breathing coming fast and harsh.
The clock on the wall reads nearly seven in the morning. He’s long past his routine bedtime.

That’s just one more part of his life that seems to be unraveling itself.

Leo doesn’t go to bed, so much as passes out as soon as he’s horizontal. It’s hardly any relief.

-/-

The second week passes, without a single sign of acknowledgment from Mikey or Donnie.

Leo hasn’t had good food in a while; he didn’t notice until Mikey left that his brother had taken over majority of the kitchen tasks. Nearly everything he and Raph scrounge up is either instant, burnt, or a combination of the two. It makes for a lot of sullen mealtimes, and more often than not leftovers no one really wants to eat.

The fridge is starting to make a weird clunking noise when the fan comes on. Either something is plugged, or slipped out of its spot, or who knows what. They could pull it out and take a look, but neither of them even knows what they would be looking at. The appliances were always something Donnie took care of.

Both the crap food and the crapping out electronics make the mealtimes unpleasant. Mostly for the reminders they represent.

The table has two too many chairs for its current occupants. It’s unsettling, both of those stools remaining empty for how long they have.

April is increasingly scarce in their social group; the only hint she’s still around at all comes through Casey, relaying that he’s seen her during the day, and brief glimpses of her in the church when Leo drops by. When April passes Leo by in these moments, her eyes linger on him with a look he can’t decipher.

He’s still bitter about her leaving them, abandoning the clan and team that made her a ninja, and Leo meets her eyes with a cold look whenever they enter the same spaces. He never gave her permission to leave them, not when they’re already missing two of their family members. This is the time when they should be banding together, searching for his brothers until they’re safe at home again. Not walking away from one of the most important things their first Sensei gave them.

April holds his cold gazes, and then looks away from them without a glance back. It makes Leo’s relationship with Karai tenser; his anger towards April bleeding into his and Karai’s conversations. She’s busy still, taking back the city and the power that the Foot lost. It’s not something Leo approves of in the least, and he makes it clear.

Karai brushes him off. Reminds him this is *her* clan, not his.

“The Foot might not have been my birth clan, but it’s the one that I’ll make my own regardless. I know you don’t like it, Leo, but this was always what I was going to do. I thought you knew that.”

“No,” Leo replies, and he knows his tone is lacking politeness. “I didn’t. And I thought you knew better than to follow in the Shredder’s footsteps.”

That remark gets him a sharp warning look from Karai. An even more so one from Shinigami, who
is eyeing him from the sidelines of the throne room. The atmosphere cools to arctic levels, and Leo knows he’s overstepped his boundaries.

He doesn’t take it back. Because he’d thought Karai was better than this.

“…master Karai,” A tentative Foot ninja speaks up, from the doorway of the throne room. “I apologize for the interruption, but the Don is here to negotiate.”

Karai’s gold eyes leave Leo, and she turns her attention away from the slight. “Tell him to enter, if he can even fit in the elevator.” She doesn’t glance at Leo as she turns away, walking up the steps of her throne. “And see my brother out. Vizioso isn’t fond of mutants.”

Leo gives a narrow look after Karai, but leaves without responding. Better to leave before someone says something really over the line.

His phone remains full of unanswered texts, and the rooms in his home too empty. The argument with Karai makes those things all the harder to bear.

/-/

Two weeks and a half.

Raph joins Leo on and off for his searches. Leo’s started picking neighborhoods at random across the city; taking the Party Wagon to travel beyond their usual running grounds. He chooses places he thinks his brothers would want to be close to, whether for resources or the sights. None of the searches yield any results.

Sometimes they talk during the searches, but their conversations don’t stray from the modes they’ve started to fall into. Terse and clipped, or surly and touchy. Sometimes, they just fight. Pointless spats that don’t really have meaning or even connection to what they’re doing. About dinner and whose turn it is to cook, or the chores they can’t divide evenly between themselves, or any number of things that aren’t worth the energy it takes to fight about them.

Sometimes they don’t speak at all during the searches. Tense silence without break or interruption. No one else is around to break the silence with an offhand joke or a long-winded explanation. It makes the empty spaces around them that much more obvious.

Leatherhead refuses to budge with his information, and Slash keeps telling them he can’t break the trust he has with the other mutant. At this point, it’s a stalemate none of them can break without doing real damage to their relationships.

Raph doesn’t yell at Slash anymore, his anger quieter and simmering rather than boiling and explosive. Leo’s own feelings and frustrations have done the same; without immediate or new antagonizing, he’s managed to form a steady baseline.

But that doesn’t mean the baseline is pleasant; hurt, anger, and confusion persisting in Leo’s mind even in quieter moments. It’s been days, and still no sign of their brothers. He doesn’t understand any more now than he did at the beginning why they’re doing this, or what’s causing them to hold out for so long.

Leo had thought his brothers would come home within a night or two. The end of the week comes,
and they get no closer to finding out where their brothers have gone.

He’s less sure what to make of that than he’s ever been.

-/-

They see the first action they’ve seen in weeks, a few days into the third week of their brothers’ disappearance.

It’s just the Purple Dragons, causing trouble now that the Kraang and the Foot clan have moved elsewhere. Leo reached something of an agreement with Karai about the Foot’s criminal activities; if it was kept out of his territory, he’d turn a blind eye and stop fighting about it. He’s not sure if she did that because he asked her to, or if she did it simply to avoid dealing with his dislike of it.

The fight should be easy. It’s the A-team, with the addition of Casey, against four ordinary men. They’ve fought entire armies at this point; four humans shouldn’t be any trouble at all.

But, no one’s there to cover Leo’s left flank. Casey is unpredictable with where he places himself in a fight, and Raph is always on Leo’s striking right. There’s no one covering their shells or his left flank.

Leo gets a deep cut in his left shoulder, because he got careless and forgot Mikey is gone.

It’s not a bad injury. He’s had wounds ten times worse, and this one won’t take more than a few days to heal. It still hurts, though.

They beat up the Dragons, call it a night, and Leo has to do first aid on himself for the first time… a fair while.

Donnie’s not here to patch them up, so Leo has to clean and bandage the gash with one hand. It’s not as neat as it could be, but he gets the wide band-aid in place, and that’s all he really needs to do.

It’s a bit unsettling afterwards, realizing how many holes there were in their fight patterns. The whole of their group fighting style depends on having at least three components- they’re short half their team, which tripped Leo up, and Casey has never been an easy person to mesh with in a fight. At least not for Leo; Raph always did it with ease, and still does.

Leo faltered, because he’s too used to having someone there to cover for him.

The empty spots in their team are emptier than ever, coming down from the high of battle and finding the victory lacking. No one is cheering particularly loud, and what few injuries they received have to be tended to individually.

Leo misses his brothers with a striking bolt of emotion, and it’s followed quickly by the feeling of betrayal at their disappearance.

He’s angry with them. He’s missing them. He just wants them to at least tell him why they left.

Leo goes home with his remaining brother, and there are not nearly enough footsteps to echo their way there.
The Shredder looms in front of him, and Leo can’t even scream before the blades come down on him.

He feels his plastron split, long scores all the way down. The pain blinds him, and it sends his senses white with agony.

Another slash- to his knee cap- and a scream finally does work its way out of his throat.

He goes down, landing on his side and still screaming. It hurts. It hurts it hurts it hurts-

Leo’s eyes roll wildly, pain blotting any thought from his mind except for wanting it to stop. He feels the icy slush of the ground mixing with the burning hot blood running out of him; it sticks to his scales and gives the effect of magma meeting the arctic waters across his body.

No one is here, no one is here and he’s alone. He’s alone and he barely has the strength to drag himself across the cold ground. Dirt and snow turn to mud under his arms as he crawls, gasping and retching as agony throbs through him.

A shadow falls across his vision, and Leo looks upwards with fear.

Splinter’s figure stands nearby, snow falling delicately on his robe.

“Sensei,” Leo gasps. He’s saved. He’s saved. He raises a hand, reaching desperately for his father to take it, pick him off the construction site’s cold ground and stop the steady bleeding from his body.

Splinter doesn’t move, just staring down at him.

“Sensei-” Leo’s voice cracks as he tries to raise his hand higher. “Sensei, please.”

Splinter remains motionless.

Leo’s vision fills, blurring. Hot tears slide down his cheeks. “Father- I can’t- h-help me, it hurts, please father it- hurts-”

Why won’t his father take his hand? Why won’t he help him?

Twin blades are stabbed through Splinter’s stomach, and Leo screams.

Splinter falls, and reveals the hulking figure of Shredder behind him.

No, no no no-

His father lays motionless on the cold ground, red growing in a thick puddle all around him. His wide dead eyes stare up at the ashy clouds above them both, filled with smoke and snow. Leo can’t breathe, lungs hitching and failing to fill as he pulls himself to his father’s body.

His fingers grip the very edge of Splinter’s sleeve, the damp fabric offering no comfort as Leo sobs. Broken and bleeding on the ground, nearly as dead as Splinter is.

His father is dead. He’s dead and no one is coming to save him. No one was ever coming to save him. Leo failed.
He failed and he’s alone.

A rough grip turns him over, and Leo meets the eyes of the monster that’s come to kill him a second time.

He struggles, weakly clawing at the huge hand that’s holding him in place. He’s screaming. He’s screaming loud enough it hurts. For someone, anyone, to save him, please, please can’t someone save him-

The Shredder raises his blades, and tears open Leo’s throat.

Leo wakes, and claws at his throat as he tries to breathe.

Its pitch black in his room, and he throws off the covers as he forces himself upright. His scars and lungs burn; his nerves on fire as he re-experiences the sensations of his injuries.

Leo retches, coughing and struggling to fill his lungs. It’s painful, his vocal cords aching as he pants fast and shallow. He’s been screaming, he can already tell.

The Shredder and his father flash across his vision, and he nearly falls on the floor as he stumbles out of bed.

He knows where his weapons are, even in the dark, and he gets his hands on his swords fast as he can. Alone in his room, Leo clings to the best defense he has. His heart is beating loud in his ears, and the feeling of being cut into pieces plays over his body again and again.

He feels like he’s dying.

He feels like he’s still there, in that construction site.

He feels like he’s going to throw up.

Leo curls around his swords, huddled on the floor of his room, and sobs.

No one comes to see why. Anyone who might’ve heard is asleep, or has been gone for nearly four weeks.

He’s alone.

-/-

Come home, he texts Mikey on the second day of the fourth week. I don’t know why you left. What did we do? Why won’t you answer me?

Please, come back home. If you’d just stop being so stubborn, we could talk about it.

What did you tell Leatherhead? Why is he so angry with us?

Mikey, what did we do?

Answer me.
Please answer me.

Mikey.

This isn’t funny.

If this is some stupid, drawn out joke, I’m not laughing.

Come home.

You’re making Raph worry, you’re making our friends worry.

You’re making Me worry.

Can’t you at least call us?

Mikey

Mikey come on

Please.

Just come home already.

-/-

April stops taking their calls completely. Leo doesn’t see her at all in the Foot clan headquarters, and Karai will only tell him she doesn’t want to see him at the moment.

He can only muster the dull feeling of confusion that night. It’s been so long since his brothers disappeared, the way April is breaking herself off from their group is only painful in the faintest way.

He doesn’t understand why she’s doing this. He doesn’t understand why Leatherhead won’t even look at him anymore. He doesn’t understand his brothers left and won’t talk to him.

He doesn’t understand any of it, and it makes a hollow pit inside his stomach.

-/-

You’re making us all worry, he texts Donnie, almost five weeks into their disappearance. You ran away and left almost nothing to explain Why.

Answer me, Donnie.

At least give me a reason.

You should be here. Both of you. Not
Not running around like this. Ignoring me, Raph, everyone.

This isn’t like you.

You’re acting like a kid. You know better than to make us worry like this.

Donnie

Please answer me.

At least tell me WHY you won’t answer!

What did we even do to you guys?

Both of you should be ashamed of yourselves. We’re all worried about you two.

Donnie

Donnie please

At least answer me.

Let me know you’re okay.

-/-

Leo rips himself out of another nightmare, screaming as he does.

This time, he’d had to watch all his brothers and friends die before he watched Splinter be killed. And then he’d died, too.

The image of all of them laid out, snowflakes and ash falling on their torn up corpses, forces Leo to get out of bed.

It’s the middle of the day, barely past noon, but he can’t even imagine going back to sleep.

He goes to the dojo instead, the one place he still can find a semblance of calm. Or, where he’d used to be able to.

Now, the katas he runs through are sloppy. His steps falter and skip. He can’t find his internal metronome, and the sickening anger inside Leo is only fed by that.

It’s just him and his swords, nothing else in the world. But this time it doesn’t work. The solution to his nightmares and fears has always been routine, his steady and dependable routine even with all the chaos in his life.

But he doesn’t have his routine anymore.

His father is dead. His father has been dead for months and is never there to greet him in the evenings, up just as early and ready to move through tai-chi with Leo. His altar is the only way Leo can see his face anymore, and it sends lightning hot flashes of grief through him every time he looks at it.
His brothers are gone. Donnie and Mikey aren’t there to move in and out of Leo’s space, following their own haphazard routines as the evening begins. They’ve been gone for five weeks and it’s left a gaping hole in Leo’s life, nearly larger than the one their father did.

Raph sleeps late, every night now. They talk tersely or they don’t talk at all, they fight about everything, neither of them can find any common ground anymore. They used to have a balance between them, the A-team, the best fighters in their family. They can barely get through an evening without one of them storming out or causing a fight.

April won’t talk to them, Leatherhead won’t talk to them, Casey and Karai and Slash are no help. Everything is falling apart.

All. Because. His brothers left.

Leo doesn’t know how long he’s been sparring with the air, but his knee screams at him as he moves without care.

He’s furious. He’s broken through the numbness and he’s furious.

How dare they leave. After everything they’ve done and lost and fought to regain- they just leave him?

This is their home, this is their family- Leo is their leader, their Sensei, their brother- and they still just left?

They didn’t even say goodbye. Donnie and Mikey just picked up and left him and Raph. They abandoned their family and didn’t look back. They turned Leatherhead on them, have probably turned April on them- who will they take next? Casey? Karai?

Leo nearly killed himself for them, over and over. He spent his whole life trying to be the leader of their family, struggling to make the hard decisions and make the right hard decisions- he put hours and hours of time in, training himself until he was exhausted. He studied battle tactics and acted responsibly whenever no one else would. He was the best older brother and leader he could be and they still just left.

Everything he did for them, everything they did together- his brothers threw it all away and abandoned him.

He’s moving fast and jaggedly; all of his movements spurred on by anger and hurt. Leo’s sides burn as he heaves in breaths, pushing his body to keep going even as his arms and legs try to give out.

Leo catches a family photo out of the corner of his eyes, hung on the wall of the dojo.

He yells wordlessly, and slashes at it.

The frame and glass splinter, and his sword slices the photo in half. It falls to the floor as it’s destroyed.

Leo stops, staring at the destroyed piece of memorabilia.

The picture is of him and his family. Leo and his siblings lined up in front of their father, young and proud of themselves.
He’s sliced the two sets of brothers in half; Leo and Raph on one half, and Donnie and Mikey on the other. The beaming smiles from their younger selves stare up at him accusingly.

Broken glass and wood litter the floor around the halved picture, and Leo stares back at the snapshot of their shared pasts.

Why did they leave?

What did he do wrong?

His eyes sting, and Leo sinks to his knees.

He feels hollow as he kneels; the center of his chest empty and painful. His katana make the glass shards clink as he lays the blades on them, eyes locked on what he’s gone and destroyed.

Their father, who had been directly center of the picture, is sliced in half. One side of Splinter with each set of siblings.

It’s ruined the smile his father had been wearing that day, the split picture.

Leo’s grip on his swords tightens, and he bites his lip. He feels his shoulders shake, and it’s not from physical exhaustion.

Leo lowers his head, vision blurring completely, and feels utterly alone.

-/-

Leo sleeps whenever he can. Night, day, in between- he’s lost his routine completely, and with it his internal balance. Nightmares get him if he sleeps too deeply, and there’s only so many times he can take watching his family die.

The fury dies slowly, turning into a painful smoulder in his chest; dead center of the emptiness. He’s angry with his brothers, with his friends- but more so, Leo just wants things to go back to normal.

Things were good. They were moving out of grieving, they were moving on. They’d started their training sessions with him as Sensei, run a few mock missions with total success. He was watching his family rebuild themselves around the gaping wound Splinter’s death left them all. They were fine.

Why did his brothers leave?

He’s been asking himself that, texting the question over and over, leaving voicemails anywhere from ten seconds to five minutes long asking just that- for six weeks, over six weeks, and he still doesn’t have an answer.

Leo doesn’t understand what he or Raph did to make their brothers so mad. He’s racking his brain even now for a recent fight or disagreement severe enough to cause this- and he’s getting nothing. As far as he can tell, everything between the A-team and the B-team was the same as it always was. Which was fine, they were all perfectly fine.

Did he miss something? Had something happen without him knowing? If so, why didn’t his
brothers talk to him about it?

Why did they leave? Why won’t they answer him?

At this point, Leo just wants to understand.

He just wants his family to come home.

-/-

Leo comes out of a deep meditative state one night, after attempting to reach a state of clarity he can’t seem to achieve anymore, to find Casey shouting at Raph. And April, who is dressed in her Foot uniform still and trying to pull Casey away from where Raph lays on the floor, holding the side of his face.

“Fuck you!” Casey yells, straining against April’s grip on him. “You- you’re my best friend and you think that’s okay? Why the fuck- I thought you were- you were supposed to-”

“Casey!” April snaps, hauling him backwards. “You promised me-”

“You were supposed to prove me wrong! You were supposed to own up to it and- and-”

“Casey!!”

“Fuck you!” Casey yells again, red in the face and looking angrier than Leo’s ever seen him. “Fuck you for that shit you pulled! Fuck you for being an abusive dickwad and thinking its okay-”

“CASEY!” April shouts, and she finally pulls Casey away from Raph. “You promised me you’d let them handle this themselves. This is Donnie and Mikey’s fight- not yours.”

“He’s my best friend,” Casey fires back, and his angry expression cracks, becoming something hurt. “He’s my best friend, and I didn’t see shit.”

“It’s not our fight. It’s not our place.” April says those things, but it looks painful for her to do so. She pushes Casey further away from Raph, herding him out towards the exit. “Come on. Get some air.”

Casey shrugs of her hands. “Get off me, I can do it myself…”

“Guys?” Leo finally breaks in, drawing attention to himself. All eyes move to him; Casey and April’s defensive, Raph’s wide and shocked. “April? Casey? What’s-”

“And you-” Casey cuts him off, a snarl twisting his expression. “Fuck you, too. You’re just as- you pulled the exact same shit.”

April pushes him again. “Casey, out.”

Casey growls, and seems to physically rein himself in. “Fine, fine. Let go- let go of me.”

April lets go of him. Casey gives them one last dark, furious glare, and then storms out of the lair. April watches him go, and then turns back to Leo and Raph.
Leo is startled by how coldly angry her eyes are.

“…April, what’s going on?” He asks, feeling lost. “What did we do?”

Her expression turns bitterly sad, and she turns her back on them.

“Ask your brothers that.”

She walks out of the lair, following Casey’s steps, and is gone before Leo can manage another word.

-/-

Casey stops speaking to them. It has the effect Leo expects on Raph. Fury, aimless fury, and a deep set wound of betrayal.

Their calls and texts remain unanswered, even as Leo and Raph ask them pointedly what Casey’s comments meant.

Their social group loses another member, and then it’s just Leo and his brother, and Slash. Karai somewhat counts, but Leo sees her so rarely it doesn’t feel like it.

The lair feels like an echoing cavern; cold and hollow. There’s no hum of Donnie’s machines and constant work, no background racket as Mikey plays his radio, t-phone, and the television all at once-

Their rooms are empty of life, and their lack of presence is somehow oppressive.

The nightmares worsen, Leo sleeps even less, and he still can’t understand why any of this is happening.

-/-

Leo stares at the photo of his father, set on the altar.

He’s kneeling partially out of respect, partially out of exhaustion. The only way he can feel anything besides slow swallowing numbness anymore is to work himself to the bone. It gives him near black sleep, at least.

Leo stares at his father’s image, and wonders where he went wrong.

He’d just been doing what he was supposed to do, what he was taught to do, and his brothers left anyways. He’d been trying his best, every single night, and his friends still all turned on him. Leo had tried to be everything his father had wanted, known, him to be, and everything has fallen apart anyways.

If he was always destined to be a leader, if he was always destined to take the mantle of Sensei, if this is what he’d been born to do…
…then why has he failed so miserably?

-/-

His phone rings, some infinite amount of time later.

Leo picks it up, off the table to the side of the dojo where he left it.

Raph’s caller ID is displayed, bringing faint disappointment to Leo’s heart, and he answers it.

“Raph? Hello?”

“-h-hey, Leo,” Raph gasps over the line. “I think- I think I need s-some help here.”

Chapter End Notes

*waves hands* its done.

shout out to my friends on tumblr who listened to me agonize over this mass of text for two weeks, and a shout out to all the people who've read it and the previous chapters. your support for this fiction is more than greatly appreciated, and i cherish every single comment you leave me even if i can never respond to them.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

To be second is to be just short of true victory. To be second is to be passed over, at least once. To be second is to receive something only after the first does. There is, truly, no defeat as bitter as being the second best, the second choice, the afterthought coming only once the favorite is chosen, for your entire life.

Chapter Notes

like, fuck me, you know? for taking this damn long to update TD. glad to be back in the saddle though. honestly it was the fact that i strongly disagree with leo and raph's pvs that kept me from getting on with this.

hope everyone who's been waiting since last fucking august is still with me, and finds this chapter (which is HUGE, fuck me, and has double the word count of the last chapter) worth that arduous wait for your friendly nonlocal author to get off their ass and actually write it.

oh and super special shout out to h0w-d0-y0u-d0-fell0w-kids on tumblr, who left me a big ol' tip on my kofi simply as a reminder to write for this fic. it really gave me the drive to get this guy done, since that 'tip' would have been worth a decently sized commission from me. pal, you're the superstar here for kicking my muse back into action. i hope you get your investment's worth with this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raph stares at the note, uncomprehending of the scribbled words across it.

*Me and Donnie are taking a vacation a break from home for a while. Just a few weeks-
-can’t tell you where we went, and we didn’t tell anyone –
-time from home and chill time for you two from us-

*Sorry-

-we’ll come home-

He stares at it, and he doesn’t understand anything about its contents.

Hot prickling annoyance rises up in his stomach, climbing his throat and making it highly tempting to crush the note in his hands. Because really? Are his brothers really pulling this kind of shit? Raph has little patience for any kind of dumbass games or stunts his siblings play at, but this? Running away like they’re little kids?

Raph’s jaw clenches. It’s barely evening and he already feels his patience running out.
He barely resists squashing the note in his fist, storming back out of Mikey’s room to find his brother and shove the paper into Leo’s hands.

It’d figure that just as things were settling down, one of his little brothers would do something to kick the hornet’s nest. He’s hedging his bet that its Mikey’s hand driving this latest scheme-inspired by who knows what, and Raph could give less than half a shit. Probably something like someone eating the last slice of cold pizza, or not getting to pick the night’s movie, or maybe some whimsical notion he got stuck in his head that it’d be fun and funny to drag Donnie off in a game of runaways and leave nothing but a messily written note and no defined date of returned and no freaking forwarding address of where they are-

Raph crushes the paper in his hands before he gets it to Leo. He feels it’s justified, given the circumstances.

---

What do you mean they’re ‘gone’? Casey asks when Raph asks him if he’s seen his siblings.

I mean they’re GONE gone, Raph texts back, glaring at the screen of his t-phone. Both their rooms are empty the lab is empty they took the damn shellraiser- they’re GONE Casey. Did either one of them let slip plans for this?

Uh no? They haven’t texted me in a while actually
You sure they really ran away?

What else would you call this?

Spring cleaning?

Raph contemplates briefly is he has any patience left for his friend. He finds just enough to not snap at Casey for being stupid about this.

This is serious Casey
You know how risky our lives are. Disappearing and leaving no fucking instructions of how to find you is asking to end up in a gutter or on a dissection table

Dude teenagers do this stuff all the time. My little sister threatens to run away like twice a month at least and she’s only 11

Don doesn’t do this kinda shit, it’s got Mike’s prints all over it

So Mikey pulled Donnie into an adventure, big deal. They’re probably fine

They better fucking be, or else

Else what?

Or. Else.

Lol

Raph closes his phone screen and grips the plastic shell tightly. Leo’s up and pacing as he calls
people, asking around still if they’ve seen even a hint of Donnie and Mikey, or heard where they might’ve gone. The Mutanimals’ was a bust, April knows nothing- oddly enough- and Casey, late as he was to responding, knows about as much as April. They even called Karai, and as much of a longshot it is that Raph’s brothers are hiding with their sister, they’d been partially hopeful. Nothing on all counts.

Raph rubs his face, breathing out harshly. Wherever his brothers ran off to, they either did a good job of getting accomplices to swear silence or just straight up didn’t tell anyone. Raph is finding both those possibilities deeply frustrating.

Maybe he should’ve expected something like this; Leo’s been a serious hardass ever since he told them the final wishes of Splinter. Sensei this, Sensei that; it’s all the same from him lately and sometimes it grates on Raph. Really grates. Leo was already the leader and eldest, they all know already he’s the one in charge- he doesn’t need to lord it over them. It figures Mikey, and possibly Donnie, would finally get sick of that and escape for a while.

They could’ve taken him with them, couple of unsympathetic assholes they are.

Raph is distracted from his annoyed thoughts by his phone, which reads “Let me know if you hear anything” from Casey.

Sure, after I’m done givin them an earful for this bullshit, Raph texts back. He gets a thumbs-up emoji in response.

Eventually, it becomes clear that efforts to re-establish contact are useless. Wherever Donnie and Mikey went, they’re refusing to pick up their phones. All they’re doing is cluttering up their call history with unanswered messages.

Raph doesn’t feel like continuing to chase after them, even just by texting and calling. It’s just making him even angrier, and he’s already having a hard time keeping his cool. If either of his brothers knows what’s good for them, they’ll show up sometime soon and he can give them a piece of his mind.

It’s hard to corral his temper and restlessness, but Raph manages to reign in his emotions to a dull annoyance. Enough that he can sit on the couch and only feel a bit like finding someone to take things out on.

He ends up reading a little, just to pass the time. There was a comic volume left on the couch where he sat down, and it’s one that he hasn’t re-read into oblivion yet. It’s as good as any time killer, waiting to the point when Leo also sits down on the couch; with a novel instead of a comic to read.

Raph’s attention doesn’t really take in the panels of the comic, mostly just skimming over the text bubbles and vaguely following the story. Though his mood has shifted from actively pissed off, his temper remains. Like a hot coal half cooled, but still burning on its underside.

After a bit, he glances at Leo on a whim, and sees a weirdly smug smile in place.

“What’s the smile for?” Raph asks sullenly, not really interested, but bored and twitchy enough to care.

“I’m going to ground Donnie and Mikey for a whole week,” Leo says, tone equally smug as his expression, “whenever they get back, because I can and they deserve it.” He looks pleased as peach with himself for arriving at that conclusion.

Raph imagines for a moment what that would look like, their brothers kneeling in the dojo and
receiving their deserved punishment from Leo. He smirks. “Sounds about right. Forgot you could
do that now.”

“It’s a perk of being Sensei,” Leo replies, puffing up a little.

Raph rolls his eyes. “Don’t go gettin’ a big head over it, though. And don’t try that shit on me.”

“I won’t if you don’t force me to.”

Raph’s smirk slips, humor tapering off. Leo’s tone isn’t joking, not even close. Raph narrows his
eyes, his negative mood returning.

Part of him wants to snap at Leo, remind him that whatever Sensei said, he’s not the total boss of
Raph. Just a little, on condition. Like fuck is he letting his brother ground him, new title or no.

Raph, however, decides to show some restraint and not bite Leo’s head off.

“Sure,” Raph says instead, going back to his comic and proceeding to dismiss Leo, “whatever you
say, Sensei.”

He senses that Leo nearly gets on his case for the sarcastic reply, but like Raph, chooses to not get
into a confrontation right this moment. Fine by Raph; he already went so far as to let Leo keep his
idealistic authority over him. His brother can do the courtesy of keeping his control freak urges to
himself.

They settle back into silence, albeit a little less chummy than before.

Raph notes, as the hours tick on and they move onto new activities, it’s a lot quieter with just the
two of them.

-/-

Raph goes to bed late, putting off sleep past sunrise and letting Chompy curl up on his pillow next
to his head. His tiny alien pet falls sound asleep, while Raph remains awake long after Chompy’s
final sleepy yawn.

Sleeping is hard, some nights. Sometimes it’s easy, and sometimes he has to just let the insomnia
take its course. With the disruption of his siblings running off into the vastness of New York, it’s
set Raph back at least a few hours from sleeping.

He won’t ever admit it aloud, but not having them all together makes it worse. The knowledge that
only Leo is in his room disquiets Raph’s mind, and he knows it’s going to affect his sleep. If he’s
lucky, it won’t be enough to cause nightmares.

Sometimes he’s that lucky. He deserves to be today, given the worry and annoyance his brothers
caused him.

Finally, and only because his eyes are starting to really burn, Raph reaches for his lamp and shuts it
off.

In the dark, he closes his eyes.
And opens them under a dark grey sky, wind whipping his face and noise all around him. The growing storm above roils angrily, like the fury inside him, always burning, always present, no matter how often he expels it-

There’s someone holding him up, April’s strong little body taking the worst of his weight, and- no, something- something terrible happens, right after this, he has to move, has to stop it-

He doesn’t make it. None of them ever make it.

Lightning flashes, white and blinding, and in a blur of loss and grief and rage, Raph screams.

He opens his eyes, hearing his alarm go off and Chompy whimpering close to his face. Raph holds still for a moment, paralyzed as usual by the same dream that’s followed him the past months.

Then he shakes himself; reaching out and turning off his alarm. The dream was no worse than any of the prior ones. If anything, that dream was more sensation, and less horrifying imagery of his father being murdered in front of him.

He can just ignore it. It’s just a dream, and no one else has been a wuss about their nightmares, if they even get them.

Raph can handle this fine.

Chompy nuzzles his face, and Raph turns his attention to his pet. Slowly, he finds the sense of calm he needs to sleep again, and drifts off.

His next alarm goes off, and Raph snarls at it as he fumbles to shut his phone up.

Eventually, even though he feels only vaguely rested, he forces himself to sit up and get out of bed. Man the hell up, he tells himself. Bad dreams aren’t an excuse to lie around feeling sorry for himself.

Raph half expects at least one of their brothers to have wandered home during the day. God knows he gets sick of them both sometimes, and however often they pair up for everything, he’s seen them get tired of each other’s company fairly quickly. Opposites don’t always attract; they usually act like their name says they will. Like opposites.

It’s perturbing that when he leaves his room, the air of the lair is still and quiet. Which doesn’t happen with the four of them starting their evening routines, ever. There’s no sign of anyone having come and gone, and as he checks his phone, Raph sees there’s still no response to any of the messages he sent yesterday.

Raph walks past the empty rooms of his brothers- their doors still wide open from before- and goes to find Leo and breakfast. For the first time in a while, there’s no scent of hot food being prepared in the kitchen. It’s as weird as the empty spaces Raph is becoming aware of.

He still partially hopes they’ll be in the kitchen, sat down around the table and getting their reprimand from Leo, but as Raph enters he finds only Leo and his coffee.

Raph grumbles irritably. Because of course they weren’t going to makes things that easy.

-/-
If there’s one thing, one thing out of all the insanity they have to deal with near constantly, that Raph knows for sure will remain a staple in his life, it’s his punching dummy.

Even after years of crazy misadventures and world domination plots and a hundred little tragedies in between, Raph still has the bulky punching dummy to come back to. The impact of his fists against it is a steady drum in his bones, and it eases some of the building tension in him.

If the objects of his anger tonight aren’t around- still- then at least he has a substitute stand in. And he wants all the pent up emotion out, transferred into reality and then dispelled. He hates feeling clogged up inside like this, too many thoughts stuffed in together and nowhere for them to go.

So, since his brothers have decided to keep playing runaways, and Raph’s real source of frustrations remain unsolved, his punching dummy gets its fair share of punishment and more.

It’s a little easier to think, after a couple hours of that. As long as he exerts himself enough, things stay quiet in his head and his temper is less difficult to handle.

But even so, he’s still got a knot of worry settling into his chest. It’s wrapped in prickly anger, but at its center he’s feeling concerned about his siblings. It’s stressing him out to not know where they are, when they’ll be back, or if they’re somewhere safe. Logically he knows Mikey is alright at keeping himself in one piece, and Donnie is smarter than any of them, but logic hasn’t ever been Raph’s strongest point.

If they would just answer his texts, Raph wouldn’t be feeling so restless and fidgety. If they’d just give him and Leo a location, an update, something, then he’d be able to stop curling and uncurling his fists.

He’s a loner, kind of an introvert, but not having all of his siblings in one place isn’t something he’s used to. Raph likes his space and his privacy, but also likes knowing where everyone is at. He wants his brothers around, just sometimes at a distance. If he knows for certain everyone is accounted for at home or will eventually return unharmed, then he can keep a handle on the uncomfortable tightness that squeezes his chest some nights.

It’s stupid. They’re practically adults. They’re ninjas. They can all take care of themselves. He shouldn’t feel so wrong-footed by this.

It’s been two full days since he’s seen hide or tail of his siblings.

Raph gets about twenty minutes of break, before he’s right back at the punching dummy. Trying yet again to force the constricting discomfort around his chest to release its grip.

His mood isn’t helped by Leo walking around, acting calm as anything about what’s going on. It makes Raph feel even more self-conscious of the discomfort he’s carrying. Their brothers are missing, but Leo is confident everything will turn out fine and their brothers will come home without issue.

It’s just on the edge of aggravating, having Leo be so calm still, while Raph feels like he’s got a buzz in his teeth.

He hits the punching dummy another hundred times, and fifty more for good measure, before taking another short breather. Something resembling his baseline has been re-established for the exertion, but Raph still can’t quite find any true sense of calm.
How many times has an interruption to their lives been benign? How many times has something out of the ordinary been safe? Sometimes those misadventures are fun, but too many of them end up being life-threatening. This is an abrupt and drastic change to the normalcy of their home, and Raph wants to just let it go, believe that everything will turn out okay on its own, but neither of his younger siblings is answering their phones and it’s setting him up to explode.

Two days. Not even a hint of how his brothers are doing. What are the chances of something having gone wrong?

Too high. Way too high. Their luck, the way their personalities are wired, how they all just somehow always manage to end up in the center of some fresh storm of bullshit- Donnie could probably calculate all those things into a clean and precise number, but Raph just has his gut feeling of it all leading to one conclusion: eventual catastrophe.

Probably not the world ending type this time, not even Mikey is that much of a screw up. Localized catastrophe, then. And how would that catastrophe happen, how would it end up involving his brothers?

*The Shredder is dead*, he reminds himself. Putting his forehead against the punching dummy and breathing in deeply, Raph firmly reminds himself the Shredder is dead. And the last time they saw anything of the wackos he kept on staff, they were slinking away from the heat of the burning building to lick their wounds, or maybe bleed out from them. Raph didn’t go looking, didn’t feel like hunting down anyone else that night; he’d just wanted to get everyone out of there, back into the sewers and the lair. Put the decapitated head on the lawn far, far behind them.

The thought lingers, though. Calling up thoughts that attach themselves willingly to the Shredder’s memory in his mind. How many times it was one of them, or all of them- in traps and cages, forced into a corner and targets as easy as fish in a barrel?

A scattered collection of memories flash through Raph’s mind, of the Foot stronghold before its fall and rebirth under Karai- of the things that went on in the cells to prisoners, on the cold, steel lab tables, restraints and locks strong enough to contain even a mutant- memories of eyes that burned and watched with vicious satisfaction as Raph choked and struggled, thrashing as his nerves and mind were hijacked from his control-

-up on a roof, storm raging above, everything moving too quick, too deadly, and he-

Raph lifts his head away and then smacks his forehead against the punching dummy, forcing that all back down and trying to ignore the electric prickly over his scales. Sharp and piercing, disrupting the brief calm he’d managed to find.

The dummy won’t be enough tonight. Listening to Leo’s advice and staying put, waiting them out acting like none of this bothers them- it’s not going to work for Raph.

He needs to- move. Search. Try a different type of exercise and see if it’ll fix the way his nerves won’t settle.

He could check in with Casey. Company besides Leo would be nice.

But, that’d be after Raph gets himself back under control. Showing up on the windowsill of his friend’s room, unnerved by ghosts of the recent past clinging to him… it’d just be embarrassing.

Raph rehydrates as he moves on from his workout, makes sure Chompy has his own water bowl filled in their bedroom, and leaves without telling Leo. His brother is in meditation anyway- as long
as Raph leaves his door shut and the radio on, Leo probably won’t be able to tell he’s been gone and back at all.

And unlike their dickbag brothers, Raph will actually answer his phone if Leo calls.

-/-

It gets a little easier to breathe, once he’s out on the rooftops and has an actual goal to his night. Raph isn’t entirely hopeful he’ll conveniently stumble upon wherever his brothers have gone, since he grudgingly admits that Donnie is smart enough to know how to cover his tracks, and Mikey always was best at hide and seek, even as they got older.

That doesn’t stop him from circling the buildings populating the area, or going below once or twice to see about a dry spot of tunnels. Realistically the chances of any of those places being Donnie and Mikey’s hideout are slim, given they’ve dragged most of their crap with them and have the Shellraiser to conceal, but it’s still worth the shot and leg work.

He doesn’t end up finding anything that sticks out to him, not within the immediate bounds of their patrol territory, and Raph moodily imagines that maybe Donnie finally fulfilled his childhood scheme to create a cloaking device- like something out of Leo’s old favorites of sci-fi, so their formerly gawky limbed sibling could finally start winning at hide and seek again.

Actually, Donnie is still kind of gawky in how his limbs all go together. Taller than any of them and a little weak at natural stealth without time for prior planning. Raph would hope that would be what gives his brothers’ location away, whenever they inevitably have to go out on a supply run again, but Donnie’s probably had ample time to plot this. Catching them in this scenario will be more difficult than that.

Raph gets bored eventually of searching without results and still not quite getting the thoughts in his head to go away. He’s nearby Casey’s place anyway by that point, and figures dropping in with news would be a good distraction. He thinks his friend texted a while ago, but doesn’t know what Casey actually said, since Raph had only glanced at the screen of his t-phone to see if it was his brothers or not.

It hadn’t been, obviously. Which sucks.

Raph blacks out a few of the streetlights nearest to Casey’s side of the building, and then scales the red brick of it. Double checking before he knocks, just in case he’s somehow gotten the window mistaken for another, Raph raps his knuckles on it while he clings to the building.

It takes at least eight firm knocks (maybe getting close to banging on the last three) before Casey responds. And by respond, Raph means that his friend lurches upright in his bed; hand reaching for the bat leaned against it and looking around with a startled expression. Casey notices Raph blocking the view out his windowpane almost immediately, and lowers the bat to mouth the fuck?

“Why’re you in bed so early?” Raph asks before Casey’s even got the window open all the way. His friend looks at him incredulously, shaggy black bangs hanging in his face.

“Raph, it’s-” Casey yawns, giving Raph an unfortunate whiff of his breath as he checks the digital clock on his desk. Casey rubs an eye, fuzzy and annoyed. “It’s almost five, dude. I got school in a
few hours.”

“Is it?” Raph asks. He didn’t think he’d been wandering that long.

“Do you even know what day it is?”

“Uh…” Given that Raph’s existence adheres to pretty much no one’s rules or routine, the specific date of any one night doesn’t tend to stick in his head.

“It’s fuck o’clock in the morning, on Wednesday. Middle of the week, Raph. You know I gotta catch some actual sleep ‘round now.”

“Right,” Raph says, and doesn’t know how he forgot that. He’s usually aware of the times when his few friends will be available, but with Donnie and Mikey being gone and the way his days have been harder to sleep through than usual…

Casey is looking over his shoulder, squinting irritably at the darkened street outside his apartment. “Dude, did you break the streetlights?”

“Just a few.”

“Why?”

“So no one could see me up here, dumbass,” Raph says, the words coming out a little harsher than they need to be. He feels bad about it a split second later, for coming close to snapping at his friend. That’s not what he’s here to do. This is supposed to help him feel less like he’s got too many things bouncing around in him.

“Aw, fuck, you do know the city’s gonna have to pay to get those fixed, right?” Casey asks, frowning.

“So?” Raph doesn’t get the deal here. The ‘city’ paying for things is a distant and removed concept from his life. People paying for anything is a foreign action to him. If he needs something, he just takes it. Everyone else can just get more of whatever he’s taken from the source, which he can’t.

“…I get the sense talking to you about low income neighborhoods is going to be pointless. Whatever, broken streetlights, dark sidewalk, I’ll deal. I’ll just keep a closer eye on shit for a while,” Casey says, shaking his head. He yawns again. “Right, so my life is going to suck tomorrow. Might as well ask you if you got any news on Donnie and Mikey, since you didn’t answer my texts earlier…”

“Budge over first,” Raph says, already putting a leg through the open window. It’s a trick to slip inside with his shell and shoulders’ width, but he does. “Right, since I’ve apparently been out longer than I thought, I’m gonna give you a chance to guess who I’m still searching for.”

“Seriously? Not even a phone call back yet?”

“Nothing.”

“Yeah… ‘kay, that’s a little weird,” Casey says, going back to his bed to sit heavily on it. He scratches his stomach under his loose pajama shirt absently. “I don’t think Mikey’s ever been quiet on snapchat this long, and like… Donnie should’ve checked in with April at least, right?”

“Leo thinks they’ll come home on their own, probably today or something,” Raph says, even
though the idea doesn’t sit right with him. He \textit{wants} to believe that, but…

“Uh huh… and you don’t think that?” Casey asks.

Well, Raph did say he’d been out searching. “Not really. But, I don’t know. Kind of?” He crosses his arms, leaning against the wall next to Casey’s window. “My brothers… they get into all kinds of shit, but they’re… you know. Like water and oil. You can mix them together all you want, but they’re gonna separate eventually.”

“And then come back home at that point?”

“Yeah.”

“Still… you really sure about that?” Casey questions. “I would’ve thought they’d call in to rub the vacation in our faces by now. You positive they’re not in trouble? Maybe they picked up on somethin’ going down and didn’t tell us.”

Raph grits his teeth, his stomach giving a twisting lurch as all the scenarios and memories he’d been repressing surge back to the forefront of his mind. A hundred of the worst outcomes, most of which they’ve all experienced once or twice at least-

“Why the fuck do you think I’m out here \textit{looking} for them? I \textit{don’t} know,” Raph snaps, digging his nails into his arm. The pain focuses him, gives him something to pay attention to instead of the way electricity is racing up from his chest and constricting his throat.

Casey raises a hand, a placating gesture at Raph’s sudden temper. “Right, I figured. Sorry, I’m just… kind of worried, you know?”

Raph reigns himself in, a little ashamed for his outburst. Out of his friend group, Casey isn’t someone he’s prone to being angry with. And right now, Casey is probably feeling at least a fraction of the concern Raph is. His friend gets it, even just somewhat.

“I know,” Raph mutters, and thinks he’s finally starting to feel the exertion he’s put his body through. It’s late enough it’s about to become early, too, and Casey was right earlier. He needs to sleep. They probably both do.

Raph says a quick goodbye, and leaves after promising to keep Casey updated if something changes. His friend pays the same favor of promising to share info.

In the distance, Raph realizes that the sky is starting to brighten a little, and knows that his time left outside is getting very, very short. But he still feels wound up, unsatisfied with how the (admittedly uncoordinated) search went. Not even speaking with his friend did much to mollify the way Raph’s mind keeps shoving unwanted images into his head- possibilities of any manner of pitfalls his brothers could have fallen into, the people out there who could take advantage of them in a moment of weakness, and Raph, Raph isn’t there, they’re not here with him, their team is divided and it’s like the old saying, together we stand, \textit{divided we-}

Leaping over the gap between buildings, Raph realizes that he hears voices. A pause in his run towards home, he sees below a collection of Purple Dragons gang members.

They’re just sitting on the steps of a bar that’s closed until later in the day, bottles being passed between them all despite the law against public drinking. They’re not causing any trouble besides being a little overly loud at an early hour, but knowing these assholes…

Well, they’ve probably done \textit{something} in the past twenty-four hours worthy of a beat down.
And Raph is always prepared to dish out one of those.

A fight always does the trick, always resets the way Raph’s insides want to twist and knot against his will. And as everything goes downright tranquil in his head, the crack of nasal cartilage under his fist is the sweetest sound he’s heard all night.

-/-

Raph wonders, later, just what made his brothers finally snap with their decision.

Staring at the interior of Mikey’s disaster room, cluttered with pure garbage now and nothing else, Raph finally gets around to asking himself why his brothers might have left. Until now, he’s mostly thought about what he’s going to do when they came back, and about where they could have gone. The why didn’t really matter to him, besides that it’s an inconvenience.

But his hands are sore and his head is clear, and Raph is letting himself take a short walk around the lair in the dim of a handful of lights, now that Leo’s gone to bed. It’s not pacing, because he doesn’t do that kind of shit. He’s just stretching his legs a little before sleeping, that’s all.

Did someone have a fight with him, or Leo, and neither of them notice? It’s a possibility. Mikey tends to let things go easy enough, and Donnie rarely has a real issue with anyone- but maybe this is the once in a blue moon time they decide to be stubborn about a confrontation. Clearly, it’d been one stupid and small enough Raph hadn’t counted it as such, if that’s what happened.

It just figures that could be what’s gone down. Raph gets being angry about things, he really does, but couldn’t his brothers have saved it for something actually meaningful? If it’d been Leo who fought with one of them, and Leo doesn’t remember either- then whatever fight their sibling perceive to be happening is plain idiotic to be mad over.

Raph scoffs to himself, and turns his shell on Mikey’s trashed room. He keeps his steps silent as he moves through the lair; he doesn’t want Leo to wake up and open his mouth about anything. Raph’s done with people for tonight, and that includes his remaining sibling. The fight with the Dragon goons might have been the relief of pent up energy Raph needed, but the overall disappointing search is keeping him in a poor mood.

He’d understand if it’s beef with Leo that’s driven their brothers off. Their leader and Sensei- Raph isn’t totally on board with that, some nights, when his brother takes it just a little too far with the authority thing- has been a real pain in the ass sometimes, since their father passed. Leo’s always been uptight, taking his position as eldest and defacto leader completely serious even when he needed to just lighten up already. But this kind of stuff, the things Leo tries to pass off these days? This is a whole new kind of control their brother is trying to exercise.

Raph tried the leader thing, years ago, just once, and he does understand that it’s hard. In a fight he doesn’t have the ability to distance himself from things- balance the present with strategizing in his head. Raph used to really hate that. Actually, no, he still hates it. Hates that Leo can go toe to toe with the same enemies Raph does, and still have the space in his head to come up with a plan that coordinates all of the players on the field.

For Raph, everything narrows down to his goal, and he has just enough space leftover to account for the people fighting by his side. Otherwise speaking, he maybe has a bit of a one track mind in a
fight.

Point being, just because he gets why Leo is their leader, does not mean he enjoys putting up with every puff of hot air his brother lets out. Or is willing to just grin and say “Hai, Sensei,” every time Leo tries to unnecessarily order Raph to fall back in line.

Yeah, no. Raph might not have everything it takes to be the leader, but he’s not some greenhorn in need of berating or reprimanding. He has seen, done, and dealt with exactly as much as Leo has. Raph falls short in some places, but they’re equals, dammnit, and Leo doesn’t get to treat Raph like he’s lesser than he is.

So fuck Leo for rubbing those things in their faces, whether intentional or not- it feels like sometimes Leo’s forgotten how to be anything other than the leader. Oh, and fuck Donnie and Mikey for ditching him with all that, whether they all had a fight and Raph didn’t notice or not.

The anger is easy. Raph lets it flow through him, settling hot and thick over his other emotions. It eases the tension under his plastron, and lets him draw in a deep breath to let out an angry huff.

He finishes stalking around his too quiet home, and finally feels like he can stay horizontal when he lies down.

-/-

Day three comes, and as the night gets blacker, long past sunset, Raph finds that his unsuccessful search for his brothers bothers him now even more than it did yesterday.

He’s had yet another pathetic breakfast, barely enough skill and energy to pull one together one from depleted leftovers, and he’d been in a bad mood to start with that evening. Shallow sleep, restless tossing and turning, the usual. Waking up every time to see Chompy nearby helps, but it’s not been enough to put a stop to the inherent unease the four of them being separated brings.

Raph puts forward the idea (read as: snaps the words and doesn’t leave room for real answer) that they check in with the Mutanimals face to face, instead of just calling their landline. Best way to make absolutely certain that their brothers aren’t hiding out there, or have left knowledge of their whereabouts with the Mutanimals’ motley crew, is to look the Mutanimals in the eye for themselves.

Mikey talks constantly, constantly, and even more so with people indulgent enough to actually listen to him. Leatherhead is the poor soul who actually seems to enjoy Mikey’s prattling, so if Mikey’s gone and blabbed to anyone in their friend group about where he and Donnie have hidden themselves, it’s more than likely going to have been to Leatherhead.

“We can check in with April while we’re out,” Leo suggests, not arguing Raph’s point. “It’ll be easier with her also; to tell if she’s telling the truth or not if we’re face to face, instead of just texting.”

Raph almost rolls his eyes at his brother’s addition to the plan, the soft handed interrogation it sounds like. April might be Donnie’s specific best friend out of their team, but he’s never known her to hide secrets on anyone’s behalf between the four of them. He remembers her distinct annoyance any time their pairs started an argument, and how she’d just excuse herself until they were done.
It’s still worth the shot. Maybe April’s decided to act out of character too, like Donnie and Mikey.

“They haven’t been here,” Slash says after they arrive. Arms crossed and annoyed frown aimed at them, even Raph. And looking at the person who’d formerly been Raph’s pet tortoise, Raph can see in Slash’s craggy face that he’s telling the truth. Of the Mutanimals, Slash is the one Raph knows wouldn’t ever lie to him, so.

Raph takes a deep breath, and walks away.

He kicks the skateboard ramp in the middle of the room hard enough it shifts across the floor. He ignores the yelp and scrambling of Mondo fucking Gecko, who sounds just enough like Mikey right now it makes Raph turn a snarl on him briefly. The gecko mutant clings to the railing of the opposite side of the ramp, tiny sharp teeth bared in a grimace as he shies away from the display.

Leatherhead, raising himself from a curl beside the ramp, gives Raph a disapproving look for scaring Mondo. Raph could give less than a shit what the old crocodile thinks right now- Leatherhead is a dead end and so is this trip. The way the crocodile still looks pensive, had asked them for information about Mikey’s (and Donnie’s, added as an afterthought) location is proof enough that Mikey hasn’t been here at all.

So Raph was wrong. And it’s pissing him off as much as Leatherhead and everyone else in the room is.

“The hell are you looking at?” Raph snaps at Leatherhead and Mondo, both still staring at him. Mondo hastily averts his gaze, and Leatherhead lets out a huff, turning his attention from Raph to Leo, who is talking with Slash still.

Promises and pleasantries are exchanged- Raph makes a vague threat or two towards their wayward and troublesome siblings- and Leo gives him an annoyed look for the way he’s acting. Tough shit, Raph’s pissed off his second attempt of tracking their siblings didn’t pan out, leaving them stuck still at square one.

Three days and not a single response to text or call. Raph isn’t used to this, isn’t used to just not knowing where his family is. If they had a problem with what was happening at home, they should have stuck around and confronted someone about it, not run away like this. Getting a fight over with is cleaner, faster- someone gets a little hurt, people yell a bit, and you’re done. Everyone can move the hell on with their lives.

Drawing it out like this, hiding themselves away and saying jack all of what their current location or wellbeing is- it’s risky, irresponsible, and flat out disrespectful to the people waiting on them to come home. Anything could happen to Mikey and Donnie out there. Their lives are constantly in danger, whether actively or just passively. Simply existing still is an accomplishment for them at the end of a long night, when the whole world is stacked against them and one false move will end them blank eyed and bleeding out on dirty city pavement.

Raph barely hears the goodbyes of the Mutanimals, barely feels himself walking out of the hideout with Leo. Raph’s chest feels tight again and his hands in need of something solid to touch, to ground him. He just wants the next stop over with so he can go home, pick something physical to occupy himself with, and bury the twisting sickness he’s got spreading through him.

Taking the side trip Leo requested after the Mutanimals- it turns out that April’s room is dark and empty, and she doesn’t answer their texts. So even this part of his night isn’t working out. Raph is halfway tempted to kick the windowpane full of cracks before they leave, just to give April a reminder to, oh, maybe check in if she’s also going to go off on her own?
Being a lone wolf is his thing. Having his family break off from the main group like this is just plain stupid, since one is a kunoichi with a bare handful of years of training, and the other two are their B-team. Raph knows he can make sure he makes it home in one piece, but the constriction of his chest and looping worst case scenarios make him doubt the other three can.

On the way back to the lair, he focuses on his anger, focuses on what he can do when they find their brothers. Raph drowns the other feelings in those ones- the relief of having his brothers in sight again, and April, too; the satisfaction of reminding them they, in fact, can’t fuck off into the void without good reason; the deep and hot anger that they did this to begin with-

Easier to feel, less likely to get overwhelming. Anger he knows, anger he can handle. He’s handled it all his life; better the devil you know, right?

Raph’s going to give them a real piece of his mind whenever his brothers resurface. Teach them a lesson so they don’t ever pull this sort of stunt again. Making him, and Leo, and their human friends and all the Mutanimals worry like this. Little shits. It’s got him feeling knots of tension inside of himself he knows wouldn’t be there otherwise, and that’s infuriating on its own.

And so is the way, when Raph maybe knocks into him just a little, Leo chooses right then to make a big deal about how he’s acting.

So maybe Raph could have said something a little more polite than for his brother to watch it, mind his god damn personal space and all that, but Leo should have been able to tell Raph isn’t in the mood for that kind of thing. A lecture, now of all times?

“I already have two brothers being troublemakers at the moment, I don’t need another,” is what Leo’s saying, using that condescending tone he does when someone doesn’t do what he wants them to. Raph ignores him, continuing to walk until his brother snaps, “That means you, Raph.”

“Oh go fuck yourself, Leo,” Raph snaps right back, throwing a snarl of his lips over his shoulder for good measure. He is not in the mood, not with his hands tingling and chest tight and- “I got enough problems; I don’t need you nit-pickin’ everything I do, too. I’m not your lackey.”

“No, you’re my student, and I’m your Sensei,” Leo says, and the words that follow start to get drowned out by the buzz in Raph’s head, which grows louder with each needling little word that just screams how badly Leo’s pride has swelled.

So Raph stops, his insides shaking with emotions now, and turns to face his snob of a brother. Leo is looking down at him, literally down at him, like Raph is the one being the real problem here. Raph didn’t want a fight, didn’t want a confrontation with Leo specifically- he just wants to expel all the feelings building up in him, get it out before he explodes with them.

“I told you not to try that shit with me,” Raph says low and slow, warning Leo that now is the time to back the hell off. “Splinter might’ve said you got all that authority, but I’m not gonna roll over and let you make me fall in line. I’m not Donnie or Mikey.”

He’s not the B-team, he’s not like their siblings- he works hard at training, keeps focus in sparring, he doesn’t wander off inside his head with plans for experiments or whatever garbage is playing on TV that night. Raph doesn’t need a keeper, and doesn’t need his older brother to try acting like someone three times his age, and a hundred times as strong and wise as any of them will ever be.

Leo still scoffs at him, even though he should know by now, know that even if he’s the leader and the special chosen one of them to inherit everything- Raph isn’t just some sidekick to be ordered around, he’s kicked Leo’s ass in the dojo dozens of times, trained just as hard the same amount of
nights Leo has, he measures up, he’s not-

“Like either of them are doing that at the moment,” Leo says, words making it through the storm in Raph’s head. And, god, he looks so damn self-satisfied, and Raph is so tired of dealing with that kind of thing from his brother.

So he says, “Maybe they’ve got the right idea,” because hell, their brothers probably do.

And Leo narrows his eyes, frowning down at Raph from the steps, and Raph keeps pushing, keeps prodding his brother because he’s sick of having Leo look down on him in any manner. He’d said at the beginning that okay, Leo’s their Sensei now, Raph thought he could handle that change, thought things wouldn’t actually change much at all-

But it’s like that was all Leo needed, to boost himself up from being not just the best of them, but to being all around better than them.

They stalk towards each other, and Raph lets the anger well up in him, drown out everything else- he’s worried, so god damn worried about their brothers, but this- it’s easy and familiar and Leo has it coming. They’ll fight a little, and the noise in Raph’s head will quiet, and then it’ll all reset to zero-

But then Leo says, “Are you really so desperate to be the rebellious second son that you’d spit on what- what your own father, our father, told us? The very last thing he ever told us?”

And everything roars in Raph’s mind.

“Am I wrong?” Shut up. “You were always looking for a reason to push the boundary of his rules,” Shut up shut up, “and now you’re looking to do the same with mine.”

Raph feels his teeth grinding, his fists clenching, rage that’s black and choking rising up in him like a tidal wave-

“Our father made one, one last request,” And none of the rest of them ever even heard it, only Leo and no one else, shut UP- “and you can’t even respect that. No, you have to keep pushing and pushing and keep looking for another reason,” This wasn’t what he wanted, he just wanted to get away from everyone and Leo just HAD TO DO THIS- “as always, to start yet another fight with someone-”

Raph’s feels himself shaking, uncontrollable emotions and impulses racing through his veins, everything is too bright and overwhelming and he’s going to-

“-because you’re bored, or tired, or grumpy, or hell, just feel like it,” No, he doesn’t mean to, not always- everyone’s just so frustrating, it gets so hard to- “because you’re the second son who’s just jealous he didn’t get to be the first son,” No, shut up, that’s not- he’s not the second, he’s not less, he’s NOT-

“or the leader, or hear the last request our father ever made to us-”

Everything snaps burning and blinding, and Raph feels his fist connect with Leo’s face before he realizes he’s swung.

Everything gets simpler after that.

Raph swings again before Leo recovers, hits his brother in the exact same spot- if Leo feels like picking fights like this, Raph will make sure he doesn’t forget the cost of doing so.
Raph’s knuckles are sore from his long workouts, but the feeling of them impacting against Leo’s scales and cartilage is worth it. Except Leo recovers by the third swing, and grabs Raph’s arm to block it—twisting the in motion punch and diverting the attack to get Raph in a lock. Raph uses the fact that Leo is distracted with holding him in place to start pounding at his brother’s plastron.

Raph snarls triumphantly as Leo wheezes, but doesn’t have time to enjoy that feeling before he knows something’s gone wrong for him.

Leo twists again, shifts their weight and their legs, Raph’s arm still caught in his grip—and kicks Raph’s knee, using as much force as he can muster with the angle.

Raph feels something twinge wrong, and lets out a noise that’s pain and fury combined.

He hits Leo in a sloppy but successful attempt to loosen the lock, and keeps hitting. Raph doesn’t have any thought behind the motions, just pounding away and paying Leo back for all the fucking poison he spewed at Raph.

He’s not jealous, he’s not— their father loved them, loved Raph, and maybe he didn’t make the cut for leader but he still— he’s still just as good, he’s just as fast and strong and necessary to the team—

Leo kicks him again, same knee, same wrenched muscles— Raph’s vision gets tunneled and dark, and he doubles his efforts to leave as much damage as possible—

Leo doesn’t know anything, doesn’t know shit about what it’s like to be almost up to par and still end up not being enough— but Raph is A-team, he’s still better than their brothers, he didn’t run off and leave everyone wondering where the hell he went, he didn’t abandon his post— he’s not less, he’s better than them, he’s just as good as Leo—

Their father didn’t seem to think so, leaving it all to his favorite son, and nothing to anyone else. Maybe, somehow, Splinter knew that at the last moment, during the final battle of his life— that Raph would—

Leo clocks Raph hard enough his world spins, and he loses those thoughts in the next brutal dozen seconds he tries to pay Leo back for that. For all of it.

-/-

Raph spends most of the day staring at his ceiling.

He feels that it’s a diurnal hour, knows in his bones that the sun is up and he should be sleeping. The steady throb of his bruises and the slow numbing of his knee keep him awake, though.

He put ice on his leg, after he and Leo finally got tired of laying into one another. It’ll help the swelling, but Raph knows what a wrenched muscle feels like. Even if he’s learned to fight on despite accumulating any number of injuries, it’ll still be an absolute bitch and a half to move around for at least a few nights.

But it’s not the leg keeping him up, really. Or any of the relatively mild injuries Leo gave him. It’s the myriad of slowly circling thoughts, as sludgy and dark as the worst gunk found after rainstorms in the sewers.
So that’s what Leo really thinks of him, huh?

Somehow, Raph isn’t even surprised.

There’d been a point, when they were all younger, before they’d even been assigned official roles on the team— that Raph felt things changing. A shift in the tone of how his father treated each of them— or more specifically, how Splinter treated Leo.

Somewhere, not long after they’d been gifted their first real weapons, a gap started to form between Raph and Leo. Between all of them and Leo.

And Raph had worked so hard to close that gap, catch up to his brother every time Leo went on further ahead without him. They were the older two, they had to be a united front— but Leo just kept getting better, somehow, even though Raph trained twice as much as anyone, spent whole evenings dedicated only to working out, making himself stronger, refining his skill and striving over and over to finally put himself at level with Leo, make them equals again in their father’s eyes—

And then Leo was made leader.

And the gap turned into a gulf.

And Raph kept falling short of bridging it, despite everything he tried.

Donnie and Mikey didn’t care they got left behind like that, neither of them ever had the ambition, the right stuff to be proper ninjas- lost up in their heads all the time, slacking off training to go do meaningless hobbies that wouldn’t do anything to improve their skills— but Raph wanted the recognition, wanted to be praised for how hard he worked, how quickly he could take down his siblings in a spar— for just how damn hard he pushed himself towards each new obstacle, and eventually, conquered them.

He still fell short of his goal, though. Never managed to keep a handle on his temper, never kept a clear head in a fight— always, always lost control of himself at the wrong moment, and inevitably, failed to measure up to par.

Leo, though. Leo always managed to be that. Always managed to be the perfect student, night after night, exceeding where all the rest of them floundered— always managed to garner the most praise, the most attention.

Raph got plenty of attention. Just in the form of reprimands for his mistakes, instead of pride from his father.

Fucking Leo. Always showing Raph up, showing all of them up, and still expecting them to be just as good as him. Even though, very clearly-

They just. Never were.

Raph feels Chompy climbing onto the pillow his head is on, and rolls over slowly to look at his pet. In the dark, he can only make out the shape of his brightly colored pet.

Chompy whines, and butts his head against Raph’s flat nose.

Raph. . . just doesn’t have energy for that right now.

He picks up the little space tortoise, and sets him on the floor. Chompy’s actual sleeping spot is under the desk, anyway. A cozy little spot of darkness all to himself.
Raph’s room is supposed to be that for him, too, but it just feels oppressive today.

None of his siblings get it; none of them could get it. What it’s like to push himself so hard some days he went to bed aching right down to his core—what it’s like to get up the following evening, swallow painkillers and keep going—what it’s like to just keep running up against a wall, over and over, and continuing to do so long after his knuckles split their skin and bleed through his wrappings—

None of them get it what it’s like to be good, but never, ever the best.

The second son, the second best, the second choice. Almost as good, but only ever almost. Better than B-team, good enough to be A-team— but not the leader. Not the favorite.

A failure when it mattered, someone who fell just short of the highest expectations. The only ones he didn’t fall short of were the ones of him losing it at the last moment, faltering with his concentration and control. Snapping under the force of his own emotions, and screwing himself over in front of everyone.

Mikey and Donnie were lucky. They never had to deal with that sort of thing. Their father never expected them to do anything besides provide backup and support. They’d had it easy, all those years. Meanwhile Raph had struggled, and strained, and felt his fingers brush the tail end of real victory again and again.

And always let it slip out of his grip, and have to face the disappointment of his father for that.

Not that that matters anymore, really. Nothing about Leo’s success or their Sensei’s disappointed lectures matters anymore. Because Splinter is dead, and Raph failed to measure up at the last moment, like he always does.

It figures that the one time their father picked Raph over Leo… it’d be when he’d… when Raph would…

Raph covers his eyes and rolls to face the wall; hiding his face and twisting, piercing pain inside from the darkness surrounding him. Through the drowning emotions in his mind, only one thought makes it through.

Maybe if it had been Leo on that roof, their father’s room wouldn’t be empty right now.

-/-

Raph struggles, later on, to haul himself out of bed.

On top of shallow and repeating nightmares— all ones he’s had before, the same damn scenes he always gets on replay— he aches worse than he had yesterday, and the icepack on his knee fell off at some point during his restless sleep. It twinges with every move he makes, and it’s nearly enough to convince him that staying in bed and just… not dealing with anything is the better plan.

Except Chompy is chirping and whining, pacing Raph’s room and knocking into things to get attention. He needs to be fed, petted, and taken for a walk.

Get the fuck up, Raph tells himself, and pushes off the blankets with painful effort. Quitting is for
weaklings, you’ve dealt with worse- get up and man up.

Chompy nips his ankles as Raph drags himself out of bed. Raph shuffles his pet out of the way with his foot, lazily telling him, “I’m up, I’m up- quit biting already, jeez. Impatient little shit.”

Raph focuses on Chompy, focuses on the responsibility he has to raise the tiny to-be space Godzilla. He gets his gear on, grabs the leash and harness he made to fit his pet, and arduously forces himself to walk out the door of his room.

For a few moments, he’s alright. The dreams are just dreams- they can’t hurt him, they’re just memories, he needs to just get over it already- and at least Chompy loves him. Expecting nothing more than attention and love in return. And maybe food, too.

Raph goes to get the bag of dog food from the kitchen, and something to eat for himself, too- and comes face to face with Leo, who is, as per fucking usual, up and about before anyone else.

Never mind that there’s only Raph left to rise before, or that Raph overslept while caught in a cycle of nightmares.

Leo is nursing the bruises Raph left on him, holding himself gingerly and tense- and when he sees Raph, his lips curl ever so slightly. Disapproval and distaste showing clear in his eyes and expression.

Raph sneers right back, and snags food only for Chompy before leaving. He’s not hungry anymore, already feeling the rise of his temper takeover.

He takes his pet out of the lair, and decides to not even be in the same room as Leo for the rest of the night.

Pretty obviously, Leo doesn’t have a shred of regret for the stuff he said to Raph. And if Leo isn’t going to bother apologizing for all the shitty things he hurled at Raph, then Raph won’t bother apologizing for the dark bruises he’s inflicted on his so called Sensei.

Leo deserved it. When any of Raph’s siblings tick him off enough for that kind of snap, they deserve it.

He tries to keep his temper in check, but fuck, like any of them ever try to help him with that. Stomping on his toes until he decides to kick back, and then whinging and whining about how its Raph’s fault the fight happened, and going and getting him in trouble for it, excluding him and ignoring him and acting like Raph’s the one with a god damn problem-

For the stuff Leo said, Raph should have hit him harder.

For leaving him here, for disrupting everything about their lives- Raph’s going to hit his missing siblings just as hard as he did their leader. And then maybe worse, if they keep ignoring their texts, keep hiding somewhere in the city, keep being little shits and causing more trouble than they’re worth.

The anger is good. It makes Raph’s chest shudder, bones buzz- but its normal sensations, familiar ones. He knows how to handle the swell of fury in him, and much prefers it to the paralyzing sensations he gets there, sometimes.

Except Chompy is whining, pawing Raph’s foot and pacing tight little circles, and no, no- Raph isn’t mad at him, the anger isn’t supposed to ever be directed at his pet.
“Sorry, fuck- I’m sorry,” Raph says, kneeling down in a painful, slow motion. He picks up his one dependable companion, the only steady support he can depend on. Chompy nuzzles his hands, little spiky tail wagging despite the anxious whine he’s still making.

Raph sighs, curling around his pet in the tunnel they’re walking through. “I’m not mad at you, I promise. Just my brothers. You didn’t do anything, Chompy, okay? We’re good, don’t worry.”

His pet makes the growling, chirruping sound he does whenever he’s feeling particularly pleased about something.

“…you just want me to carry you,” Raph scolds. Chompy blinks innocent little eyes at him, and Raph rolls his own.

“I’m spoiling you,” Raph tells Chompy, standing gently enough he only winces a little at his leg. It hurts, but he’s dealing. “You need to learn how to walk on your own, you know. Toughen up. No one’s going to respect you if you’re not strong enough to fight your own battles.”

The little space tortoise coos, perfectly content in the crook of Raph’s arm. Raph shakes his head at that.

“You’re just as lazy as my brothers,” Raph comments dryly, thinking again of Mikey and Donnie’s scheme to escape the lair and their responsibilities. The coil of anger about that, of them just disappearing and barely leaving an explanation for it - it rises bitter and sharp, but Raph quiets it, focusing on his pet and scratching under Chompy’s chin.

He carries his tortoise a few blocks worth of tunnels, limping along and pushing through the pain of that. He’s had worse, he’s fought real battles with way worse- he can handle taking his pet for a walk with this injury.

He pointedly ignores Leo when they get back, continuing his plan to spend exactly zero time with his brother. Raph goes so far as to shove his phone into his side table drawer and leave it buried under the crap he’s got inside it. Ignoring the brothers who are ignoring him.

Raph spends the rest of his night like that- drowning out the weird and increasingly uncomfortable silence of the lair with his drum kit, and ignoring all three of his siblings like they deserve to be.

And so ends night fucking four of the stupid drama Donnie and Mikey are causing.

-/-

The next night following, after errands meant more so to fill up their evening, distract them from how it’s been five nights now and still nothing from their siblings, and-

“You have no right to be.”

Those words derail Raph’s thoughts, their delivery and tone so sudden and sharp he’s totally knocked off-balance.

They came from Leatherhead, their first mutant friend, someone they’d come to think of trustworthy in almost every way. Who is growling at them, sound rumbling from his barrel chest- Raph hasn’t been the target of that kind of threat in years, hasn’t had to worry at all of Leatherhead
ever turning his strength and size and dangerously large mouth of sharp teeth on him. Not since Mikey charmed the old lizard over to their side of things.

Mikey, who was here, who was here- who Leatherhead hid from them, and then was convinced to force his own team into listening to him with threats- to play along and keep quiet and hide Raph’s brother from him-

“You have no right to be,” Leatherhead said, the moment they tried to rail at him, and Raph doesn’t know what that’s even supposed to mean. Leatherhead is the one without right, keeping their brother from them. And as the crocodile mutant goes on, the words that follow make no more sense than the first.

They’re lucky, apparently, that Mikey said for Leatherhead to not lose it on them in one of his infamous rages. And Raph can tell that’s what Leatherhead wants to do, can practically feel the fury radiating off their friend- he knows anger, knows it so well, and his own is rising in tandem to meet Leatherhead’s head on.

...what the hell are you talking about?” Raph asks, and his words almost shake with how fucking pissed off he is right now; that violent flood of emotion barely covering the boggling confusion he’s feeling at the same time.

And with Leatherhead at his full height, towering over them, growling so loud it echoes in Raph’s bones- Raph- flinches, gets the hilts of his weapons in his hands, barely restrains himself from drawing them on a friend- Leatherhead is broad and armored thickly by his scales and he’s angry, he’s furious, and Raph’s never been scared of the crocodile, but for a split second, just for a moment-

Raph’s breath catches in his throat, abruptly feeling very much like he’s in serious danger.

“It’s not my place to explain,” is said, the shadow over Raph moving away from him. “Leave my home, and leave your brothers alone. That is all I have to say to you,” following a beat later, and Raph still can’t unlock his body.

For a very long moment, the feeling of being in some great threat’s looming shadow persists, and Raph can’t breathe at all.

But finally, once Leatherhead is out of the room, once he figures out how to inhale again, everything rushes back to him, and Raph lets the rage flow thick and burning.

But it’s not enough, all that anger and it’s still not enough to drown out the hurt, bury the betrayal he’s feeling. Leatherhead has always been Mikey’s friend more than Raph’s, though it still hurts, but Slash- Slash was Spike a handful of years ago, someone who might not have been able to answer back, but someone who Raph loved, could care about and hold and never find any one thing setting him off. Slash was Spike and Raph thought of all the Mutanimals, of all his friends, that he could trust the tortoise.

For almost the length of his life, up until Raph got careless, didn’t consider the consequences, completely fucked up and nearly got his brothers killed and lost his best friend in the process- until that night, and the months and years following, Slash was Spike and Spike was Raph’s anchor of comfort in a world that just felt too tight and dark sometimes.

And now, with Mikey gone, back out into the night and vanished like faded wind, Slash is standing in front of Raph and yelling back just as loud, just as angrily, defensive of his choices and his team and he just- doesn’t get it, doesn’t get the fact that Raph doesn’t care that Leatherhead threatened
to leave the team if they told about Mikey’s presence in their hideout, only cares that his family is in two pieces and he wants it whole again.

Mikey is his little brother and Raph wants him back, wants him and Donnie in the lair again, where Raph can see them and assure himself- none of them are going anywhere, there’s no one left to keep fighting against, no chance of them getting hurt and losing each other if they’re all together, they’re only strong as a team, and the thought of what could happen without Raph to be there for his brothers right now, out in the world, somewhere that might not be as secure and hidden as the stony echoing rooms they called home all their lives, is terrifying him down to his core. And he thought, he genuinely and implicitly thought he could trust Slash to understand that.

The fist to his face is as much a shock as Mikey and Donnie’s desertion had been.

Things are in fragments after that, filled with bursts of renewed anger and betrayal.

Never, not in a million years, would Raph have thought that Slash would tell him to just leave like that. Would just dismiss him like that. Choosing, after everything, after all the years Raph spent caring for him, talking to him, loving his pet like nothing else in the world- Mikey, over Raph, even just by way of wanting to keep Leatherhead with the Mutanimals.

As if not enough of Raph’s world has suffered upheaval.

Raph’s head whirls with questions- why would Mikey go to the Mutanimals over his own brothers, what could he have said to make Leatherhead so angry, how could Slash do this to him- and his chest is so tight it feels like he’s in a vice that just keeps tightening and tightening and tightening.

How could Slash do this. How could Leatherhead. How could Mikey.

He makes for his punching dummy the second they’re home, ignoring the burn of a cut on his cheek, ignoring how it got there. Focusing on making it to his last remaining anchor, the one thing in the whole world it feels like that’s just always there for him to come back to.

But, with his chest not expanding all the way, his lungs not getting enough air, his head awash with emotions of rage and sickening betrayal both-

His sais slice into it before he knows they’re in his hands.

Sand spews free of the deep stomach wound Raph’s dealt to his dummy, spraying the floor with grains of tiny rocks that had been difficult to obtain. The next slash Raph puts into the lifeless figure earns him a cloud of murky stuffing, coming from the joint of an arm.

This is all I have left, Raph thinks, distant and vague, recalling that it’d been one of the few more positive one on one training exercises with his father that lead to the dummy’s creation. Splinter and him, to mitigate the violent temper he struggled with and still does, building a safe target to take it out on. A long few evenings, putting together the punching dummy that would eventually be used by everyone, but most of all by Raph. A staple, a constant, like Splinter’s presence in their home.

Splinter is dead. Mikey and Donnie left their home. Leatherhead hates them. Slash betrayed him.

Raph tears into the remnant of his childhood, letting the memories attached to it be drowned by the aching fury he’s filled with.
He’s on the rooftop, he’s unable to stand anymore, he’s feeling cuts and bruises all over him- the wind is thick in his face, moving too fast to inhale properly, stealing air as fast as he can suck it down as he struggles to get back up.

Raph reaches- someone catches him, someone always catches him when he falters- and finds himself grasping at thin air. No one is at his side, she’s not here, she wouldn’t answer them and wouldn’t answer Casey and no one knows where-

April is gone, everyone else is gone, they left him- and he’s forced to watch Shredder stab his father through the back all alone, body failing him, strength failing him, failing, he failed again just when it was truly important-

It’s Raph’s hand connecting with the wall that jolts him out of the nightmare, fist loose and clumsy enough that it actually hurts him. Without his wrappings on, he’s scraped his knuckles. He can already feel the sting of the small injury.

Raph is uncomprehending for the length of eight shuddering breaths, so completely sure he’s still on that rooftop.

He’s shaky and weak as he sits up, trembling inside and out from the dream. It hurts, everything hurts, overly raw and torn on the edges. He doesn’t think it’s real; the safe darkness around him, the softly worn comforter over his legs, the snuffling nudges of Chompy against his side.

Numbly, Raph reaches over and turns on the lamp of his bedside table. His room feels alien to him; familiar but not. Everything is in its place, most of it possessions he’s had long as he can remember. Half the faded posters as old as he is, the drum kit in the corner battered but maintained carefully, and a hundred other objects that all come together to form somewhere Raph is supposed to be as familiar with as his own self.

It all feels off right now.

His hand is shaking still as he puts it on Chompy’s spiny shell. The internal forge of the little alien radiates through his scutes and scales, usually comforting, tonight as otherworldly as everything else feels.

Slowly, things trickle back into Raph’s mind. Why he feels so tired. Why he feels so out of it. Why something inside him is hurting, somewhere he can’t reach in and fix it.

Out of all the things that happened the night prior, hours ago, before the sun rose and Raph’s sleep devolved into the memory of him losing the person he thought was stronger than anyone-

Out of all those betrayals and hurts, the fact that he wrecked his punching dummy irreparably hits him sideways. And, like he’s some kid who’s broken a favorite toy, a sudden childish sadness sweeps over him.

Compared to everything, it really shouldn’t mean anything. And it was his choice. His fists and weapons. Raph tore it apart with his own two hands.

It still hurts.

His eyes fill, and Raph can’t even bother to wipe them as the stinging of tears slips over their
edges. He’s exhausted and hurting, and half of the reasons why are missing their answers.

Where did his brothers go? What did Mikey tell Leatherhead? Why won’t they just come home already? And why the hell did Raph do that, breaking one of the most important things he’d ever owned, ever been given by his father?

Chompy is whining, high and concerned, intelligent enough to know something is wrong with his owner if uncertain sure what, but clearly wanting it to stop. He’s trying to fix things, Raph is fairly sure, as Chompy moves out from under his hand to crawl onto Raph’s lap. Sitting there and tucking his legs under him, seeming to amp up the heat of his body—purring, a tiny little engine rumble, as he looks up at Raph and wags his tail tentatively.

For a moment, Raph sees the ghost of Spike in Chompy’s place.

Unable to stifle it fully, Raph chokes on a sob, and curls around the alien tortoise.

It hurts and it’s awful and Raph thought he was over the pain of losing Spike, of giving up ownership of the person his friend had become. Slash, a mutant, a person, a thinking being now but still someone Raph thought he could trust the same way.

Having Slash throw that back in his face brings up the wounds his first betrayal left, and Raph feels like he’s practically bleeding on the inside.

Chompy is trying, is trilling and purring and trying to make him feel better, but it’s not the same, not nearly the same as Spike’s quiet comfort had been. Raph loves Chompy, but- he had Spike since he was little, learned to be gentle with someone small and fragile with the tortoise in his care. It’s not the same, holding the hatchling of an alien species that’ll someday have the strength to crush cities. Chompy is precious and Raph’s responsibility and he loves him but he’s not Spike.

Spike doesn’t exist anymore. Hasn’t for years.

There’s only Slash, and Slash doesn’t love him the way Raph thought, hoped, he might still.

Raph cries, feels ashamed of that, and isn’t able to stop for a long time. He feels very, very alone, locked in his unfamiliar feeling room, hidden in a home that’s got too many missing people.

He doesn’t sleep well the rest of the day.

-/-

“Seriously?” is Casey’s response to recent events, after Raph and Leo split up for the rest of the night. Their search ended up pointless and fruitless and Raph really just wants someone who isn’t his brother to be with right now. He’s sick of Leo, sick of the empty rooms in the lair, and sick of feeling like everything he used to use as supports in his life are falling apart in his hands.

Six nights. Nearly six full turns of day and night since their brothers disappeared.

Raph’s insides twist in knots, made out of all the thoughts he’s having more and more trouble keeping under lock and key in his head.

“Yes seriously, they just tossed us out. Slash even- did this,” Raph says, pointing vaguely at the
healing cut across his cheek. It’s not deep enough to scar for long, but it’s itchy as his accelerated healing does its work. And it represents something that’s hurtful enough Raph can’t think on it right now.

Casey grimaces. “Jesus, and I thought you guys were tight. That’s shitty, dude.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Raph mutters, kicking a dirty t-shirt away from himself. Casey’s room is still a disaster, as usual, and maybe even worse tonight as he puts together his gear. Which, due to some of it being necessary for normal sports play, got scattered over the course of the week.

At least tonight is a night Casey can come out with him. Saturday, as empty as the results for locating his brothers had been, means Casey is free to spend the whole of the nocturnal hours out raising hell. It’s a happier note among a lot of sour ones in Raph’s life right now.

Casey finally locates his collection of explosive pucks under his bed, and stands up to drop them onto the pile of other gear. Glancing at Raph, he asks, “So… do you want to keep looking for Donnie and Mikey, or, you know. Do normal shit.”

“We already combed the Mutanimals’ territory, and I’ve been over ours,” Raph says, frustrated by the unsuccessful searches and getting more so with each night. “I doubt we’ll find any more clues there the first five times I looked.”

“Could we look around and kick some ass?” Casey suggests, and- right, he’s not as affected by this as Raph, isn’t feeling as pissed off by Mikey and Donnie’s game of hide and fuck-off-into-the-void. Casey still just wants to find Raph’s siblings, instead of find them and punch them in the face for everything that’s happened.

“Sure,” Raph agrees, because why not. He’s already wasted his whole evening searching for the two assholes, why not waste the rest of his night, too?

Maybe Casey will help Raph deal out the appropriate punishment whenever they run across his brothers. Casey still has that grudge against Donnie, right? Raph could just set the two of them on each other and deal with Mikey exclusively. Less work for him overall.

God he’s so fucking angry with his brothers. For them driving him nuts with worry of their well-being, for causing Leatherhead to turn on everyone, for being inconsiderate shits who won’t answer their phones and will, without a doubt, run into serious trouble eventually and get themselves hurt-

Raph shakes his head, brushing off the sudden sweep of worry and breathing in deeply to fight the tightness under his plastron.

“Ready to go?” Casey asks, having gotten ready at some point while Raph was thinking over other things. His friend already has his grappling hook out and ready to rappel to street level out his bedroom window; his assorted melee weapons on his back and mask perched up on his head. Raph manages to smile at that eagerness.

“Was just waitin’ on you,” Raph replies sardonically, and feels a little less like everything is wrong with his life, being able to slip into the normal bantering he has with Casey.

There’s not much to find in terms of crime tonight. They barely run into more than a couple teenagers, some of them barely that, trying to make themselves bigger and scarier than they actually are. All it takes is one look at Casey’s likely notorious skeletal hockey mask, and then a split second glimpse of Raph on the roofs of the buildings above them, and the teens hightail it
back to wherever they ought to actually be. Given how many years now Raph and his family have patrolled this area, and Casey, too, for almost as long, it’s unsurprising they know to back down before a fight even brews.

Raph still feels like it’s a weirdly quiet night, especially as they drift into rougher neighborhoods. They manage to beat up exactly two guys- one trying to stupidly mug Casey, the psycho with an arsenal on his back, and the other a wannabe carjacker, barely able to scratch the window before Raph slams his forehead against it.

It’s hardly a workout, and it’s only after they find a sketchy looking Purple Dragon recruit do they get any answers as to where the fuck everyone’s gone.

“I-it’s the Foot, okay? They’re- they’re out for blood tonight, an’ it’s got nothing to do with any of us!” says the guy, gurgles really, once Raph has him by the throat and against an alley wall.

He hears Casey knock his hockey stick against the ground, making a tank sound on the dirty concrete, and Raph presses his arm against the man’s throat a little harder. For good measure reminding him that there’s the tip of a sai poised to collapse his lung as well, poking through the shirt he’s wearing.

“Who’s blood?” Raph asks.

“Gkk- no- no one around here,” says the Dragon, whole shades paler now. It’s a good look for him. “They’re goin’ for some gang over northside, way outside o-our turf. Drug trade. So not our thing. We’re all just tryin’ to lay low and not draw attention to ourselves, okay? I was getting milk, man.”

Raph vaguely remembers a plastic bag being dropped on the pavement when they grabbed him, and huffs. If it hadn’t been for the sleeveless shirt he’d been wearing, exposing his tattoo, Raph admits he wouldn’t have paid the guy any attention.

“Cover up that eyesore if you don’t want us harassing you, then,” Raph sneers, and releases the guy. He steps back, watching the Dragon rub his throat and cough a little. “Or better yet, get it removed entirely. Unless you’re into getting your ass beat on a nightly basis.”

The Dragon doesn’t reply, just ducking away from Raph and Casey and hightailing it back onto the main street. Casey snorts, calling the gangbanger a pussy under his breath. Raph agrees with the insult; there’s so few criminals around anymore that can even get his blood going. At best, it’s like a light jog. In a weird and complicated way, a part of Raph really misses the enemies they used to throw down with.

But. A few of them he doesn’t. Not even a little.

As the time edges towards ungodly morning instead of ungodly nighttime hours, they call it. Raph gives Casey a solid fist bump before they part, and they promise to keep each other in the loop if either of them finds Raph’s brothers. Or figures out where the hell April’s gotten off to.

Leo’s on the couch when Raph arrives home; his brother clearly sulking about something. But, as Raph has had a disappointing patrol with Casey, found no trace of their siblings anywhere, and hasn’t quite forgiven his Sensei for being an utter ass the other night- he’s not inclined to ask why Leo looks so put out and grumpy.

He chooses to walk past Leo without acknowledgement of his brother’s sulky pout, and goes straight to his room to avoid any part in it. And if Leo really wanted attention anyway, he could have just called after Raph.
Whatever, it’s not actually Raph’s issue. Truth be told, with the mood he’s simmering in, he couldn’t give less of a shit why Leo’s upset about something.

-/-

Part of Raph thought it had been just a fluke, that Slash had just been a bit wound up and would come back around to their side of things.

The tortoise, his former best friend, remains stubborn about not going behind Leatherhead’s back and spilling the times when Mikey is around the hideout.

Slash tries, after a disastrous conference call where Leatherhead hangs up the moment Raph speaks, to placate them, remind them he honestly doesn’t know anything important about Mikey and Donnie’s whereabouts. Raph hardly listens; too busy clenching his fists and breathing through the offense of Leatherhead’s dismissal, of Slash’s continued loyalty to Raph’s brothers instead of him.

He’s got so many different threads of frustration and hurt and worry all tangled up in him, without any solid method anymore to work them off- his punching dummy, why the hell did he do that- and no end in sight of the way his entire fucking world keeps turning itself on its head.

Raph feels himself building up, almost constantly now. The threat of an explosion because he doesn’t have anywhere to vent anymore. His drum kit is only half a remedy, his walks with Chompy barely a few moments of peace- and with Karai’s Foot soldiers out in the night terrorizing the larger gangs and crushing the smaller ones, there’s only a handful of idiots still out and about for Raph to pick off.

And April is helping with that, helping with cutting off yet another one of Raph’s outlets. The most frustrating part of that is that she didn’t even tell them she was. The only reason Raph even knows, eventually, about where she’s been disappearing to is because of Leo coming home in a storm of emotions more suited to Raph.

“She totally disrespected my authority, completely disregarded that I’m her Sensei- can you believe that, Raph?” Leo demands, barely after telling Raph why he’s acting like someone shit in his cereal. “And Karai- I thought- I thought she’d finish what we started. I thought she’d pull the Foot out of New York completely and- I don’t know, go back to Japan, maybe disband the whole clan. But no, she’s just- spreading the influence of the Foot all over again, and April is helping her!”

Somehow, with almost every other person in his life turning on him, a part of Raph isn’t totally surprised that April’s switched sides.

It still- hurts. Like Leatherhead, like Slash. Like their brothers.

Raph always kind of considered April as a neutral party, in a weird way. Even if she was closer to Donnie than any of the rest of them, she never actually chose someone over anyone else. Stubborn of her own values and unwilling to get involved in petty scuffles; something Raph liked about her.

In very, very private moments, Raph used her as a base idea for what having a sister might have been like.

But Karai, whether they expected it or not, is their actual sister, and she’s gone and stolen April to her team instead of Raph’s. So fuck having sisters, actually.
Even if April claims it to be helping find Raph’s little brothers, it doesn’t change the fact that she didn’t *tell them*. April totally cut them out of her little plan, and only came forward about it when she got caught red-handed.

And Karai didn’t exactly drop a resignation letter off on behalf of April, so Raph is actually just as pissed with her as he is with April, and his brothers, and Slash, and Leatherhead, and basically fucking *everyone* in his life.

He’s so furious he thinks he might’ve cracked a tooth, grinding his teeth like he is. But. Underneath that fury… Raph feels a lot of betrayal, and it’s cutting deeper than he’d ever be comfortable admitting. He feels… abandoned.

He’s only got so many people in the entire world who accept who he is, as he is, and for what he is. And it’s those handful of people that he trusts; with his friendship, with his family, with all of their safety.

And here he is now. His brothers having run away without so much as a look back, their first friend *ever* walking away from the position in their family they gave her, the first mutant they ever met besides themselves spurning Raph and Leo for even speaking to him, Raph’s first and very closest best friend from a point in his memories that become blurry and aged siding all but *against* him in this dividing of their family- and it’s *not fair*.

What did they even do? What did he or Leo do to deserve this?

It doesn’t matter how much vitriol Raph texts his brothers, looking for a rise, backlash *something-* his messages go unanswered, and the days keep piling up.

Raph doesn’t even care anymore *why* his brothers left. He just wants them back so he can punch them in their faces for causing this all.

-/-

The rooftop is too wide, Raph can’t cross it in time. Even though he’s running fast as he can, it just keeps getting wider, and he’s alone again. Everyone left him, he’s the only one here and there’s no one to help him stop it, stop the inevitable blow that’ll shatter *everything* about his life and world and his family, they’ll lose *everything* if he can’t reach his father in time- please god let him *reach Splinter in time*-

But Raph is weak, he’s not strong enough, he’s barely able to force the ever stretching roof to let him cross a quarter of the distance- rain starting to come down fast and hard, lightning streaking the sky as everything *howls* at the tragedy in progress, and Raph- Raph *can’t*-

Splinter is impaled, body going rigid and then limp. Raph screams.

The world falls apart in broken pieces, rain blinding him, and it’s only after Raph’s knees hit pavement, his hands grasping at a soaked robe, that he realizes he finally made it to his father’s side.

They’re on the street, they’re out in the open, *anyone* could see them, they have to hide, have to get up and regroup, but Splinter-
He’s not moving.

Raph’s hands come away slick with red.

His father is dead.

His father is dead and Raph failed him.

He failed like he always fails and this time it didn’t just cost them a fight, didn’t just cause one of his siblings to get angry with him, didn’t just become yet another small mistake to blacken his record of attempts and failures-

Splinter is dead, and Raph’s failure is that; is losing his father, is failing just when it came down to the wire and this time. This time there’s no going back, no fixing this.

Raph can’t breathe, hands trembling as he touches Splinter’s chest again. The wounds are wide and ragged, torn worse by the Shredder throwing him off the roof.

Raph puts his hands over them, pressing down, trying to close the wounds. It just makes blood and flesh squelch under his palms, between his fingers- its hot and cold at the same time, rain pouring down on them both, and Raph- can’t breathe, can’t see clearly, can’t think of anything except that no, no no, Splinter can’t die, he can’t die like this, can’t die because Raph failed he couldn’t live with that on his consciousness couldn’t live knowing he let his father die right in front of him-

There’s the rain and lightning and everything feels like it’s burning as Raph watches red and red and more red bleed between his fingers as he pushes down, and it’s all pointless, the body is cold, Splinter is already gone, Raph is fighting a force not even his father could overpower, something no one can escape once it sinks its teeth into you, and it’s his fault, he failed, Raph failed and his father is paying the price for it and why won’t the blood stop please make it stop-

Raph comes out of the nightmare kicking and flailing, running into the wall as he scrabbles to find something solid to hold on to.

It’s dark in his room, the sounds filling it being his own harsh gasps and Chompy waking up from Raph’s vocalized terror. There’s no one here. He’s underground. He’s not in danger. There’s no rain falling on him to freeze his scales and no blood on his palms that burns and burns and burns as Splinter’s life escapes his grasps, fading, receding, not even death spasms left as he- as he-

Raph hears Chompy distantly squeaking and calling after him, as Raph bursts out of his room and stumbles away from the scenes trying to suck him back in. He sways, wiping at his hands even though there’s nothing there, it’s not real-

-rain and wind and lightning and a filthy street, his father’s corpse and sightless dead eyes staring up and up and far past Raph and everyone else around them-

Raph makes an aborted sound of pain, and has to get away from that. From- all this, the empty rooms and hollow halls and high ceilings that echo nothingness back at him because everyone is gone, there’s no one left, they abandoned him, betrayed him, and Raph- Raph can’t lose his brothers too, can’t live if he sees another of his family members die right in front of him-

He’s somewhere smaller, now, somewhere as dark as the lair and just as lonely. Ghosts are still following, clinging to his heels- Raph spent his whole childhood here, running the length of tunnels their father deemed safe and secure; spent days and nights and all the hours between roaming in the network of tunnels that never seemed to end. They’re so empty now, empty as the lair is- Splinter used to walk here, sometimes with Raph, mostly with Leo- long and slow jaunts
from their home, pacing the solitude of stone burrows that made up Raph’s entire world.

But Splinter is gone, has been gone for months now, and now his brothers are gone too. They’re out there somewhere and Raph doesn’t know why they left, how could they, not a single response to texts or calls, ignoring pleas and demands and threats they come home. Back where Raph can see them, can watch over them, can assure himself they’re okay, they’ll all be okay, the Shredder is dead, he can’t take anyone else from him, the Shredder is dead-

But there are so many others, practically everyone in the world is a threat. They’re mutants, they’re creatures, they’re freaks of nature and no one would turn a blind eye to that. Barely their friends, more than half of them enemies at first. And the government knows- they’re here, they exist, and who knows how long until the reports of the mutants appearing sporadically on the news are about one of them, one of Raph’s brothers, turning up on the wrong end of a gun’s bullet and bleeding out somewhere on the street, blood spilling out their wounds and slipping between Raph’s fingers and not again, not again never again please not AGAIN-

Raph’s shoulder hits the wall, his steps veering far left and his legs giving out as they do. The tightness in his chest is excruciating, clamping down on his lungs and throat, choking out any air he manages to inhale as he takes fast and shallow breaths. The dark of the tunnel keeps getting darker, his vision receding on the edges, and it hurts, he’s scared, he’s alone and he doesn’t know where his brothers are and they’ll die out there, they’re going to die and he’ll have to bury them too and he can’t, he can’t he can’t he can’t do that again-

Raph curls on himself, nails scratching against his plastron as he tries to inhale. It’s like something-is wrenching his insides, tearing everything up, leaving him bleeding places he can’t reach and filling his lungs with thick liquid instead of air. He feels like he’s dying.

It hurts, everything in his head and heart and chest hurts, and Raph can’t do more than choke and gasp as everything that fuels his nightmares rises up in vengeance and crashes down on him. His brothers are gone and they’ll die without him ever knowing, his friends won’t talk to him and he doesn’t know why, his father is dead and it’s because he failed just like always does- over and over, the thoughts tangling together and getting louder each time around- his brothers are dead and it’s because he failed, his father is gone and he doesn’t understand why, his friends won’t tell what’s going on and why they’re keeping his brothers away- they’re already gone they’re already dead Raph’s going to have to bury them all he failed he failed he failed-

Raph blanks out, lost in the static of terror and suffocation.

-/-

At some point, Raph realizes he can breathe again.

He’s been staring into darkness for who knows how long. And as he sits up from where he’d curled up on the cold ground, he feels the tackiness of dried tears on his face and the rawness of everything inside him.

Raph… doesn’t know what that was. Where any of that came from, or why it knocked him sideways so completely. He’s… used to those things, can handle those things… it shouldn’t have caused him to totally meltdown like that.
It’s embarrassing. Raph is alone in the dark tunnel, but he feels mortified anyway.

Even though a large part of him wants to just lie back down, let the things that’d dragged him there in the first place take hold again and sink his world into void- Raph forces his legs to work, and gets to his feet. He has to lean heavily on the wall at first, before pushing off of it; disgusted by his own weakness.

He drags himself back to the lair, pushing through the exhaustion now spreading throughout his body. Chompy is wandering the emptiness of their home, calling out mournfully for Raph and spitting flickers of flame from stress.

Raph manages to summon the energy to pick up his pet, cradling him close and sucking in a harsh breath at the heat of Chompy’s body. It starts to thaw the iciness of Raph’s hands, pushing back the numbness trying to settle into his head and limbs.

He feels… too tired to work up any sort of effort anymore. Not even anger, an emotion that’s been pulsing in him steadily since he read that damn note Mikey left them.

Raph just… wants to sleep.

Keeping Chompy close to his chest as he goes to return to his room, Raph blearily notes that the VCR player under the television says it’s nearly four in the afternoon. In less than four hours, his phone’s alarm will go off, and he’ll be expected to be up and ready for training.

Or, he would have been, a few months ago.

Splinter was the one who expected that of them, and now… with Mikey and Donnie gone, it’s just Leo here, and Leo seems to prefer his own company in the evenings to Raph’s.

Raph is too wrung out to even work up a spark of annoyance at that.

He takes his pet to bed, burrowing under his comforter and trying to blot out the world with fabric and a tiny purring heat source. Things are still out of place inside him, thrown into disarray by whatever… happened to him.

And he aches, somewhere deep inside his chest. Aches fiercer than almost any wound he’s ever received.

Raph sleeps restlessly, and isn’t able to rise from bed until long past his alarm goes off.

-/-

For the majority of the two weeks their brothers have been missing, Raph did his searches alone or with Casey. But they’re close to hitting another week’s halfway mark on top of those two weeks, and Raph… is feeling lonely, actually. Casey can only be out with him so many days of the week, and the quiet of the lair is starting to follow Raph everywhere he goes.

So he joins Leo on his randomly picked neighborhood combings; an extra pair of eyes upping the odds they’ll find something.

But, they find nothing, and despite how uncomfortably isolated Raph is starting to feel, he can’t
figure out how to talk with Leo anymore without a fight. It’s just- always something, some little thing that manages to set one or both of them off again. They’ve always fought, their positions as the A-team and older pair of siblings causing friction as they competed for attention and wins against each other- but this is different. It’s like… whatever let them get along, even in the moments when they really wanted to take a go at each other (or really, when Raph wanted to take a go at Leo), has just… broken down.

It’s because of their brothers, Raph reasons, simmering and growling after yet another fight with Leo over who’s doing dishes that night. It’s because Mikey and Donnie left and upset the balance of their home. It’s their fault, and the longer they hide away somewhere, the angrier Raph finds himself getting.

He sometimes feels like he’s always angry, on a level. But the moments when his temper flares are getting brighter and hotter, in a way that lashes back at him as much as it does at Leo. Raph doesn’t actually want to be this angry, but his brothers are making him. This is their fault, ruining the hierarchy and structure of their home, breaking up the team and leaving Raph and Leo hanging.

Raph is pissed off beyond belief in some moments, and can’t do anything more than send a stream of furious comments about his brothers’ behavior to them. To which they never answer.

Assholes.

They could at least pick a fight with him already, given the stuff he’s sent them.

So cowardly assholes, actually. Not just ditching them, but too wimpy to man up and face the music of what they’ve done.

After the umpteenth search Raph does with Leo, driving home in the Party Wagon without anything to show for the hours of work- Raph thinks that he’s getting to the point where he maybe just wants to find his brothers simply so he can tell them to get lost again.

“You guys just need some R n’ R,” Casey suggests later that same night; lounging on the lair couch and eating the leftovers that neither Raph nor Leo wanted to touch. Their cooking… isn’t exactly tasty. Somehow, probably because he’s got a thing for putting himself in danger, Casey has been eating a lot of the more inedible dishes they leave wrapped in the fridge.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Raph says dryly, slouching deeper into his beanbag, “our lives are kind of mostly R and R these days. Karai keeps stomping out all the good fights, and…” Shredder’s goons are all gone, and he’s dead, Raph doesn’t say, and doesn’t need to.

“Well… it might be easier to find some now, since she’s agreed to leave our territory alone,” Leo speaks up, entering the conversation for the first time since Casey arrived. Until now, he’s been on the far opposite of the couch and pretending he and his novel are too good to acknowledge Raph or their friend. Raph rolls his eyes, since it’s clear even to him Karai only ‘agreed’ to that because she’d already been planning it, and not because Leo whined at her for it.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Casey says, pointing at Leo with his spoonful of rice that’s practically glued together. “You just need something to unwind with, so let’s go lookin’ for an outlet, alright? I got some time before I gotta go home tonight.”

Raph wants to disagree that they don’t just need to ‘unwind’, but… hell, it’s not like they’re managing to get anywhere searching relentlessly. Slash and Leatherhead are still stonewalling them, April is just about MIA, since it’s only brief times during the day Casey sees her and the glimpses of her presence Leo notes in the Foot headquarters still, and in all that their brothers still
won’t re-establish contact.

Raph is almost tired of being pissed off, but so long as this all keeps happening, he’s more than likely going to maintain that mood.

(He’s so worried sometimes he feels sick, so freaked out after some nightmares he can’t breathe right until the sun sets, so completely certain something is going to happen to his brothers the longer this goes on that his hands shake and his throat constricts and he can’t think-)

“Why the fuck not,” is what he says, pushing the noise in his head back down. A fight, even just a light one, would be appreciated. After all, he’s still stepping on granules of sand ground into the cracks of the lair’s floor. He doesn’t exactly have a punching dummy anymore to work off the- pent up emotions (not stress, he’s not stressed, he’s fine).

In the end, they find a fight, they have said fight, and Raph comes out of it with a handful of bruises and feels exactly as miserable as he did going into it.

The lair is so cold and silent, with just him and Leo coming back to it.

-/-

Not even two nights after the brief scuffle with the four Purple Dragons, April stops responding to any text or call completely, and through Karai tells them to fuck off.

Raph wants to be surprised that April’s completely shut them out, but he’s not.

He wants to feel some form of shock, be able to claim he didn’t see it coming- but from how she’s been ignoring them, sticking with the Foot over anyone else, it just feels inevitable.

Leatherhead turned on them, and turned Slash as well, and their own brothers ran away- so why not April, too? Why the fuck not would the very first friend any of them ever had decide she’s done talking with them, done with so much as looking at them?

Raph hates her. Hates Leatherhead, hates Slash, and hates his brothers.

He hates all of them.

Hates Leo, too, for wandering around their home and seeming unable to pick a mood. Raph hates his brother for having nights where he’s acting like he’s some untouchable, unflappable master- which he kind of actually is and Raph hates that, too- and then having nights where he seems to look right through Raph for a second too long, starting to feel distant in a way that’s not due anymore to their hierarchy positions.

Raph hates his friends and his brothers, hates that his sleep is almost constantly riddled with nightmares, hates that his home feels too large, too empty, filled with just two voices and dust gathering on what remains of their brothers’ possessions-

It all hurts, cutting Raph up inside and keeping him feeling unbalanced. Without Mikey and Donnie, it’s begun to feel like he’s had two limbs cut off- phantom pain striking Raph in sporadic moments and causing a shock of electricity up his spine and through his hands. It’s a feeling whose cause is so wrapped up in tangling emotions that he can’t even tell which the root is anymore.
Then again, it actually all just traces back to his brothers running away.

It’s their fault; they’re the cause of the twisting, churning, sickening tightness inside him, and the cause of all their friends, one by one, turning away from Raph and Leo. There’s only Casey left, and Raph already feels a new knot of tension forming at the thought of his best friend leaving him, too.

Raph hates his brothers more than he hates anything else about this situation.

He desperately wants them to just come home already.

-/-

It’s been just over three full weeks since Mikey and Donnie disappeared, the night Casey comes into the lair with a tight expression on his face.

Raph feels his spirits pick up a little, and he turns down the volume of the TV as he rises to meet his friend at the entrance to the lair. For vague reasons Casey texted him, his friend has been unavailable for any kind of hang out time for a couple days now.

“Sup,” Raph says, offering a fist to his friend. Casey, hesitating for a weirdly long moment, takes one hand out of his hoodie’s pocket to return the gesture.

“Sup,” Casey replies, subdued in an abnormal way. Raph notes tension in his friend’s posture, the way he’s gingerly meeting Raph’s eyes and seeming to be looking for something.

“Hey, you feeling alright?” Raph asks, looking closer and seeing tiredness to Casey’s eyes. “You getting sick?”

“Uh, not… really. Just had too many drinks the other night,” Casey says, and the way he’s speaking sounds oddly careful.

“Is that where you’ve been?” Raph snorts. “You get grounded or something for getting shitfaced?”

“Nah, my dad’s not the type. He just tells me to be more careful with how much alcohol I ingest and to make sure I drink enough water.” He stops, running a hand backwards over his scalp and pressing down his already flat black hair. “Hey, Raph, I kinda-”

“Casey!”

Raph jerks his focus to the person entering the lair at nearly a run, her dully silver Foot clan armor shining under the lights. Automatically, his lip curls and Raph snaps, “Oh, so you feel like talking to us again? Could’ve just fucking called, April.”

April completely ignores him, marching right over to Casey and hissing at him, “We agreed, we told them we wouldn’t interfere!”

“I don’t care,” Casey hisses back at her, “and I already told Don I was gonna to this anyway-”

“This isn’t our place to-”

“They’re our friends, he’s my best friend, of course I’m gonna-”
“Wait,” Raph interrupts, grasping a name thrown out in the conversation and feeling his fury switch gears from April to- “Casey, you talked with Donnie? What the fuck! You said you tell me if you found them, and- April, you. Did both of you find them and not-?”

The flash of guilt in both his friends’ expressions is enough to confirm Raph’s accusation.

Raph is actually struck silent for a second, completely and utterly betrayed that not just April, but Casey kept his brothers’ location from him. His brothers, who he’s been worried about for weeks, and they had the nerve to-

“How- what the FUCK?” Raph yells at them, clenching his fists and drawing himself up. “How could you do that? You know how worried we’ve been, and you just- just didn’t tell us where our brothers are? Fuck you!”

“It got complicated, okay?” Casey defends sharply, and Raph hates that his human friend is taller than him, can look down on him right now. “April knew an’ she told me an’ I went on my own. She didn’t even want to confront them, but I. I was trying to fix things, alright? I was just lookin’ for answers for you guys and things got- Donnie…”

“Donnie what?” Raph demands as his fists tremble in anger.

“Casey,” April cautions again, tone even harsher than the first time, and Casey still waves her off.

“Look, Donnie told me some stuff, a lot of stuff, an’ then I talked a little with Mikey later, and…” Casey swallows, distinctly uncomfortable. “They said that why they left was ‘cause of how you and Leo treat them.”

“…what?” is all Raph can manage to say, incredulous of the statement his friend just made. Honestly? Seriously? “You’re kidding, right?” he asks, staring at Casey, then at April.

Why are they looking at him like that? Why do they look so grim?

“Raph… you ever notice how much you hit Mikey?” Casey asks in a low voice, one that’s more careful than any other tone he’s ever used, and Raph-

“Are you being serious right now?” he says, taking a step back from both humans. Something like humor bubbles up in him, and he nearly lets out a furious laugh. Because of course, of course. “You’re telling me they disappeared like this, turned every fucking friend we’ve got between us against me an’ Leo, have ignored every single god damn text or call we send them- because I hit Mikey?”

“Yeah, and ‘cause of other reasons, but that’s a big one,” Casey replies, and why the fuck is he looking at Raph like that?

Raph’s temper roars in his ears, humor draining away to become tried and true annoyance with his dumbass youngest sibling. “Of course it was somethin’ stupid, I can’t believe it. Actually, no, I should’ve known. That’s just like him, makin’ something small out to be this big overblown deal- I give him a smack and he does this? And drags everyone else into it with him? All of this, all of this, and it’s ‘cause Mikey felt like being a shit about some stupid fight.” Raph throws up his hands, so furious he wants to find Mikey right this second and give him a real reason to be upset about getting hit. “I should’ve hit him harder! If he wanted to make a big deal then he should’ve told me! I swear to god, none of you should’ve listened to that dumbass, this is just more of his bullshit fucking up my life and making literally everything more aggravating than it needs to be-”

Casey hauls off and punches him without warning.
Raph hits the floor, so surprised by the blow he couldn’t even correct his fall to land right. For a
drawn out moment, he’s stuck there. Processing what’s just happened. Touching his cheek, the
very same one Slash hit a few weeks ago- and Raph just. Doesn’t understand what’s going on.

Casey hit me, Raph thinks, and lifts his eyes to stare at his friend.

Casey is red in the face, breathing harshly, and Raph doesn’t recall his friend ever turning so much
anger on him.

“What kind of person,” Casey spits, words rising into a shout, “says that about his own brother?”

Raph doesn’t understand.

“What?” is all he can manage to say as April drags Casey backwards, the both of them yelling at
each other, at Raph- and Casey- Casey’s still shouting furious things at him, fighting April’s grip to
get at Raph again, maybe to hit him again, maybe to just scream in his face, and Raph just doesn’t
know why.

“Fuck you! You- you’re my best friend and you think that’s okay? Why the fuck- I thought you
were- you were supposed to-”

What?

“Casey! You promised me-”

Raph doesn’t-

“You were supposed to prove me wrong! You were supposed to own up to it and- and-”

Prove him wrong? How? What did he-

“Casey!!”

Raph can’t even summon anger, he’s just- confused-

“Fuck you! Fuck you for that shit you pulled! Fuck you for being an abusive dickwad and thinking
its okay-”

“CASEY!” April shouts over Casey’s stream of insults, hauling him by his hoodie backwards from
Raph and saying, “You promised me you’d let them handle this themselves. This is Donnie and
Mikey’s fight- not yours."

“He’s my best friend,” Casey snarls, and at that- his furious expression breaks, cracks of something
painful leaking through. “He’s my best friend, and I didn’t see shit.”

The look he casts at Raph, one made from anger and hurt and- betrayal, twisting into something
that makes Raph feel very small for having it turned on him.

It’s an expression that seems to be hurting Casey as much as it is Raph.

And he doesn’t even understand why it’s on his friend’s face to begin with.

Even as Casey turns his ire on Leo, Raph’s brother interrupting things too late to even try and stop
them. Even after April shoves Casey out of the lair, turning one last pitying and grim look on them
before walking out herself. Even after Leo approaches Raph in slow steps, kneeling next to him
and putting a hand on his shoulder, asking what just happened, why were they here, why did Casey
do that, Raph-

Can’t manage to say another word before his friends leave, and feels like the last remaining part of his life that made any sense, the very last friend he’d been certain (hoping) wouldn’t turn on him too, has just been yanked from his grasp like everyone else was.

-/-

Casey won’t reply to any of Raph’s texts, in the hours following. Raph stares at his phone, stares at yet another message chain filling up with his words and his words alone- and doesn’t get it. Doesn’t understand.

Abusive, Casey called him. But- that’s not right. Raph might get annoyed with them, might feel like he can’t stand to be around them a second longer than he has to some nights- but he doesn’t want to wilfully hurt his siblings, he doesn’t want to abuse them. He doesn’t hate them. Raph loves them enough that even after three weeks of silence he’s still texting them, still asking for them to come home- spending half his nights worrying about their well-being, concerned the time that they’ll slip up will come before he can find them, that he’ll have to get the news of their location after the tragedy’s happened and he’s too late to do anything to save them-

Raph loves his brothers. Sure, he might smack Mikey upside the head, but that’s justified. It’s to keep Mikey in line, remind him to shut his mouth when he’s acting stupid. Raph loves Mikey; he’s not abusive towards his brother.

Right?

Casey doesn’t reply to his texts. Mikey doesn’t reply to his texts. No one gives Raph the answers he desperately, desperately wants.

-/-

Days pile on top of days, nights pile on top of nights; weeks flow by and Raph doesn’t think he’s ever been as lonely as he is now.

Even when it was just his family, before he and his brothers ever broached the subject of traversing the surface alone- it wasn’t this quiet in his world, so spacious for all the wrong reasons. Raph had blotted it out from the start, repressed his awareness of it, but the lair is just so empty without Mikey and Donnie in it. Raph, with Casey’s withdrawn friendship, feels like he’s existing in a vacuum of space.

There’s just him and Leo, now. The shrine of their father, which Leo has taken to sitting in front of for hours, doesn’t count.

Raph’s life has always been made up of scavenged things, patched up things; stolen baubles and hoarded moments that are all strung together to form the hidden life of a mutant turtle. But even if it isn’t exactly glamorous, is built with just what he’s been able to have in a world that would kill him if it got the chance- it’s still his, and that all goes for his family, too.
They’re creatures, they’re animals given minds of their own- they’re mistakes of fate that got a chance to have purpose, being ninjas and brothers and a family together. Even if all the rest of the world hates them and sees them as monsters, at least they always had each other. At least they had that one, true, unconditional source of love.

And now what do they have?

It’s been four weeks, and Raph wants to say they have nothing.

And part of him is terrified at that, cold in the bottom of his soul at the thought of losing his brothers not just like this, but permanently. His friends he could handle, probably, maybe, having them leave him; they lived such an enclosed and limited life before meeting April and setting everything in motion. Maybe, probably, Raph could go back to that. But not without his brothers, not without two people he’s shared every single moment of his life with- up to the point they left him.

Raph can’t imagine his life without his brothers. He just can’t. He’s living it right now, that future, a life without Mikey’s obnoxious exuberance and Donnie’s nit-picky attitude- and he can’t comprehend it fully. Their rooms have been empty for weeks and he’ll catch himself still waiting to hear a voice chime in on a conversation, for someone to demand a turn with the television, for either of them to come into his space and bug him with something inane and ridiculous, and exactly none of those things happen.

Their silence persists, refusal to even acknowledge what Raph sends them through text; or what messages he’ll leave, when it’s late in the day and his dreams won’t let him rest and he just. Can’t handle being alone here, spending those bleak hours being convinced by everything horrible in his head that they’ll die, be killed without Raph and Leo to back them up when the time comes- and still, they don’t answer.

No one is answering Raph anymore, save for Slash, sometimes. Raph is still hurting, still nursing a wound deep in himself that stems from Slash’s unwillingness to help him more. But Slash is the only one still talking to him even somewhat anymore, and…

Raph is sinking into a place, bit by bit, where even as his anger builds, and his frustration mounts, and his urge to find his brothers and finally shake them until they apologize or explain or something, give him something to let him understand what the hell they’ve done to their lives- even with all those familiar and desperate emotions fueling his unpredictable rages, the choking, constricting sensation he used to get only sometimes is making itself home in him. It’s dragging him down, disturbing his sleep to the point he can barely get any, and leaves echoing thoughts that are just so convincing he can’t ignore them.

Raph can’t imagine a life without his brothers, all three of them, at his side.

But if this continues, Raph doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to forgive Mikey or Donnie for what they’ve done. Maybe to the point he just won’t even want them around any longer.

Maybe they should just stay away permanently, and once the silence, and the emptiness, and the holes in their battle formations fill themselves naturally- Raph will get used to them not being here, and finally be able to move the fuck on with his life without them. They didn’t want to stay anyway, apparently, so why should he want them to come back at all?

(Those are the lies he tells himself. They barely soothe the aching loneliness, or wounds of betrayal.)
It’s already been close to seven weeks before Raph even notices.

The days and nights are blurring, the way his sleep is so disturbed and his waking hours filled with a hundred little things driving him mad. And without many of his friends all that willing to so much as breathe the same air as him, Raph doesn’t have anyone to distract him from the most aggravating parts of his existence.

One of those things being the behavior of Leo, who has all but withdrawn into himself. The rare times Raph can manage to get even half a rise out of his brother, the fight peters off into unresolved silence. It’s like all his Sensei can do anymore is meditate and ask their deceased Sensei’s shrine for guidance. Leo, at one point, claimed Splinter visited him after they buried their father. Given that the time of their father’s passing involved Leo acting very much like he is now—hollow eyed, distant, rarely uttering more than a handful of sentences—Raph is really beginning to question how right in his head Leo was then, and is now.

Some leader Leo makes in this sorry state. Not only did two of his students/team members disappear from under his nose, but the other two defected a scant few weeks later. Raph is the only one left, but he sure isn’t looking to Leo for any sort of guidance any longer. He just lives here, unfortunately, in their house full of ghosts and empty rooms.

(Raph is ignoring that he didn’t notice anything amiss, either. It’s not his fault, he’s not the leader, it’s not his responsibility to provide guidance to anyone, and he’d probably do a poor job anyways. The team hothead trying to lead everyone? Raph can barely lead himself, let alone multiple people. They all know that, Raph best of all.)

After over a month of this, the isolation, the stonewalling, and the boredom of being at least mildly miserable almost every moment of the night—Raph is worn down, admittedly. Even if it’s still there, still simmering and shifting under everything else, just like always, not even he can remain angry 24/7. Though majority thoughts of his brothers crossing his mind still manages to spark a fair amount of annoyance, even with time stretching between their disappearance and the present evening.

It’s been well over a month since Mikey and Donnie left, abandoned them, and Raph has started to notice thick dust gathering in their rooms. The familiar scents that their bedrooms held before are fading into nothing; becoming just musty, the same scent the rest of the lair has. If any more time passes, Raph wonders if he’ll even be able to remember properly what their rooms are supposed to be like.

Part of him wonders if they have new bedrooms, now. If those bedrooms are anything like the four essentially identical stone rooms they’d lived in their entire lives. If their rooms are bigger, or smaller, or even made of stone at all. For the most part, Raph hopes his brothers have terrible new living quarters, and are suffering through damp and dank conditions that make them rightly miserable for running away.

(And how quick would their health take a turn, living like that? How likely is an unsecure location to be discovered by the wrong people? Those are just two of the hundreds of worst paths for this to take and Raph buries them under the anger, along with any desire for his brothers to come home.)
After a brief look in on Leo’s condition of the night- again, sitting in front of their father’s altar, somewhere between meditation and being completely checked out from reality- and Raph decides that between his brother’s listless mood and the as usual unappetizing food in the fridge, he might as well just head out for the next seven or eight hours.

If he’s up and moving, it’s less likely that his chest will tighten or his hands will start to tremble slightly. If Raph has something to do, something that occupies his thoughts and body both, then it’s like there’s nothing different about his life. If he’s out searching for someone to pick a fight with, or lurking in the presence of the two remaining people who will tolerate him, or checking on his pigeon flocks, then Raph is fine. He’s a perfectly functional, if somewhat lonely, person. He just has to keep himself busy until he’s tired out enough sleep is possible, and he can collapse for a few hours before his mind antagonizes him awake again.

He kind of feels like shit for using those methods, running himself ragged so he can sleep almost dreamlessly, but the burden of achy limbs and occasional headaches is worth it. And it’s not like he really has anyone to spar with anymore- it’s boring fighting one person over and over, and Leo doesn’t even want to spar these days- or even his punching dummy to beat up, seeing as its shredded remains were taken out in the trash weeks ago.

So, spending the bulk of the night roaming is the only remaining solution.

It’s better than giving into the urge to just curl up in his bedroom, leave the lights off and his phone as well, and just not get up at all.

If it wasn’t for Chompy complaining loudly about his routine being interrupted and his meals being late, Raph almost does, some nights.

His pet has been fed and walked already, so Raph leaves the lair without guilt for doing so. He’ll spend the hours it takes to fall asleep after sunrise playing with Chompy, which will satisfy the tortoise’s energy levels after napping most of the night in Raph’s absence. And with that tether in place, to eventually draw Raph back into the echoing halls of his home, he climbs into the seat of the Stealth Bike and starts it up, driving out of the lair’s garage with a dull roar. The automatic doorway out of the tunnels still works, opening as Raph approaches it, but it’s at a slower rate than it used to. He thinks, somewhere in the noise of the bike’s engine, that the doors might be making an unpleasant screeching sound as they pull upwards.

But Donnie isn’t here to fix the sound, and Raph doesn’t know any more about how to fix it than he did before his brother left. So he leaves it be, and hopes it’ll still work when he comes home.

Cruising the streets, Raph figures he’ll take the Stealth Bike to the far edges of their territory. He’s planning on paying Slash a visit anyway, and the Mutanimals’ hideout is enough of a distance from the lair Raph feels warranted in bringing the bike. Close to a half hour of lazy driving later and Raph leaves the Stealth Bike in an alley and takes to the rooftops; setting out for his solo patrol.

As is the trend lately, there’s hardly anyone out causing trouble. Even with Karai keeping her influence out of their turf, it still leaks in. Things between gangs are downright civil these days, what with almost all of them either paying tribute to the Foot, or outright being taken over by Raph’s half-sister. What’s left over for Raph are petty criminals, unaffiliated and sometimes just sad to beat up.

Raph doesn’t like taking a fist to someone who’s doing something out of desperation instead of malice; it sits uncomfortably in him the hours afterwards, the greyness of the conflict leaving more to think on than he’d want. And thinking is something he’s trying to avoid.
If Karai didn’t have April settled into the ranks of the Foot, Raph would be tempted to go looking for a job with them. But, since he and April are on the far opposite of speaking terms, Raph thinks he’ll just keep on resenting Karai for stealing all the good fights.

Thinking of April makes Raph think of Casey, which causes a bolt of hurt to go right through him, which resurrects the hot pain connected with Mikey and Donnie’s abandonment, and Raph is forced to call his largely uneventful patrol to escape it all. Returning to the Stealth Bike, he decides to go see Slash. They’re not… back to how it’d been, before all this, but Raph doesn’t find himself yelling at his friend as much as he did at the beginning.

It’s not ideal, but Slash is the only person besides Murakami who’ll talk with him most nights. And while the blind chef is a good friend, Murakami is human and old as hell. Slash is closer in age to Raph… kind of. Its close enough, and Slash had the same origins as Raph; a pet turned into a person. It’s stifled in moments, with their loyalties still diverging, which both hurts and inspires tooth gritting fury, but it’s tolerable for the sake of company.

Slowing his bike in front of an entrance to the hideout, Raph waits for the subtle bleep of the camera to recognize his presence, alert someone inside, and for that someone to open the door. Another few seconds, during which Raph drums his fingers irritably against the handles of the Stealth Bike, and finally someone unlocks the reinforced blast door.

After the Shredder broke in and totaled their old hideout, the Mutanimals went all out with the design of their next one. Similar enough to the first that they could pirate surviving parts and adapt them, but with all the holes in their security patched airtight. Most of the reused materials don’t even smell like ash anymore.

Raph remembers how, during the weeks of the move, he and his brothers and their friends had all pitched in to help every way they could. It’d been something to focus on, something to distract them from the absence of Splinter in their lives. Often, it’d been easier to just crash on a lumpy couch than it was to go home.

Raph doesn’t miss those weeks, but he does miss having something physical and straight forwards to do.

He leaves the Stealth Bike pushed to the far side of the back entry, which had been a loading dock before the warehouse’s conversion. Taking care at first to make sure he doesn’t cross paths with Leatherhead as he wanders inwards, Raph shakes himself of the reflex and walks confidently. He’d welcome a chance, finally, to just take the croc on and put an end to how Leatherhead circles him when he’s in the hideout; watching, subtly threatening…

Why can’t people just pick a fight instead of drawing things out? Raph would welcome both Leatherhead and his brothers just coming straight out to say what the hell their deal is. Give him a clear explanation already.

Mikey still hasn’t answered a single text, even following Raph asking what Casey’s comment of abuse was supposed to mean. Raph hates his brother for that, hates everyone for that.

Just. Explain, plain and honest, and pick the god damn fight with him already. That’s what he wants from people, so this can all just be over with.

Raph hasn’t gotten that yet, no matter what angle he tries to get a rise out of his siblings. It’s more than enough to get a rise out of him instead.

Raph brushes those thoughts aside, coming out of the hallway and into the open main room. Slash
is there, alone, and Raph is both offended and grateful for that. Dr Rockwell avoids him as much as Mondo does, following Leatherhead’s lead. Which, ironically, is like what April and Casey are doing with Raph’s siblings. Even though neither Leatherhead nor Mikey and Donnie are the leaders of their teams, people are still following them instead of their real leaders: Leo and Slash.

It’s all very frustrating, extremely so, and Raph has gone over the facts of it plenty times already. He chooses, instead of dwelling the umpteenth time on the behavior of everyone else, to engage in a conversation with Slash.

They don’t actually have a ton to speak about, having very few intersections of interests, but still. It’s *conversing*, with another real person, and Raph is so done with trying that with Leo. Let Leo drag himself back to functioning like a normal person, and *then* Raph will start spending time around his brother again.

*Let all* his brothers come crawling back, eventually, and maybe, *maybe* he’ll let things return to normal with minimal punishment for this bullshit.

And, as the saying goes, *speak of the devil…*

…and he shall appear.

The clatter of a skateboard isn’t out of place, with Mondo Gecko living here, but Raph still checks over his shoulder, to identify the cause of the board being dropped and evaluate if it’s anything to be concerned about. It’s just *habit*, ground into him by mistake after mistake of not being observant enough of his surroundings. Better safe than sorry.

The eyes Raph meets are not brown with green sclera.

They’re blue on white, and wide as Raph’s are going.

For the first time in well over a month - Raph sees his little brother.

Who looks like he’s been cornered by an enemy, and not simply spotted by his seriously worried brother.

Mikey takes a step back.

Raph finally gets his mouth to open, and manages to say, “Mikey?”

His brother turns and starts running.

“*Mikey!*”

-/-

Raph chases Mikey, but-

He never even gets close to catching him.

Mikey, as Raph had somehow forgotten, is *good* at escaping. Good at outrunning and outwitting opponents when they’re on his tail. Without even so much as a glance back, Mikey darts through the patches of light from overhanging streetlights in the alleys. Raph follows, hopping over trash
and broken glass, and even as he pushes and pushes and pushes himself, the gap between him and his brother never shortens.

“Mikey! MIKEY!” Raph yells, and he can’t even spare a thought for how they’re drawing attention to themselves, alerting every person with working ears nearby they’re here- all he can think of is catching Mikey and never letting him go again. But- Mikey keeps getting further and further away, feet barely seeming to touch the ground as he sprints, and- why, why is he running-

“Just wait a second,” Raph pleads, shouting across the distance Mikey keeps increasing, “where are you going?!”

His brother doesn’t even look backwards at him.

The chase is scarcely more than a few seconds, maybe a minute at the most- and then Raph’s vision is blinded by a smokescreen exploding in his path. He inhales sharply, surprised by one of their best defenses turned on him, and chokes as he’s forced to jump backwards from it. By the time it’s clear enough he can look around without watering eyes, and has stopped hacking up his lungs-

Mikey is long gone.

Raph doesn’t even spare time to let his throat recover from the smoke, sucking in a breath and bellowing for Mikey to come back.

The only other movement around him is the dissipating smokescreen, wisps drifting off into the night wind and leaving Raph alone in the alley.

Raph turns in a circle, eyes skittering from one possible path to the next- he’s still yelling for Mikey, on autopilot with his words, trying to multitask figuring out which direction his brother might have gone-

“MIKEY! MIKEY WHERE ARE YOU?” he demands, and Raph- can’t tell, can’t pick a rooftop out of the buildings around him his brother might have chosen, or a manhole he could have dropped into, or- anything, he doesn’t know which of any of the options Mikey could have chosen. Raph just doesn’t know-

A window of a worn down apartment complex shunts open, a human woman sticking her head out to likely shout at Raph to shut the hell up. Her words clearly die in her throat as she gets a look at Raph below; expression blanching and mouth twisting into something between horrified disgust and outright fear.

For a split second, Raph’s whole body locks up at one of the most fundamental rules of his existence being broken: don’t ever be seen by humans.

The woman screams, and Raph jolts out of his frozen terror. His head and body alight with fear and stinging shame, Raph rushes to find a puddle of darkness and vanish from sight. Firmly swept up in the instinct to flee, Raph scales a fire escape faster than he can even properly process, and books it across four rooftops before he can stop himself. It’s only there that he can throw his shell against an AC unit, sides heaving and thoughts whirling.

With barely a glance around, he knows he hasn’t picked the same escape Mikey did from him. The roofs of the buildings around him are completely barren of life or movement, and Raph is alone with the extremely unnerving experience of being seen and the knowledge of having let his brother get away.
As intangible as the smokescreen had been, Raph’s brother has just slid from his grasp a second time, without a single word as to why.

Shaken, by both his brother running away again and being seen by an ordinary human- Raph inhales, ignores the way part of his brain is devolving into static, and starts running again.

He does a loose, sloppy circle of where Mikey disappeared. Raph can’t manage more than that; he already knows it’s too late. Mikey has already no doubt fled the scene, and is again lost in the urban wilds of New York. There’s no convenient trail to pick up, no clues which direction Mikey came from in the first place- there’s nothing, not even a telltale slip of noise that Mikey inevitably always makes.

At some point, Mikey mastered stealth without Raph noticing, and it’s distinctly ironic that he’s learning of the accomplishment in this way.

As Raph gives up the search, he lets a violent sweep of fury cascade over him. He has no hope of finding Mikey like this, not without a significant amount of luck and a coordinated team effort. And that pre-emptive failure burns in Raph, bringing back to life the smoldering coals of hurt and anger that have been with him since the first night, and the flames of those coals flare high and scorching.

He’s angry, Raph is furious- how dare Mikey do that, why would he do that- none of it makes sense and that’s just so Mikey, never listening properly, always screwing up everything, a constant unending annoyance that just won’t shut up or stop bothering Raph and pushing him right over the edge over and over and over- Why did he run? Why in hell after over a month of hiding and ignoring them would Mikey just- turn tail without a word and sprint like his life depended on it? It doesn’t make sense, Raph’s two brothers abandoning him doesn’t make sense, their friends turning one by one on him doesn’t make sense, none of it makes any fucking sense at all-

Raph storms back into the Mutanimals’ hideout, taking the most direct route back to his bike. Slash, briefly, tries to talk to him as he passes through- Leatherhead emerging from an adjacent hallway to the main room and looking at Raph, eyes following him, accusing him- and Raph snaps at Slash almost immediately, nerves shot and temper out of control.

Raph ignores his friend’s calls after him, ducking his head and marching to the back exit where the Stealth Bike is. He doesn’t want company right now, certainly not from people who’ve been aiding and abetting his brothers in their ridiculous fucking runaway scheme.

He slams the button to lift the blast doors, and Raph kicks the Stealth Bike into gear barely after getting into its seat. With just enough room to fit, he drives out the still opening doors and lets the engine join the roar inside his head.

Raph drives aimlessly, mad at Mikey, mad at the world- mad at himself, for not being quick enough, for failing to grab hold of his little brother and demand a real explanation for all this instead of one shittily written note.

But it’s not his fault, Mikey and Donnie are the ones who came up with the plan to run away, they’re the ones who’ve been keeping their family divided, they’re the ones who’ve caused all this drama and worry and frankly fucking ridiculous situation as a whole. And Raph is beyond furious now, beyond willing to forgive being ignored and hidden from for over a month, and when he gets his hands on his brothers, on Mikey for this latest stunt, he’ll- he’ll-
“Raph... you ever notice how much you hit Mikey?”

Raph nearly drives through a red light, skidding to a stop just short of hitting late night traffic driving by. His arms are trembling from how hard he’s gripping the bike’s handles, and the constricting force around his chest is steadily returning.

It’s not like that, Raph doesn’t know what his brothers told Casey, but it’s not like that. He loves them, they’re his only family, he’d do just about anything to keep them safe- how can he be abusive? Casey is wrong, it’s not like that, he wouldn’t ever-

A car honks angrily behind him, and Raph snaps back into reality; gunning the Stealth Bike forwards again and taking off in a different direction. He’s barely aware that he’s driving further and further from his roaming grounds, too caught up in the unyielding storm of emotions and thoughts in his head.

He needs- something physical to hit, something to clear away everything roiling in him. There’s got to be somewhere to find a good fight, Karai might be scary but she’s not omnipresent. Someone in this city is bound to be still fighting against her, and Raph is determined to find that someone.

Anything to distract him from his thoughts, from failing yet again, from Mikey-

It’s after a long smear of time and streets, Raph rides past a warehouse that’s got one too many cars parked around it to be empty. He pulls off the main street quick as he can, quieting the engine and sliding out from under the bike’s overhang. He’s ended up towards the docks, the not too distant scent of sea water permeating the air. The perfect area for illegal overseas trading.

Raph climbs up the side of the nearest building, leaving the camouflaged Stealth Bike behind a large dumpster. Its rookie level stealth to get on top of the warehouse and Raph doesn’t second guess himself for being suspicious of it; no one who legitimately works around here can afford cars that nice.

And peering through the murky skylight, Raph makes out a few dozen men and women in expensive looking suits. They’re not with Don Vizioso, though. Raph knows that gang only recruits Italians or whites; the people below are all Asian, and he’s pretty sure the fragments of voices making it through the glass are in Mandarin.

No visible markers for who they’re affiliated with, which is a tip off they’re higher up than average gangbangers. The more power you wield, the less you need to advertise it. The people who actually need to know who you are will, and whoever doesn’t probably will take less than a swat to get rid of.

A flash of abnormal green catches Raph’s eye, and his attention is drawn to what’s been set out on the table for trade negotiations. It only takes a split second to identify the items as one of the most unpredictable and dangerous substances in existence: mutagen.

The figure looming over the table, arms crossed and single eye trained on the woman he’s speaking with, is the second abnormality to the scene. Now dressed in a suit, bespoke and stark black, is an individual that haunts Raph’s memories as often as any of their most dangerous enemies.

Tigerclaw.

The skylight shatters under Raph’s feet, and he plummets down onto the stacks of shipping crates. He’s got a war cry ripping out of his throat before he’s even consciously made the choice to attack.

Tigerclaw spots him immediately, hand going to draw the gun no doubt hidden under his suit
jacket- and Raph stops him from shooting by grabbing the nearest well-dressed grunt and tossing him right at the other mutant. Tigerclaw raises his arms to catch the unconventional attack and Raph uses the seconds of distraction to grab the lip of the table and upend the cases of mutagen.

Instantly everyone scatters, sharp cries of warning about the few canisters that have cracked in the fall. Raph is used to avoiding dangers like a mutagen spill, and takes advantage again of the chaos to attack Tigerclaw- drawing his sais in a fluid movement as he immediately brings them up to stab through Tigerclaw’s stomach.

Unfortunately, even though the tiger mutant prefers long range attacks, Tigerclaw is no slouch with hand to hand combat, and stops Raph’s jab before his sai’s tip can even put a run in the jacket. Raph disengages, avoiding risk of being pulled into a lock by the stronger mutant.

With small mutagen puddles spreading across the concrete around them, Raph has to put half his focus into keeping away from the toxic swirling green. Tigerclaw growls at him, feet apart in a defensive position and already starting to stalk around Raph.

“Whelp,” Tigerclaw hisses, drawing his gun and putting a claw on the trigger.

“Cat scat,” Raph taunts, and spins his sais with exaggerated casualness. “I thought we already kicked your stubby excuse for a tail enough that you’d finally fucked off.”

“I am not so easily intimidated by a group of teenagers still wet behind the ear,” his opponent snaps, and Raph gives a feral grin.

“Last I remembered, we killed the Shredder, who was your boss and the most powerful dickhead around these parts.” Raph follows Tigerclaw’s example, stalking a circle around the mutagen spills and keeping Tigerclaw as far from his person as possible. “So, I don’t know about you,” Raph sneers, almost high on the return to this, this, the feeling of life or death fights and purpose, “but that sounds like a damn good reason to be intimidated.”

Tigerclaw curls his whiskered lips, revealing thick fangs in his mouth. He raises a single hand, and the collection of humans having drawn guns as well stop where they stand; Raph hadn’t even noticed them getting into position, too focused on the fight with Tigerclaw.

“Why have you come to aggravate me like this?” Tigerclaw asks.

“Because you’re an evil douchebag who deserves a beatdown any time, for any reason,” Raph snarls, their last battles surfacing from his memories- as clear as they’d been in the moment, Tigerclaw, ever the second in command of Shredder’s mutant soldiers, standing at his psycho boss’s side right up until the end of their conflict.

Tigerclaw had a hand in Splinter’s murder. Every single one of the mutants working for him did. And while Raph only really got the chance to tear into one of them- fucking Xever- his hate of those men turned mutants hasn’t diminished in the slightest.

“This has nothing to do with you or yours,” Tigerclaw says calmly, and Raph always hated the condescending tone he has when he speaks. “This is simply business, and no business of yours.”

“You’re trading mutagen, so that makes it my business,” Raph fires back. He can’t even imagine how many awful things could be done with mutagen, if it got weaponized by the right people. Like it was by Shredder. “You don’t get to sell it off like this and not have me showin’ up to remind you this is our turf, since we made it damn clear we don’t tolerate this shit. So be smart about this: hand over the mutagen, and slink back to whichever old lady’s house you came from, pussy cat.”
Tigerclaw regards him with his single yellow eye, then moving it to examine the warehouse around them. And with a toothy sneer, he lets out a low chuckle.

“No, I do not think I will be doing that,” Tigerclaw says, withdrawing the gun he’d been training on Raph and holstering it under his jacket again. Raph feels the slight, the obvious message that Tigerclaw doesn’t think he’s worth the firearm; it makes him bare his teeth, almost wishing for fangs like the tiger mutant. “Unless your brothers and friends are hiding in the shadows, waiting to jump out in surprise- and if they are, by all means.” He sweeps a hand out at the shadows of the warehouse. “Please make this interesting instead of laughable. Raphael, what threat are you to myself and my associates, all on your own?”

Raph snaps, “Plenty, asshole,” but feels a weight of sudden dread dawn on him.

He is alone, and no one even knows where he is. Tigerclaw meanwhile has two dozen humans on his side and a track record that puts him down as someone they always needed at least a tag team to face. Raph abruptly reevaluates his odds, and swallows thickly.

“I am sure,” Tigerclaw says sarcastically, and turns a look over his shoulder, addressing the humans surrounding them both. “Clean up this mess.” Tigerclaw instructs calmly, reaching into the opposite side of his jacket and drawing a large knife. “I will deal with our uninvited guest myself.”

And with a speed that’s unexpected from someone his size, Tigerclaw crosses the short distance between himself and Raph- knife aimed to rip through Raph’s throat, and barely missing as he dodges the swift attack. But even if the situation is getting close to completely out of Raph’s control- at least he gets to have this, the surge of adrenaline as a familiar and craved scenario plays out for him. It’s you or me, life or death, no holds barred- the kind of fight that Raph experienced every time he fought the Foot in the later stages of their war. And it’s something he hasn’t been able to figure out how to replicate, the sensation of fighting someone with every ounce of strength and skill he possesses and the intent to maim or even kill.

Petty criminals have nothing on this, sparring is paltry in comparison- this is living; it’s how Raph life is supposed to be. The rush of coming so close to death and surviving anyway, burning through whole nights by dedicating every waking moment to beating the odds. It’s a purpose, a goal, a thrill that electrocutes his entire nervous system and brings everything into crystal clarity, aching simplicity where nothing is confusing or painful.

Fight.

Or die.

No other rules, and it’s glorious for that.

Except. He’s losing, steps faltering, dodges and blocks growing sloppy. Raph hasn’t ever fought Tigerclaw on his own, he’s always had someone to back him up- he’s a great fighter, a skilled ninja, but Tigerclaw is twice his age and has experience Raph is only just garnering. And he’s huge compared to Raph, battering him with blows when Raph’s guard slips and a fist makes it through. A tiger and man’s strength doubled on itself, mutagen creating a monster perfect for killing.

Raph is the same, has both human and animal DNA- but his base is a turtle, not a human and tiger, and he doubts there’s a single tale in the entirety of the world of a turtle ever besting two of the most fearsome predators alive.
They only ever won when they were all together, him and his brothers. Alone... they’re as good as easy prey.

Raph realizes, as he miscalculates a dodge and receives a kick to the sternum for it, that he’s possibly bitten off more than he can chew.

He skids across the concrete floor, barely able to flip onto his feet again as Tigerclaw bears down on him. His sais clang against the wide blade of Tigerclaw’s knife, and he feels immediately that the diverted path of the attack won’t be enough. Raph twists, trying to escape the blow, but still feels steel bite into his scales along the length of his forearm. His wrappings soak up the bleed, but some of them come apart; the slice having gone through them as well.

Directly following that, Tigerclaw continues his attack by slashing upwards diagonally- nearly taking out Raph’s eye, and putting a sizable gash in his cheek. Raph cries out in pain, blinded by the blood, and can’t clear his sight in time to avoid the fist coming towards him.

Raph’s flat nose makes a sound it shouldn’t, and his world shorts out for a moment. Pure blackness in his vision and mind both, accompanied by agony.

It’s only by sheer luck and instinct he manages to duck the next attack- letting his weak knees give out and narrowly saving himself from having a knife buried in his throat. Raph retreats backwards, still half blind and dizzy, and manages to parry Tigerclaw’s knife well enough he doesn’t end up immediately dead.

But- with one eye turned into a blind spot- he doesn’t see the claws of his opponent’s right hand.

Tigerclaw swapped the knife from his dominate hand without Raph noticing.

Claws gouge Raph’s shoulder, and rip from the base of his neck outwards. Raph howls, feeling his flesh tear all the way down his shoulder. Naturally, his enemy doesn’t waste the chance to kick Raph once again across the floor.

This time, Raph goes down hard, and can’t get his feet under him in time.

A hand gets a crushing grip around his neck, and Raph- dropped his sais at some point, oh fuck-digs his nails into the wrist of his attacker, defiant still, but is deterred from the weak assault by a heavy blow to his face.

Raph feels himself choking, and the butt of Tigerclaw’s knife doing half the work of pummeling him into a green smear. His vision cuts in and out, and his attempts to disengage the huge fingers around his neck are all but ignored.

After the seventh blow, Raph’s consciousness blacks out, and he feels himself go limp just before that.

For a long moment he’s not even aware of, there is only darkness.

Then, his lungs find the air they desperately need, and he feels himself hit the ground as Tigerclaw drops him.

Raph curls up, choking and bleeding. He struggles to get his bearings, the instinct to run hide get away get away get away pulsing in his already pounding skull.

"-ld have thought after Montes had such trouble with you, you would put up a better fight," Tigerclaw is saying, standing over Raph as he forces himself most of the way to his feet.
Raph’s eyes can’t focus, and he can barely manage to meet eyes with Tigerclaw as his whole world sways.

The older mutant regards him coldly, and sneers.

“Pathetic.”

Raph wraps his arms around himself, crossing them over his cartilage covered stomach and belt.

Tigerclaw reaches for him, claws extended on one hand and knife held readily in the other.

Raph feels his fingers brush the shells of what he’s looking for.

As Tigerclaw looms, Raph throws down his very last smoke bombs.

-/-

Without Donnie around to make more, Raph figured he should be conservative with his smokescreen attacks for the time being.

How lucky he is for deciding that.

Raph’s right arm is almost useless, and so is his left eye as it starts swelling. With only his right eye to see, scrubbed of blood from the still bleeding gash on his cheek, he hauls ass from the smoke filled warehouse he left behind.

Tigerclaw isn’t chasing him, he doesn’t think. Maybe because he has better things to do than hunt down the lone intruder who barely put up a fight.

Raph doesn’t think he even managed to land a decent hit on Tigerclaw, and that stings as much as his injuries do.

Ducking down, retreating underground, Raph’s slick fingers struggle to pull the manhole cover away as he disappears into the sewers. He can’t spare time to go back for the Stealth Bike, and like this he’d probably crash it anyway. Best he can do is just put as much distance between him and Tigerclaw as possible and pray it’ll be enough.

He’s bleeding, badly, and he dropped his weapons in the fight. The only option left is to retreat as fast and thoroughly as possible, and call for help.

As he runs, Raph realizes woozily that everything is getting a lot more distant feeling all of a sudden.

He doesn’t notice he’s falling until he catches himself against the tunnel wall, and then ripping himself away from it as overwhelming agony flares from his right arm. The long claw marks have coated his whole arm in tacky red, which fills Raph’s senses with even more blood stench; his bloody, possibly broken nose dripping down his chin, his other, smaller knife wounds—everything smells like blood and Raph is acutely aware he needs to get help now.

Raph sees another manhole just up ahead, and he hopes wherever he emerges it won’t be into worse danger.
It’s even harder to climb out of the sewers than it had been to climb in. Raph’s whole body is begging him to stop moving, but he can’t, he could possibly, literally die if he does. When he finally gets the manhole cover off, Raph claws his way up and out, coming to realize he’s in the middle of a road adjacent to a larger one. No one is driving by, thank fucking god, and he kicks the cover back into place as he hightails it for the nearest dark alley. A glance at the street signs is all he needs before the next step.

Raph struggles to extract his phone, using his left hand instead of his right. The screen smears with blood as he stumbles to a wall of the alley and collapses against it; fingers clumsily finding the contact he needs.

Shoving his phone against his left ear slit, Raph forces his thoughts to recollect themselves. He needs to stay aware, even though shock is setting in. He needs to be ready to run, even if he can’t muster more energy than staying conscious right now. He… he needs to…

“Raph? Hello?”

Raph jolts back into reality, dangerously close to passing out in the filthy alley all alone and still bleeding.

“-h-hey, Leo,” Raph gasps out, voice rasping as his throat aches. He hasn’t been able to check, but thick bruising has probably already started. “I think- I think I need s-some help here.”

“What? Raph, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

Raph coughs, feeling the disgusting sensation of blood go down the back of his throat. His whole body is wracked with another wave of pain for the jerky movements, enough that Raph’s vision goes spotty for a moment too long.

“What? Raph, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

Raph, for some reason, somehow, lets out a ragged laugh.

“Got myself into a bit of a mess, Leo… Think you could come bail me out? I think. I’m p.pretty sure… I’m gonna need a lotta st-stitches after this one…”

It’s kind of ironic.

Raph’s spent all these weeks worrying it’d be his little brothers bleeding out in some nameless alleyway, all alone in their injured state…

And here he is, fulfilling that prophecy himself.

-/-

Raph fades in and out, even with Leo ordering him to stay awake.

Everything is murky and pain filled, getting steadily worse even as the bleeding of his arm and face slows. But even though it’d slowed, the wounds are still wide open for germs to infect as he lies slumped in the alley. If Raph had energy for worrying about infection, he would, but he doesn’t. Even the filth he knows is already smeared into the wounds can’t get him to wake up
At some point, the phone slips from his hand and even Leo’s voice deserts him.

Raph is very, very alone for a period of time.

It terrifies him, breaking through the dim blanket of shock that’s settled over him. He’s alone and he’s bleeding and he very well could die.

He’s never been so alone. Why would his brothers leave him to be so alone?

It hurts. Everything hurts.

Even the touch of someone getting their arms around him, gentle and careful as they may be, hurts. And Raph, reacting on instinct, hisses and lashes out. He’s hurting and he’s vulnerable, but he will not let someone kill him without a fight-

“Raph, Raph, it’s me, it’s Leo- Raph calm down it’s just me,” says the person trying to get a hold of him, stronger than Raph is right now, dangerous so long as Raph is weak and injured and alone-

“It’s gonna be okay, c’mon, just wake up and look at me. Raph. Raph, look at me. I’m here, I’m-I’m right here. I’m gonna get you somewhere safe now.”

Raph is blearily aware of being stood up, of having someone take almost all his weight and urging him forwards. Into a vehicle, a yellow van- the effort to get into the passenger seat agonizing as it jars his wounds and makes his head swirl sickeningly. The door is slammed shut soon as he’s in, and not a moment later the driver’s door opens and Leo rushes to climb inside.

“Just hold on until we get home,” Leo is saying, but it’s distant, hard to understand the words as they leave his mouth in a flurry. “Stay with me, okay? I’ll- I’ll heal you, soon as we get out of this place. Just hold on until then. I promise, I promise you’ll be okay.”

Raph barely understands the words, everything fading out of focus again.

He thinks, maybe, he responds once or twice on the way. He doesn’t know what questions he’s answering, or what he’s even saying, but he knows he’s talking, probably. Leo drives like a maniac the whole way, that much Raph is sure of.

-/-

Raph wakes up again as Leo pulls him from the Party Wagon, choking on a scream as his right arm flares back to life with fireworks of agony.

“Sorry! Oh fuck- I’m sorry, I’m sorry, just- lean on me, I’ll hold you up,” Leo says, getting an arm around Raph’s shell and putting Raph’s non-fucked up arm over his shoulders. They stumble up the steps of the lair’s entrance together, and Raph tries to not keel over and puke from the pain wracking him.

Somehow, they make it into the dojo, and Raph is allowed to just slump against the wall finally. The journey from the van to the dojo has reopened his injuries, which have left a small red trail from the entrance to where Raph now sits, and the drips around him just keep multiplying.
Is he going to die from losing this much blood? Leo lost a shit ton of blood and still pulled through, that one time. But- that was with Donnie working on him, and Donnie isn’t-

“-here, here drink this,” Leo is saying, abruptly in front of Raph and holding out a cup of water. “Fluids, while I- uh, figure out where to start.”

Raph’s left hand is covered in his own blood as he takes the cup.

His throat feels horribly dry as he drains it, and it soothes a miniscule factor to how much pain he’s in currently. As he lowers the cup again, setting it aside and feeling his clumsy fingers knock it over, Raph notices finally that Leo is doing a series of hand gestures and visibly concentrating, mumbling under his breath the whole time.

A few seconds pass, and Leo’s hands seem to start trembling a little as they hover over the worst of Raph’s shoulder wounds. Mouth forming a tight line for a split second, Leo repeats the gestures and mutters the poetic sounding words a second time.

Again, nothing happens. Raph realizes finally that Leo is trying to accomplish the healing hands thing their father did, practiced a few times around them before his death.

“No, no,” Leo mutters, and goes through the motions and chant again. All that happens is him bumping the edge of Raph’s torn flesh and causing Raph to hiss and draw away.

“It’s not working, why isn’t it working?” Leo says desperately, repeating the hand motions in rapid succession and saying the words and again getting nothing.

“Leo,” Raph rasps.

“I- it’s supposed to work, I’ve done it before, it’s supposed to work why won’t it work.”

“Leo!” Raph snaps, shutting his brother up. “Get the fuckin’ kit.”

“They’re supposed to work,” Leo repeats in a hollow voice, staring at Raph with eyes that don’t seem to quite see reality. “Raph, something’s wrong.”

“Yeah, I’m bleeding out. Get the fucking KIT.”

Leo, finally, gets the fucking medical kit.

Last ounce of strength spent snapping his brother out of his panic, Raph slumps further against the wall and focuses on just breathing for a while.

He almost counts himself lucky that he’s far enough gone to hardly feel the stitches.

It still hurts.

-/-

Leo keeps trying the healing hands trick, even after Raph gets his stitches in and is laid out on a futon in the dojo. They don’t have the knowledge of how much blood a mutant turtle can lose before he straight up dies, so Leo is refusing to leave Raph’s side for longer than it takes to go get more water and food. They go the rest of the night, the following day, and most of the second
evening like so.

Even as Leo tries the healing hands again and again, Raph feels infection setting in. It was inevitable, the way he contaminated his injuries with just about every undesirable substance New York has to offer. His stitched flesh swells as his body fights the infection, causing them to weep blood and pus into the bandages and pull against the thread binding his scales.

It hurts, everything hurts, and Raph is having trouble keeping a grip on his reality beyond that.

“I don’t know what’s wrong, it’s supposed to work,” Leo keeps saying, expression the same one he wore the night of Splinter’s death. The look of someone who’s lost ability to process his own life events, and is rapidly sinking into despair.

Raph is already starting to cough until he sees spots, and is in no shape to drag Leo back to his own sanity.

He tells himself he’ll do it later, when he kicks the infection to the curb and pulls himself out of bed finally.

-/-

“Raph, it’s not getting better,” Leo tells him as they redress the injuries. The scales pulled together by tight black stitches have turned a sickly color, fluids leaking from the wounds as they struggle to heal. Three nights in a row of this is a really bad sign, given that their accelerated healing should eat up any viruses before they can take root. “Look, we… we have to call-”

“No!” Raph snarls, trying to yank himself out of Leo’s gentle grip and actually failing to, he’s so weak now. “They don’t want us, why should we want them?”

“Raph,” Leo starts, expression stricken.

“I said no,” Raph growls. “They abandoned us, so fuck them. We didn’t need them anyway. I’ll be fine. I just gotta-” He breaks off, coughing as his throat burns and sides heave. As the fit subsides, a faint wheeze accompanying the rasping inhales Raph takes, he turns a harsh look on his remaining brother.

“If they want to run away, then fine,” Raph says, filled with all his frustration and anger that’s steadily warped into bitter hate. “They can just never come home at all, ‘cause I don’t want them here anymore. I just gotta sleep this off; we don’t need them, Leo. We never needed those assholes.”

Leo’s lips purse into a tight line, disagreement written all over his face. Raph ignores it, and tells his brother to just finish redressing his injuries.

Afterwards, as he lies on his futon and Leo reads distractedly on his, Raph is too tired to resist the draw of miserable feelings, and is pulled down into a shallow nap full of half-formed thoughts and memories.

They left, they left, it’s their fault this happened and they’re the ones who left… Raph doesn’t want his brothers back if they don’t want him, he doesn’t need them anyway, he’ll be fine… even if he’s a little sick right now, he’ll be fine with a bit of rest…
He’s not lonely, he doesn’t miss them, Mikey and Donnie clearly don’t give a shit about them, and so Raph won’t give a shit, either.

They don’t want to come home. They don’t want to see Raph or Leo.

Far as Raph thinks now, they can stay gone.

He doesn’t want them back.

He doesn’t care.

He doesn’t.

-/-

Raph feels the nights passing, but it’s all distant from him now. They have the bulk of their medical supplies still, but neither of them knows what to do with the more powerful drugs, or even which ones Raph needs to take.

Best Leo can do is offering Raph painkillers and cold medicine, trying to rid him of the swelling to his stitches and the cough rattling his chest. It all really fucking sucks, especially since even as a fourth night slides through Raph’s awareness, and all he can manage to do is sit up and eat unappetizing food.

He wants to believe he’s getting better. He wants to believe in his own ability to deal with this and get back on his feet without any problem.

Raph has to look away next time Leo helps him change his bandages. He’s not squeamish, but- his stitches, they look even worse than they did on the second night.

Raph spends almost all of the fourth night passed out, or close to being so. Everything is distant and difficult to grasp, and Raph wonders if he’s desperate enough yet to just start taking pills at random and hope for the best.

Leo doesn’t let him anyway, so.

Pointless, the whole attempt to unscrew the caps of the bottles before they’re taken away.

Raph sleeps and tries to recover. He has little success, and the miserable presence of Leo nearby does nothing to help.

-/-

“It’s supposed to work, why won’t it work,” Leo cries to himself, somewhere in the hours Raph can’t even open his eyes all the way. Raph hears the words break off into sobs, and barely makes out the figure of his brother, leader, Sensei curled on himself beside Raph’s futon- bent over folded knees and covering his head with his arms.
He parts his cracked lips, trying to summon energy to provide a semblance of comfort—*he doesn’t know why the healing hands aren’t working, doesn’t even know how they work to begin with, that all died with their father*—but feels himself slipping back under even as Leo keeps crying to himself, disparaged by his inability to heal Raph with a wave of his hands and a few uttered sentences.

Time loses meaning.

Raph sleeps, waking enough to cough and feel *wretched*, and keeps barely any food down at all.

/--

“Raph, we’re going somewhere, okay? Just hold onto me, like last time.”

Raph is only semi-conscious as Leo hauls him off the futon, taking steps forwards on legs that just want to fold again. He can’t manage more than a mumbled agreement to follow along, and even that is belated as they make it down the steps from the dojo.

Somehow, Raph ends up in the passenger seat of the Party Wagon again. A comforter is immediately wrapped around him, and Raph keens in pain as the efforts disturb his injured arm.

“Sorry, I’m sorry- just bear with it, Raph,” Leo says, climbing into the driver’s side. “We’re getting help.”

That stirs Raph enough he can say, “No, not… not them, they… they left us…”

“I know,” Leo says, and his tone is quiet, pained. “But it’s not them, I promise.”

Raph is satisfied by that enough to slip back into his shallow sleep, escaping what is essentially a fever for a turtle and all the pain that it brings.

He feels the van moving, the rumble of its tires as they drive. It soothes him, a lull to counteract the tight ache coming from his face, shoulder, and arm. Raph slips further into the sleep that’s been consuming him for the past few nights, and it’s like sinking into a bottomless black pool.

It’s quiet. Tranquil. It’s better than he’s felt in *weeks*, and maybe… he can just stay here, away from everything and everyone…

The door to his seat opens, bringing him back up to the surface of the black pool.

“Please, I know we fucked up somehow and you hate us, but *please,*” Leo says, desperation in every word, “*help him.*”

“Leo- Leo, *of course,*” says someone, and it’s- April? “Get him out of the van, I’ll- I’ll make sure they have a bed ready. But- what *happened?”*

“Tigerclaw. Raph- he tried to take him on by himself, and-”

“Tigerclaw? I thought- you, tell Karai we’ve got a serious threat still in New York. I want his location *yesterday-”*

“Raph, I’m sorry, but I gotta move you again. Are you ready?”
“Nn,” Raph mumbles, and its hurts to get out again, his comforter sliding to the ground as Leo holds him up. Raph has his eyes open as they walk, but the moving shapes of black all smear together dizzyingly. The only one not doing so is the one with silver and red on top of the black. April, she’s here, and that means- no, Raph came to her, not the other way around, otherwise why would they have been driving-?

Why is this place so big, it takes forever for Raph to be allowed to collapse again, and every step is a fresh wave of either nausea or pain. He’s tired, he wants to just sleep, why are they keeping him awake if it hurts so much-

“Gently,” someone says brusquely, and that’s- Karai, her tone and blurry shape becoming recognizable. “April, could you-?”

Raph feels himself suddenly get even lighter- he realizes, not even steps from the Party Wagon, his head had started to feel floaty, but not for the reason he thought- and is carried without his permission up onto a soft bed. The landing however jars his arm again, and an aborted cry escapes his throat.

“How long has he been like this?” Karai is asking, and there’s someone else- someone distinctly human bending over Raph and he doesn’t know who they are-

Light shines in his eyes as people move in and out of his vision, some in white, some in black, only one figure solid green-

“Since the second day,” Leo replies, and he’s further away than Raph wants him to be. “…it’s been six days, now.”

“Why didn’t you call-?” Karai starts to demand.

“He wouldn’t let me!” Leo snaps, desperation back in his voice. “I tried to convince him and he said no-”

“He’s clearly not in any state to make decisions about himself, Leo! What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know! I don’t fucking know, okay?! I- I tried to heal him myself, and it- they’re not working, I don’t know what’s wrong but they’re not working-”

“Leo, my staff might be highly trained, and know how to treat specifically my mutation- but we have no idea how to treat Raph. Without Donnie we might give him something that’ll make it worse, or maybe even kill him. You have to call them.”

“…I… I know. But, Karai, what if they don’t-?”

Raph finally finds the strength surge upwards, more energy than he’s had since his fight with Tigerclaw coursing through him with the return of his fury.

“NO!” he shouts, startling the nurses away from him and drawing all eyes in the room. “They fucking left us, I don’t need shit from Donnie! I’d rather die-”

“Raph lie down,” April exclaims, coming close to the bed and starting to reach out to push him down again. Raph slaps her hands away, and doesn’t acknowledge the shock in April’s expression when he does.

“They abandoned us,” Raph spits, vision going spotty again and arm burning all the way down to his fingertips. He’s barely done anything and he’s already panting for breath, energy sapping away
again. “If they want- want to fuck off like that, then let them. I don’t want them if they don’t want me, so fuck them, I don’t- I don’t need any help, I’d rather die than let them-”

“Raph, you’re not thinking straight,” April tells him, and Raph would lash out at her again, but he can feel weight pressing down on him, a gentle but steadily growing force pushing him back down. He fights it every step of the way, even as his shoulder blares agony in his senses and he lets out a furious cry.

He’s pushed back onto the bed, but not by any easy means. April’s blanched face swims in Raph’s sight, and he sneers at her. Let her feel guilty for that, for leaving him, too. He hates her as much as he does his brothers, and they all- they all deserve to worry as much as he did-

“I sent a text,” says a voice almost too quiet to hear, belonging to Shinigami, the shadow that follows Karai’s every step. “I have not gotten a reply yet, but I assume they will not make us wait. Leonardo, when they do I would advise you take over-”

The rest of her words are drowned out the noise in Raph’s head, the sickness infesting his body, and the bustle of nurses coming back to loom over him. Their hands- five fingers, human, they’re all human- touching him, removing his bandages, eyes examining each part of him and cataloguing it and Raph hates it, hates all of them, hates feeling like he’s finally on a dissection table and about to be cut into bits and pieces to be stored for later, scalpels slicing apart his body, cold eyes watching him writhe, forcing him into restraints and experiments and something burrowing into his throat, stealing his mind-

“Raph, no, no it’s okay, calm down,” April says, entering his vision again. Her hand on his brow burns, the human temperature of everyone touching him burns. “We’re going to help you, not hurt you. You don’t have to be scared.”

And Raph hates her, feeling a pulse of power come from her palm, and knowing exactly what she’s doing. Like this, he can’t stop her from influencing him, can’t stop the humans from touching him like this, can’t stop Leo or Karai or fucking Shinigami, she’s not even related to them, from calling their brothers and begging Donnie to come home because Raph fucked up spectacularly, and it’s not fair, it’s not fair-

“I know, I know, but it’ll be okay,” April says, spreading another layer of cobwebs over Raph’s mind, pushing him closer to sleep.

“They left us,” Raph hisses, and that hurts, it’s hurt since the first night and it just won’t stop. “They- they hate us-”

“No they don’t,” April whispers, “I don’t think they ever could. They told me themselves. Raph- Raph there’s so much wrong with all of this, but they love you, alright? And you love them. We’ll get through this. You’ll get through this.”

Behind her, Leo comes into view, wearing an expression that is practically bleeding exhaustion and misery. With him comes Karai, her steely gaze for once softened into worry. In front of both of them, April’s blue eyes remain, and Raph hates that they’ve glossed over in a way he doesn’t think she deserves to let them.

April wraps him in another layer of thick psychic suggestion, replicating the feeling of driving in the Party Wagon. Raph feels himself receding from reality unwillingly, even though he wants to fend off the delicate touch swiping at his cheeks, catching the trails of wetness there.

Raph snarls wordlessly at all of them, hates all of them, and fights against unconsciousness until he
can’t anymore.

The bottomless black pool welcomes him.

Chapter End Notes

karmic justice.

don't quote me on anything- i'm making this up as i go and am 99% sure i haven't broken Too many laws of life or reality or canon with this chapter. or like, contradicted past chapters too badly. if i have, pls lemme have like two days of rest before you point out a mistake and force me into a frenzy to retcon it. i kind of hardly slept for two-ish weeks now and ended up with a cold for it.

uhhh.... also this fanfic has been entered into a reader's choice awards comp, and it'd mean a lot to me if y'all would go put in a good word for me with the votes. here's a link to the post on my blog that'll link you to the voting ballets.

thanks for reading? and for the continued support?? this fic means.... a whole fuckin lot to me. see you all hopefully sooner than later.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

No individual is an island, but they can be set adrift on the sea. A person needs bonds, needs love to thrive. The isolation on a raft, untethered, battered by the currents and waves... it breeds a desperation. To cling, to hold. Anything to stop yourself from being swept further away from land, even if slick rocks cut your hands and water chokes your lungs.

Some anchors only drown you faster in the storm around and within you.

Chapter Notes

glory be, i return.

god it's been so long since i gave you guys a chapter. you're all beyond wonderful, and i'm so sorry it took this long.

i think a part of why is because a portion of the story was missing in my head. that being april's character arc in all this, as well as karai's and a bit of shinigami's. 2012, alongside its shit family dynamics, really undercut their female characters. they were given next to no agency in the story, relying heavily on whatever the male characters wanted to do. i had to build a world from the ground up to make april's chapter(s) come to life like how they needed to. i needed to rebuild her, honestly. she had so, so, so much potential in canon, and basically every ounce of it went to waste. so. i fixed that.

the other part of why there was such a big hiatus.... well, life happens, you know? my family has worked through a lot of stuff in the past year. we all went through some personal changes, which have made us better people for it. i got into contact with a psychiatrist, who gave me a prescription for anti-anxiety/depression medication, and i can honest to god say this is the happiest i've been in years. there were a ton of other things that came and went, too, but that prescription and my family's increasing stability are the biggest changes. and i missed this story. i missed it and thought about it and dreamt of how i'd finish it someday. the missing pieces have fallen into place, finally, and from here on out i hope to give it the attention it and you, the readers, truly deserve.

also, heads up to people, april's arc deals with a number of dark topics. i know this whole series has been about serious business and emotions, but still. i wanna let you know that moments here will be a little more fucked up than usual. stay safe everyone, and thank you so, so, so much for sticking with me :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Donnie and Mikey disappeared. Have you seen them?”
That’s the gist of what Leo asks April, prompting an immediate responding thought: *Now that doesn’t sound right.*

April’s sixth sense goes wild, shivering in her veins and setting her alight with the feeling that *something* has happened, and that it’s significant.

It’s disconcerting. That hasn’t happened in weeks, nearly months. They’re supposed to be done with wild adventures and dangerous escapades. Things should be peaceful now, should be downright *boring* with calmness.

(April pretends the calmness doesn’t set her on edge, most nights.)

April tells Leo that no, she hasn’t seen his brothers, and doesn’t know where they are. Then she goes to start looking for them.

It’s not as though she’d been doing anything more interesting than rudimentary training. Jumping between rooftops with a blindfold on had been getting boring anyway. April uses her quiet pride over her increasing spacial awareness to quell the unease in her stomach. (It only halfway works.)

As she pants, heart racing with adrenaline as she runs- April puts together the clues of the disappearance that she has, and adds in the context of the people involved in it. One: this is Donnie and Mikey they’re talking about. Donnie has more loyalty in his heart than any person April has ever met, and however inappropriate some of Mikey’s jokes sometimes may be- he doesn’t intentionally seek to hurt people. They wouldn’t leave without explanation unless the reason was beyond good.

Two: the emptiness of their rooms and the lab says this was premeditated. They moved their possessions somewhere other than the lair- that’s a given fact, but what’s the answer to *why*? There are so very few reasons to give them motive; the only ones April can think of involve *danger* somehow. To them or their family or someone they care enough about they might as well be blood relatives.

Three: how many enemies do they have left standing? Who could pose enough of a threat that the two of them would mobilize without a word to anyone else? Is it a negotiation move- splitting up the team in exchange for someone being spared an attack? Is it a tactician’s decision- intentional confusion until they reveal the actual plan, escaping notice of whoever might be monitoring them until the final moment? Or… is it mind control?

April didn’t notice anything amiss, didn’t *sense* anything different about them, but- neither did they, for roughly the same count of weeks and months, when she-

April’s sneakers impact against the stone of the church, and as she rises out of her landing crouch, she doesn’t flinch at the emerging figures of Foot guardsmen. Their weapons are a fraction drawn, postures stiff- and to the slightest thread of power April lets free, they read as somewhat disconcerted. After all, it’s not every night a regular seeming teenage girl in track pants and a yellow hoodie vaults onto the roof of a six story building.

But then again, April has always been something of an oddity, even when she didn’t know it.

“Take me to your leader,” April quips, because the person who’d usually say that isn’t here, and none of them have ever really had tact for tense situations.

The befuddled expression the guardsmen have, despite their masks hiding their faces, is a brief moment of humor amongst April’s growing anxiety.
On a level, April kind of likes Karai.

On many others, she views the woman with a very reasonable amount of suspicion.

Over the course of only a handful of years, April’s friends and their half-sister have managed to not only grievously injure one another time and again, but be drawn into each other’s family drama on a scale that’s almost admirable… If it weren’t so incredibly devastating to both sides. Both physically and emotionally, the bulk of clashes involving Karai left everyone wounded. Even the crime lord herself.

It’s not Karai’s fault that Splinter and Shredder had a decades old feud, of course. It’s not anyone’s fault but the deceased men’s. But still, Karai’s hand in April’s family being hurt over and over… whether by her sword or her asking them to take the blow for someone else… it leaves April feeling not exactly warm and fuzzy about the lady in the Kabuto helmet.

Which is ugly, in April’s opinion. And creepy, given its former wearer. But then again, ninja clan stuff… April hasn’t really been included in those politics, beyond association with the brothers. A lot of it is just incomprehensible tradition to her.

She’s not a born and bred ninja, though, so she keeps her disagreements with the culture to herself. It’d be rude to do otherwise, and it’s just not her place to say anything anyway.

April feels a tad out of place, standing in her workout clothes in a room full of well-dressed or fully armored individuals. What she’s wearing doesn’t really matter, however. The priority is speaking with the woman eyeing her carefully.

“April,” Karai greets smoothly, giving the barest gesture to her followers. They all bow and leave the room, even the guards who’d escorted April here. “This is a surprise…”

“But not really,” April finishes for her. She puts her hands into the pockets of her hoodie. “Did the news make its way down the line to you already?”

Karai nods, setting down the stack of papers in her hands. She’d been doing something with them when April came in- the room they’re in is for board meetings, or something akin to that, and there are other stacks of paperwork across the long table. “My brother called a little while before you got here,” she says, folding her arms as she comes to stand in front of April. “I take it you’re here about the same reason he called for?”

“Yes,” April says firmly, worry starting to churn at her stomach again. It’s already nearly been a few hours since Donnie and Mikey probably disappeared, going by the rough timeline their brothers gave her. They should have mobilized far sooner than this.

Karai raises an eyebrow. April swallows her frustration that the Foot clan’s leader is making her actually say this aloud- it’d be so much faster if they’d just get on with things already.

“I want a favor,” April says, because that’s what this is going to be. “I want you to help me find where they went. You have more resources than the rest of us, and the manpower to back them up. If Donnie and Mikey are in trouble… you’re the best shot we have at finding them in time.”
Karai hums, a tinge of satisfaction coming off her aura. April recalls again one of the things that have always frustrated her with Karai: the woman’s pride.

“You realize this is probably nothing, right?” Karai asks.

“I don’t think it is,” April counters. “It doesn’t feel like nothing.”

“So you’re going by a hunch.”

“Aren’t you, too?”

Karai scoffs. “No, I’m going by how often those four cause drama for themselves.”

“I could say the same thing to you,” April says, a bit snide.

They stare each other down for a moment. April feels the anxiety over the brothers mix with her anger about being held back from searching for them, and it creates a nasty feeling that tempts her to let out just a little of her powers, just a few drops of the ocean inside her, to let them seep into reality and help tip this conflict in her favor-

“I won’t do it for free,” Karai says, unwittingly interrupting those dangerous thoughts. “You’ll have to pay me back for the time and energy expended tracking them down.”

“You’re making me pay for your help to find your brothers?” April asks incredulously. Internally, she shudders. Months spent recovering from and breaking those habits, and they’ll still try creeping up on her like that.

April wishes Splinter hadn’t died. She wishes she could have asked him for better techniques to combat the damage done to her mind. As it stands, she has her dad’s advice, but… there’s only so much her dad can help with. After all, it’s not like there’s any prerequisites for removing someone else’s brain patterns from your mind.

“I don’t think they’re actually in danger,” Karai says calmly, “so I don’t think I should spend my resources on something that isn’t an immediate concern. Even Leo and Raph aren’t overly worried—you shouldn’t be, either.”

April takes a quiet breath in and reminds herself that not everyone lives with premonition chiming in their head. Karai doesn’t feel the wrongness April does right now, so the woman won’t share her seriousness towards this.

“...What do you want me to do?” April asks, making a mental reminder to later tell Donnie and Mikey exactly how much trouble she’s going through to make sure they’re okay. “Because if you’re looking for payment in actual money, I’m sorry to tell you that won’t work. I don’t have a job.” She’s barely managing school right now; an actual job would push April beyond her limits.

“Well now you do,” Karai replies, lips quirking a little, and oh, oh no.

April hates that she already understands what Karai means.

-/-

Karai passes April off onto another pair of soldiers. Because of course this doesn’t warrant the
woman’s full attention.

April supposes it *could* be nothing, but her senses tell her otherwise. She might not always have perfect control of her psychic abilities, she acknowledges that and openly admits it, but she’s *positive* about this. There’s something more to what’s happened.

April just hopes it’s worth what she’s going through, right now. She feels very awkward, following behind the two silent Foot soldiers. Especially since Karai told April is now several ranks *above them* in the clan hierarchy.

April didn’t *ask* to be given that rank, but apparently has been saddled with it anyway.

“*It’s just reflecting your skill level, O’Neil,*” Karai had said as explanation, before walking away without listening to any of April’s protests. April just wants to find out where the brothers have gone- not to mention make it home at some point tonight. Her dad will worry otherwise.

But, like a lot of things in her life, April doesn’t have any say in what’s happening anymore.

She and the two soldiers come to a stop after a long period of walking, moving between levels and hallways of the church base. April can hear multiple voices on the other side of the double doors, both of which are the sliding type. She’s surprised when both of the soldiers reach to their masks and pull them off. April hasn’t seen many- if any- Foot soldiers outside of their uniforms. It’s a bit startling to see completely human faces beneath those masks.

Both of them are Asian women, taller than April. One has her hair cut so short it’s barely scruffy from the mask, and has multiple metal studs along the shell of her ears. The other has long hair that’s been braided into a crown around her head, keeping it out of the way of her uniform.

“*Hello,*” greets the soldier with braids, a polite smile on her face. Her accented English comes out precise and clear. “*My name is Katsumi, and this is my partner, Mei. It is nice to meet you, Ms. O’Neil.*”

“Oh, uh… *you can just call me April, really,*” April says, uncomfortable with the formal way the woman is addressing her. Katsumi and Mei both look to be in their late twenties and have probably been training their whole lives to be kunoichi- April is barely eighteen and only started training three years ago.

Katsumi starts to say something, frowning a little, but Mei puts a hand on her shoulder. “*If she says she wants to be called that,*” says Mei, with the same accent as Katsumi, “*then I do not see why we can’t.*”

Katsumi sighs, muttering something about breach in protocol. Mei meanwhile extends a hand towards April. “*Welcome to the clan,*” she says, and her grip is strong as April shakes with her. Mei smirks. “*We have heard a lot about you and your friends- word travels fast when you do something like take out the Shredder.*”

April manages a laugh. “*Yeah, uh, that was us…*” The memories of that night, the one prior, and the ones following aren’t pleasant ones, but April has gotten used to brushing them aside. She looks for a topic to shift the conversation to. “*So how long have you two been with the Foot clan?*”

“Since it’s *rebirth,*” Katsumi replies, smiling and clasping her hands behind her back. “*Master Karai approached us just when we were looking for new work, too, so it was a real stroke of luck.*”

“Though working for her has been a bit more exciting than we thought it would be,” Mei says, ignoring Katsumi’s shushing. “*We knew America would be interesting, but there has been so much*
April does laugh for real at that. She’d been a part of nearly all of that drama, and the wry humor in Mei’s voice is how April feels about it, too.

“So, um, sorry to cut to the chase,” April says hesitantly, “but what happens now? I don’t mean to rush, but…” April does want to rush things along. She wants the brothers found before the night is over.

Katsumi answers her, reaching for the door handle as she does. “Now, you meet some of the other members of the troop you are overseeing for the next while. The scouts and techies are already working on picking up any leads on your missing kappa friends- they will do all the legwork while you get settled in.”

“Oh,” April says, energy deflating a little. She’s used to playing part in every aspect of a mission; the research, scouting, and attack. With how small their team is- her, the brothers, and Casey- she has to. It’s strange that a bunch of people she doesn’t know at all are taking care of the initial details right now.

She’s distracted from those conflicting feelings as the room’s interior is revealed. It’s a wide training space, far larger than the one the brothers’ home has. And it’s got far more occupants than any of their training sessions ever have.

There are more than a dozen people in the room, dressed in either casual workout outfits or full gear. Most of them are women, April notes, as everyone’s eyes come to rest on the trio in the doorway. She shifts a bit uneasily, not enjoying the sensation of being the center of attention.

“This is April O’Neil,” announces Mei, voice raised and commanding. “For an undetermined period of time, she will be acting as one of your superiors. Katsumi and I will be your captains still, but defer to April as you would us. Master Karai has assigned our troop a special mission, so be on top of your game. Any questions?”

A few hands go up. Katsumi points at one of them. “Yes, you?”

“What’s the mission?” asks the woman, who April is surprised to see is fair haired and light skinned. Her grey eyes look to April, and she looks away from that gaze. As April does so, she realizes while the majority of the troop looks to be of Asian descent, there’s still a decent number of other races. It makes her a little more comfortable, knowing she won’t really be the odd one out (more than she already is, anyway).

Mei closes the doors behind them as Katsumi speaks. “This is a confidential matter,” Katsumi says, walking into the room, April following behind. “I don’t want to have information leaked, so keep this within our troop. Anyone who needs to know already will.” She stops, just a few paces from the main collection of soldiers. “In summary, there is a possibility that two of Master Karai’s half-siblings may have disappeared. We have been charged with finding their current location, and determining if they require rescue. April is close with both of them, as well as someone who Master Karai and Shinigami have given recommendation for. She will be invaluable in this mission.”

And all eyes are moved right back to April, again. She waves, stifling the discomfort of being stared at by so many people.

She sees more than a few raised eyebrows, and April can guess how they probably see her- some random teenager with very little claim to this world. Her collection of scars is hidden under her
hoodie and tights, and she only has her tessen in its holster, also out of sight.

“Spar with her until our scouts return with leads,” Katsumi continues, gesturing to April. “Familiarize yourselves with each other’s fighting styles; we will not be tolerating any interpersonal conflicts during an actual mission run. If there are any problems, call Mei or me. You are all dismissed.”

“Hai,” comes the unanimous reply. Katsumi nods to April, and then turns to leave. April watches her go, lips pursed as she’s handed off once again. If there’s one benefit to how small her normal team is, it’s that they can mobilize at a moment’s notice. It feels like there’s too many steps with the Foot clan (hu, bad pun).

April is pulled from her annoyed thoughts by someone coming to stand in front of her. She looks up, because everyone here is taller than her, dammnit- to meet calm, dark eyes.

“Hey, I’m Naomi,” says the woman, short dark hair pulled back in a ponytail like April’s. She has a few moles across her face and a long scar from her left temple to her chin; twisting the edge of her smile, though not unkindly. “I’m second to Katsumi and Mei, so I’m second to you, too, now.”

“Hi,” April says, trying not to grimace. She’s still not comfortable with her new position. “You guys can just call me April. I’m sorry about all this; I didn’t ask Karai to… you know. I just wanna find my friends.”

Naomi regards her for a moment, and then nods. She looks satisfied for some reason. “Alright, then. April. What level of training have you received? I don’t want to throw you into anything you can’t handle.”

“Uh… I’m not entirely sure at this point, actually?” April says awkwardly. She swipes her hand against her bangs, fussing to divert the nervousness in herself. “My sensei- we could only train on and off, around everything that happened. Plus there’s some time travel to account for… Um, ignore that part,” April says quickly, forcing a laugh to dissuade Naomi’s confused look. “It’d be overly complicated to explain. You can just… try whatever with me. I promise I’ll do my best to handle it.”

Naomi huffs a laugh, turning her head towards some of the other soldiers. “You heard her, ladies. Try whatever. Just try and not break the newbie, alright?”

There are a few scattered laughs, and April’s cheeks flush hotly. She might not have as much experience as these people, but she has seen some shit. She and her friends have been places few can even begin to imagine, fought battles on the edge of the universe, travelled through time, and kept New York from imploding on itself multiple times. April doesn’t appreciate the Foot soldiers looking down on her.

Which is why she shucks off her hoodie without prompt, leaving just her sleeveless workout shirt underneath; going to stand on one end of a large training mat and flicking her tessen open.

“Who’s first?” April challenges, eager to burn off the worry for her friends.

-/-

It’s been a while since she sparred. April still does it sometimes with the brothers, but for the most
part it’s just… fallen out of habit. Team sessions don’t happen very often anymore, given they
don’t really have any enemies left.

(Hopefully, at least. Donnie and Mikey- could they have been taken by a new threat? April hates
that thought, the fear of a brand-new war making her gut curdle.)

She stretches low and long, warming up her muscles again. April got a decent workout done before
this all started, so she doesn’t need much prep. Her stamina is still good, too; she could probably
go for another few hours before she seriously needed a rest. But how well she’ll fair against a far
better trained opponent is still a question. April might have a lot of weird experience, dealing with
bizarre events and enemies, but fighting someone with probably a lifetime to train… she can’t help
but doubt herself, just a little.

That’s not a remark on Splinter’s training of her, of course. She could have tried harder, devoted
more hours to studying ninjutsu with him- but the chance to do that is long past, and she only has
herself to blame for not putting more focus onto her training back then. (Herself, and all the other
insanity that was happening at the time…)

Her first opponent steps onto the mat. The woman is about the same height as April, though has
clearly defined muscles in her broader shoulders. Her hair is similar to Karai’s style, short with an
undercut.

“Name’s Rio,” says the woman, tossing a wooden spar staff towards April. When she catches it
easily, aided by her powers subtly guiding it to her hand, Rio smirks. “I’ll give you the first move,
as a courtesy.”

April snaps her tessen closed and slides it into its holster. She spins the staff, adjusting to its
weight. “My friend uses one of these,” she comments, feeling out the grip of the bo staff. “He
 taught me a few tricks with it, just in case.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want this to be one-sided.”

April decides Rio’s ‘courtesy’ is another way of looking down on her skill level. April scowls;
temper rising once again.

“And I don’t want this to take longer than it has to,” April says in a controlled tone, sinking into a
fighting stance. Rio assumes one as well, and they stare each other down, waiting for April to
make the first move.

Inhaling, April’s mind goes quiet, and she pushes down the adrenaline inside herself. No mistakes,
no distractions. She’s in control. She’s in control.

April leaps forwards in a burst of sudden speed, catching a startled look flitting across Rio’s face as
April crosses the mat in half a second’s time. The woman raises her weapon to block, which April
uses to her advantage- feinting an attack, which forces Rio into a defense position she can’t move
out of immediately, and ducking around the woman to come from a different direction.

April’s attack gets Rio in the shoulder, then the legs as she sweeps them out from under the
woman. April spins her staff to point at her opponent’s face, stopping just before the end meets
Rio’s nose.

They’re both frozen for a moment, staring at each other from opposite ends of the staff. Rio looks
baffled to be on the floor. April is a little baffled herself. It takes way more than that to take down
one of the brothers or Casey.
“Jesus you’re fast,” Rio says breathlessly.

“Uh, thanks?” April replies uncertainly. She moves her weapon away, extending a hand downwards. Rio takes it, accepting assistance to stand up again. As she does, April realizes there are a lot of eyes on them both right now.

Naomi is in the forefront of the small crowd, eyebrows raised. April resists the urge to avert her eyes from the woman’s gaze.

“Well, alright, then,” says Naomi, sounding impressed. “I can see now why the higher ups gave you their recommendations. Rio— you should probably use that as a lesson in humility. Underestimating opponents based on first glance impressions is how you end up dead.”

“Ugh, you don’t have to tell me that. What are you, my madre?” Rio mutters, walking away from April. She’s jostled and elbowed by her fellow soldiers, teasing her for losing so quickly.

Another person steps forwards. He’s older than Rio, with grey along his temples, and crow’s feet around his eyes. What catches April’s eye about him is an inky black tattoo curling up his neck; a tree’s branch, she thinks.

“I am Akihiro,” he says, inclining his head as he speaks. His thick accent reminds April of Splinter for a second, and it hurts. “It will be an honor to spar with you, April. I have been witness to you and the kappa in battle.”

“Oh, really?” April says, surprised. She offers a small smile, inclining her head as well. “It’s an honor to spar with you, too, Akihiro.” She shifts the weight of the bo staff in her hands, looking towards a rack of other weaponry. “So… are we using bos again, or…?”

“I prefer a sword, if that is alright.”

“As swords are good. I use one pretty often, too.”

As April takes a wooden training sword from the racks, having returned the bo staff to its place, she overhears a whisper of “-Akihiro is totally gonna wipe the floor with her.” April’s grip on the sword tightens at those words, and she breathes through the offense that threatens to snap her patience.

She doesn’t want to be here. She wants to be out there— searching for Donnie and Mikey, getting things done. This is just wasting her time.

However, April doesn’t have time to think thoughts like that, once she steps back onto the mat with Akihiro. It’s only because of her sixth sense that doesn’t get immediately taken out— sword snapping up to catch Akihiro’s without conscious thought. The man’s eyes widen a fraction, and he gives her a pleased smile.

“Rio is correct,” he says, pushing against April’s block from an angle, “you are quite fast.”

April grits her teeth and doesn’t reply. She instead jumps backwards, regrouping as she comes back at Akihiro for a strike of her own. Akihiro evades it, easy as breathing, and April recognizes the skill level he’s probably at. This has been his lifelong career, likely speaking. She should be far outmatched.

And yet, when he comes back to attack her again— April finds she can catch the blow before it connects with her shoulder. She kicks out, using their close quarters to her advantage, and Akihiro only barely raises his knee in time to stop her sneaker from meeting his stomach. April doesn’t stop
there, leaping back and darting around, changing position again and trying to go for Akihiro’s exposed back.

He spins in time to stop her strike, but still. He’s slower than the brothers. April almost wonders if he’s going easy on her, but no, his sword whistles right past her temple, the wind from the jab’s speed brushing her skin. He’s fighting her with his full ability, though lacking killing intent.

*It’s so weird.* That’s how April feels as she jumps away from Akihiro again, waiting for him to charge her, then jumping up and over him in a flip. She remembers that fighting Foot soldiers used to be one of the most challenging things to do. True, it’s been a long while since the days of Shredder using actual people as soldiers. It’d just been robots after a point, but those got easier to fight in time, too-

But that’s not a thought for right now.

As April’s strike stops just short of meeting Akihiro’s neck, a severe spinal injury if this had been a real battle, she wrestles with the thought that she’s a better fighter than even someone so much more experienced.

“Ah, good match,” Akihiro says good-naturedly, accepting defeat as April takes her sword away from his neck. He turns and bows to her, and April returns that bow respectfully. Her opponent is smiling, crow’s feet crinkling, as he raises his head. “You are a very skilled individual, April. I look forwards to working with you.”

“Uh, same to you,” April says; embarrassed, uncertain, and pleased all at the same time. It’s just short of overwhelming to feel, and she pulls her extra senses in close to herself, locking down on them to cut off the ambient readings of other peoples’ emotions she gets sometimes. No need to even further overstimulate herself; that’d be a swift and merciless trip down a path she tries her best to avoid.

“Does anyone else feel like one on one sparring?” Naomi asks the observing crowd. April is intimidated and sort of excited by how many hands go up. Naomi laughs. “Alright. We stick to swords from now on, though, since those work well in basics. If we don’t get a mission update before we’re finished with individual spars, we’ll move onto tag teams. And April?”

“Yes?” April answers.

Naomi gives her a teasing smile. “Try not to beat our troopers in under twenty seconds anymore, okay? We need to get used to each other’s styles, and lightning fast rounds aren’t much help with that.”

“Oh, yeah- um, sorry about that,” April says, flustered. “I guess I’m, kind of… used to only a few spar partners? We, uh. Don’t tend to hold back. I’ll tone it down, or. Yeah. Sorry, again.”

Naomi laughs. There are a few chuckles from the other soldiers, too.

“I didn’t say that was really a bad thing.” Naomi says, “it’s just bad for our egos, you know? And team building. Feel free to unleash that on whatever’s got your friends, though, alright?”

“Of course, totally,” April manages, deeply, deeply embarrassed by this whole thing. She feels her anxiety clawing at her insides; the stress about her friends and being in the Foot headquarters and being around actual people is starting to really get to her. She tries to subtly but hurriedly move onto sparring again; fighting is, for her nowadays, so much easier than trying to navigate social situations.
If only she could walk into school and spend the whole day doing this instead of doing… normal things. It probably says something about her that she’s more at home sparring with her once upon a time enemy than she is in her everyday high school. April should probably talk to her dad about that.

She probably won’t.

-/-

The night ends with a disappointingly small amount of progress. The sun is starting to lighten the horizon, and there’s practically nothing to show for their efforts.

“I almost forgot how good he is at covering their tracks,” Karai says to her in a slightly miffed tone, after April is called up from the sparring dojo.

April frowns at her probable-friend. “You-” April stops herself before she says something rude and ruins things. “I mean… You have so many people working for you, I thought you guys would be able to. You know.”

“You forget there’s a reason why no one’s ever found the lair, or found out my brothers’ existence,” Karai says, folding her arms as she looks out the windows of the throne room. They’re standing behind said throne, and April has been trying to ignore flashes of memory about the monster that once sat on it. “More than once, Donatello is probably the only thing that stood between the Shredder and his revenge. He erases every bit of their presence from the internet, from city traffic footage- I don’t know how he does it, but he does, and it’s making it impossible to track down even which direction they went, let alone their current location.”

April has to groan, putting her hands to her face and dragging her palms down against her cheeks. “Donnie. God dammnit.”

“We’ll probably have to switch to eyewitness accounts,” Karai says, and she looks incredibly annoyed by that. April is annoyed by it, too.

“I’m gonna give them a piece of my mind for this,” April grumbles. She’s worn out more so from interacting with so many people all night, rather than the sparring. That was actually really enjoyable. It’s been a while since she had such a diversity of opponents.

“Head home and get some sleep for now. Or go to school, or whatever you do right now. Are you still in school?”

“…Do you not know how old I am, Karai?”

“It’s closer to the fact that I was homeschooled my whole life. I’ve… never attended school, public or private.”

“Oh.”

They let the moment hang, the reminder of what the Shredder did to Karai weighing on their conversation. Sometimes, April morbidly wonders what Karai’s childhood was like. Living with the man who murdered her mother and stole her from her real father- someone who built a criminal empire on his adopted clan’s ashes and eventually went mad enough to try and do the same to the
whole world.

From what April can judge by those factors, and Karai’s comment, and the tinge of bitter emotion she’s sensing in the air… April can guess Karai’s childhood was very lonely.

“I’m in school still,” April says, breaking the quiet. As she does, the sun does the same to the skyline. April sighs; it’s going to suck so much, heading home at an hour so late it’s become early.

“And it’s a weekday,” Karai says.

“Yeah.”

“I advise you skip.”

April laughs a little despairingly. “I’ve skipped the last two weeks straight. One more day won’t make much of a difference.”

At Karai’s raised eyebrow, April quickly redirects the conversation from her struggling schooling. “Call me immediately if you guys get anything, okay? I know Donnie and Mikey will probably be asleep right now, but- just in case. Please?”

“Of course,” Karai says seriously, nodding. “Even if you hadn’t asked, I would have had someone go and drag you back here by force if you didn’t answer our call. This is all on your request; you don’t get to avoid putting in some actual work for it.”

April gives her a flat look. “I just spent all night training with the troop you assigned me- which I didn’t want, fyi- so I don’t think I’m exactly slacking off here.”

“Good,” Karai says. “The reborn Foot doesn’t tolerate anything less than complete effort on everyone’s part. I’ll let you know if we find anything about our missing turtles, and if nothing comes up I want you to report in tonight anyway.”

“Why?” April asks. She probably would have regardless of news or no news, but she’d also been vaguely planning to try tackling her homework.

Karai smiles a sneaky, snakelike smile. Her gold eyes flicker green, reptilian and amused.

“To work your first official shift, of course.”

-/-

On that cheery note, April gets out of there. She already dreads returning, even if that’s hours away.

What isn’t hours away is school. Does she have the energy to try going today? Does she have the willpower to keep herself alert through droning lectures? Does she have the patience and control to exist in such a crowded space full of noise and people and dozens of everchanging emotions that never ever, ever stop pushing at her?

Ha. Nope.

April stops at a convenience store. Buys a meal replacement bar. Eats the thing in four bites (when
did she last eat? She forgot again). She starts running.

She doesn’t even bother pretending she’ll try swinging by her school’s front gate. April just breathes and runs and goes home to take her meds, drink one of the power shakes her dad is stocking up on lately, and collapse on her bed for as many hours of sleep as she can get.

/-/

April blearily wakes up with a headache and an empty stomach. She doesn’t feel rested at all, even if those symptoms mean she’s been asleep for a long while.

Fumbling around her pillow, she finds her phone. It reads as nearly five in the evening.

Great. Not only did she sleep through the whole day (again), but since her dad didn’t even try waking her up even once today… that means he’s having a bad swing again.

April lays in her bed for another half an hour, dreading and debating and berating herself. She needs to eat, shower, get dressed again; it all feels so overwhelming and complicated. She should check in with her dad, see how he’s doing despite how very little energy April has to spend right now. She’s a miserable mess of a person for finding all this exhausting to even think about.

_Donnie and Mikey need to be found_, she reminds herself. And April can’t go looking for them in grimy PJs.

She manages to roll out of bed and stumble towards the bathroom, but only after another ten minutes of arranging her thoughts enough to do so.

The warm water is nice against her muscles. She’s got some bruises blooming in a few places- pale purple, nothing to worry about. Others are older and nearly gone, just yellowy patches now. Most are from her wiping out in the middle of solo training, a few from the scattered spar sessions with the brothers. The newest additions are from April getting distracted during the tag team spars last night; coordinating with someone she doesn’t know is hard, especially when she couldn’t fully shake the discomfort of having said stranger at her back.

April’s body is covered in individual testaments about how dangerous letting strangers near herself can be. And even when she’s wary and alert, even _then_, it can still go very, very badly.

There’s a few dozen old little nicks and gashes spread across her skin. None of them are much to write home about, considering the ones Leo sports around his neck and knee. However, the one on her shoulder is deep. The scarring there is knotted and gets achy on cold days, lacing pain into her bones that probably doesn’t actually exist.

The first few weeks after Splinter’s death, April had difficulty using that arm. She’d had to submit to physical therapy with Donnie to fully recover her finer motor skills, painstaking care going into the nurturing of her healing process. If she’d lost even a little more of her mobility in that arm, April’s anxiety about it becoming a fatal weakness might have eaten her alive.

She compensates for it, though. Not in an obvious way, of course, there’s no need to flaunt the injury to people who’d take advantage of it- but enough that she can almost pretend it’s not there at all.
It feels like a brand, sometimes. A branding done by her failure to protect someone who’d taken her into his home, the family he’d raised there, and given her pieces of knowledge that helped her grow strong.

Not strong enough, though. Not enough to protect him when it really mattered. April can’t ever protect things when they really matter.

She turns off the water, squeezing the excess water out of her hair and pushing back the shower curtain. She ignores the faint twinge of her arm, the tissue pulling a little from the exertion she put herself through last night.

-/-

April finds the rest of her home empty of life. Her dad is out, she supposes, or locked in his room again. She wavers for a moment between spending energy on checking in on him, or on making herself a semi-acceptable meal. April’s stomach growls, making the decision for her.

She’ll see if she can ration some of her energy into looking after her dad, later. Before she goes and pours the rest of it into finding her missing friends, as well as dealing with whatever Karai is planning on putting her through tonight.

April goes through the fridge and cupboards. She finds ingredients for larger, better meals, but deems them too energy consuming. She opts for cereal, another power shake, and a lonely yogurt in the back of the fridge. It’s two days past it’s best-before, but April’s eaten much worse, the weeks when New York was an occupied war zone with poor scavenging options.

April had learned a lot during those weeks. She’d learned a lot about not taking food for granted, or water for that matter- and, about how the brothers’ life was, underneath the scrappy, stubborn humor they try to maintain. April tended to not think about just how the brothers and their father got along in terms of food supplies, but they showed her just how they did, if somewhat unwillingly.

Stealth is one of the basic principles of their home. Thievery goes hand in hand with that, when surviving. Creeping through the ravaged streets of New York, breaking into grocery stores and taking what they needed- not being picky about it, either, even if canned goods got tiring after a point- April got a clear picture of what the brothers’ life had been like, ever since they were babies.

To live, sometimes you have to take from others. Be that supplies, weapons, or… lives.

The cereal and yogurt are unappealing to eat, but April forces herself to do so anyway. She promised her dad she’d stop living off bare minimum and actually try to take care of her body. There’s no reason for her to feel so pent-up that she skips meals, no reason she becomes so distanced from her body she’ll forget about hunger and sleep- everything is fine now, they’re at peace or as close as they can be. It shouldn’t feel like such a chore for April to choke down a bowl of god damn cereal at five thirty in the evening.

And when she’s done with that bowl, April lines up her pill bottles and stares at them hard for several seconds.

She took some early this morning- has it been long enough she can take them again? And since she’d been so sleep deprived when she did, is she absolutely sure she didn’t miss any? April needs
to find that fucking chart she made for herself weeks ago and actually use it, even if she hasn’t a clue where it went.

April finally realizes, after an embarrassingly long minute, that two of the bottles belong to her dad. She shuffles them out of the way and manages to piece together which of hers she needs to take.

Fuzzy memories supply she took her sleep aid, so even if she doesn’t feel rested mentally, April is at least physically rested. The power shake she downed at the same time means she took her anxiety meds, too. She has to eat in order to take them, which for the most part ensures she has food once a day.

April decides it’s been technically-probably-hopefully long enough she can take another round of her anxiety meds. Tonight is going to be a lot, and she wants total insurance against falling apart during it. She takes her mild anti-psychotics, too, which is the other pill she really needs to keep a lid on things.

Psychic powers combined with accumulative trauma- most of which stemming from those powers-tends to build into interesting PTSD symptoms. Like voices.

April knows most of the ‘voices’ aren’t actual voices, of course. They’re just such strong impressions of other peoples’ thoughts they can be counted as such. The anti-psychotics buffer against that aspect of her abilities. They also act as countermeasure to the wisps of something much more sinister than wayward internal dialogue.

April, she can almost hear, even now. April, April, April- a sweetly seducing voice that comes from somewhere in her mind that’s been torn up, poorly healed over, and still feels rotten in its core.

April finishes taking her meds, puts her dishes in the sink, and goes to find her headphones.

-/-

She does a onceover of her current stack of homework, briefly. April might skip school more than she should, but she’s scraping by anyway. Her attendance record is a mess, but then again practically every student’s is in recent years. April hands in decent enough papers despite missing classes, and middles in grade level for tests.

She used to be better than that. She used to rank in the top twenty out of her whole junior high, she used to turn in papers early, she used to study up until the last night before a test and then pass with scores worthy of praise.

It’d gotten a lot harder after her dad disappeared to keep any interest in her schoolwork. It’d become a forced staple of normalcy in her increasingly terrible life, then it’d become a burden as she tried to balance studiousness of two types, and then it’d just become something… irrelevant to her.

Her worldview is so much bigger than it used to be; her old, vague dreams of going to university and becoming a biologist, or an investigative journalist… they’re simply drowned out by everything else. April feels like she’s drowning, too, sometimes.

April pushes her stack of assignments to the back of her cluttered desk, putting them off for even
longer. At one point in her life, she’d have been hurrying to catch up on what she’s fallen behind on, but now?

Right now, April has far more pressing concerns than late homework for trig or history.

The sun is sinking low in the sky, turning it brilliant hues and lengthening shadows below. April leaves a note on her door for her dad- that she’ll be gone all night, again, and not to worry- and leaves via her fire escape.

It’s nearly six thirty. April’s hair is faintly damp still, and she gets a chill down her spine for it. She welcomes it; the sensation wakes her up further and pushes her into action.

It’s probably too early in the evening for her to go by rooftop, but April thinks she can deal with sidewalks crowds tonight anyway. She has her headphones, she’s taken her meds- she’s got this. She can do this.

Stepping up onto the railing of the fire escape, April balances briefly on the arches of her feet, sneakers making the old metal creak under her weight. Then, she lets herself tilt forwards, and falls.

April turns the fall into a somersault, slowing her descent with the slightest touch of her powers as she flips to land on her feet. April breathes in, breathes out, turns up her music, and starts running.

It’s not as good as leaping between buildings, or sparring until her breathing stings, but running is good, too. Stamina is important, after all. April used to end up with aching sides every time she trained with her friends- all four of the brothers had twice the stamina of a regular human, if not more. It made April feel frustrated, as well as jealous for their physical advantage.

But, she got stronger. April took the challenge and kept going, even when her knuckles were split and bruises bigger than her fist patterned her limbs. She pushed herself to the point of tears, ragged and furious the moment she got to her aunt’s spare bedroom, alone at last- until she could keep up with the brothers. Today, she makes the long run to the church easily, lungs taking in air without issue, gait eating up the sidewalk as April weaves through the pedestrian traffic.

It feels good. It lets her feel something close to content for a half hour, at ease with her body and mind alike.

The second the spires of the Foot clan’s church come into view, however, those pleasant feelings evaporate like they were never there.

April lets her demeanour become serious, sliding into the grave mentality she’d had yesterday. It’s time to get some actual work done. She’s going to find her friends tonight, April refuses to waste precious time again.

The soldiers on watch duty are subtle, hidden from view of the world until they drop down to meet her on the sidewalk. They let her in through the front door tonight.

April squares her shoulders and marches inside; intent on her goals, determined to not be deterred a second time.

-/-
April somehow ends up in a kitchen.

“Have you eaten yet?” Rio asks her curtly.

“Uh,” April says, blinking at the room packed with soldiers and cooking.

Rio makes her own conclusions at that response. “Go sit down. We have eggs. I’ll bring you a plate with some toast in a moment.”

“But, no, I-” April can’t say more than that before she’s shooed out of the kitchen. There’s so many people in the room, they all spill over into the small dining room and take up the bar counter’s space. April ends up being sat at the table, befuddled by what’s happening.

“Evening,” greets someone, and April looks to the person on her right.

“Evening, uh,” April doesn’t remember her name.

“Katsumi,” supplies the woman with a smile.

“Right, sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

April’s cheeks threaten with a flush, embarrassed to have so quickly forgotten Katsumi’s name. She’d been so focused on the brothers last night, and then maintaining good social courtesy through the sparring- April didn’t really take in many other details.

Katsumi doesn’t seem bothered by April’s lack of grace, continuing to eat her eggs and sip her coffee. Another person joins them then, sliding into the seat next to Katsumi.

“Evening,” greets the woman- Mei, April thinks- and presses a quick kiss to Katsumi’s cheek.

“Evening,” Katsumi returns, smiling at Mei. Her gaze is soft and warm, same as Mei’s is for her.

April turns her eyes away from the PDA, not wanting to intrude or stare. She’s never had a relationship like that; she’s never had a relationship at all. It’s all very alien and scary to consider, especially since there’s basically no one out there who’d accept April as a partner.

The fact that she’s sitting in the dining room of a criminal organization, waiting for eggs and toast before she starts hunting down her mutant turtle friends, is all that needs to be said about how strange April and her life are.

“Who do I give these to?” asks a loud voice, belonging to a woman holding a full plate.

“There’s only one redhead in the room, Rin!” Rio shouts back. She jabs a spatula at April’s direction. “She’s right fucking there, how’re you missing her?”

“I didn’t want to assume!” exclaims Rin, raising her voice even louder to be heard over the laughter of other soldiers. She flips off Rio and marches over to the table, putting down April’s plate of evening breakfast food.

“Here,” Rin says, huffing. She’s a wiry woman with sharp features, her black hair a messy shoulder length. She’s also got a septum piercing and five studs per ear, which draw April’s eyes before she refocuses.

“Uh, thank you, sorry.” April says quickly, bringing the plate closer to herself. She’s already eaten
tonight, but she doesn’t want to offend by turning a second meal down.

Rin shrugs and goes back to the kitchen, resuming her spirited conversation with Rio and the other cooks. April stares around herself for a moment, at all the people talking and eating together.

In her mind, she’s always associated Foot soldiers with rigid conduct, absolute silence, and brutal fighting skills. The scene before her directly contrasts that; people moving in and out of each other’s space with ease, joking and chiding. Under the warm light of the large room, they don’t look quite like a family, but certainly close enough to one it makes April feel like an outsider.

She misses her own family, suddenly. She misses the brothers and Casey and their own little corner of the world they have. When was the last time they did something like this? Just spending time together, easy and happy?

The few memories she has of moments like that, between one trial and the next, make her heart ache. April and her dad, along with her aunt, have always been a tightly knit, but not overly affectionate family. The brothers and Casey gave April a taste of a different sort of familial care. Scrappy and devoted and enduring.

April picks up her fork and stabs her eggs, forcing the first bite into her mouth. She’ll need to energy they’ll give her, because more than anything right now, she wants to restore her little family and ensure it’s never broken up again. They’ve already lost too much of it to let anyone else go.

-/-

It takes nearly another whole hour before anyone tells April they’ve found something.

Karai is smiling at her. Fiendishly. Horrendously amused. April briefly considers resurrecting their old rivalry and taking out her frustrations on the woman.

“We can spar later,” says Karai when April threatens her. Karai tilts her head, smile becoming a smirk. “I mean, after all, we should be out searching for my brothers right now instead of playing around.”

“Karai. I have knives. I will use them.”

“Tsk. You’re just as touchy as you were at fifteen.”

“Don’t say that like you’re not barely a year and a half older than me.”

“I like you more than I did at first,” Shinigami interjects casually, standing just a half-step behind Karai. “You’re more fun, now.”

Thanks, that’s probably because I’m not possessed anymore. Oh, if only April could say that without feeling like she’s eaten shards of ice. Instead, she says, “Can we please just get on with this? The sooner we do, the sooner we don’t have to spend time together anymore.”

Karai makes a subtle movement with her expression that’s just short of being an eyeroll. April is somewhat jealous of that skill. “If you must know,” Karai says, huffing, “we only got the tip about twenty minutes ago. I wouldn’t have withheld the information from you longer than we had to, April- we were just confirming the source’s reliability.”
“We were also just teasing you a little,” purrs Shinigami, pitch lips twisted into a smile. April knows, logically, that she’s plenty capable of fighting the witch on even terms- but, still. Shinigami’s dark markup and outfit are… intimidating.

Not to mention her ‘your worst fears come to life’ trick she can do. April still hasn’t figured out how those illusions work, why they’re so effectively terrifying- she never picks up any trace of psychic powers, and Splinter never mentioned witchcraft being an aspect of ninjutsu…

It’s just best to tread carefully with Karai- a shapeshifting mutant crime lord- and Shinigami- a mysterious and sly witch-ninja. Even if April blatantly glares at them both as they resume walking away from the soldiers’ quarters.

(April is a biologically engineered living weapon. She has a bit of a leg up on anyone else who tangles with the two women.)

“We picked up a lot of different sightings of mutants last night and today,” Karai says as they move through the halls, the updated décor of the soldier quarters giving way to the gothic bones of the church. “Most of them didn’t match Donatello or Michelangelo’s descriptions at all, though I had some scouts doublecheck any that had remote possibility. None of them were my brothers- just other mutants, or regular homeless humans.”

“I do not understand how they mix the two up,” Shinigami says, shaking her head. April hums. “I think it’s something like, people not wanting to look too closely? I mean… it’s hard to, right? To see someone in that situation.”

“I suppose,” Shinigami allows.

“Regardless, we finally got a decent lead tonight,” Karai says, leading them through a doorway into a room that has a few dozen work desks; computers, equipment, and miscellaneous piles of paper and charts scattered across them. “You’ll go with the scout party this time, April, since, again-”

“I know, I know,” April says blandly. “You’re doing this because I asked you to, I need to pull my own weight, I have to pay you back somehow- etcetera.”

Shinigami titters. Karai ignores the backtalk. One of the five people in the room throws April a startled and somewhat fearful glance. April supposes it’s not every day you hear someone mouthing off at your very scary boss like that. Whoops.

“Ah, master Karai!” pipes up a voice suddenly, a head popping up from behind a precariously piled stack of paperwork. April blinks as the very short person comes around the table, not entirely certain of their gender, figure obscured by the long coat they’re wearing. All she has to work with is a lot of dark hair in a large, messy bun, and big glasses on their round face.

“Jester,” Karai greets easily, which still doesn’t tell April anything about this person’s gender.

“We have everything all lined up,” says Jester, voice excited. They’re jittery with their hands as they speak, pulling out a small sheet of paper from their coat’s pocket and turning it into a crane. “Location, route plan, travel time estimation, weather prediction-”

“Perfect,” Karai says, interrupting Jester in an oddly gentle fashion. “Put in a call to troop one’s dorm and give April anything physical they’ll need with them.”

“Sure, Piper already has the GPS loaded up.” Jester tosses the crane onto a nearby desk, also
“I accidentally put it in Croatian mode, hold on!” Piper, apparently, yells from a table in the far corner of the room. Her hair is a shocking pink, of all colors, and looking again at the staff of this department, April thinks she may have just walked into a nest of very odd people.

“How did you put it in Croatian mode?” Jester demands. “It shouldn’t have a Croatian mode!”

“I was trying to give it a wider range of languages!”

“Why?”

“Well, what if we get someone whose first language is Croatian? Huh?”

“Almost seventy-five percent of everyone working here is Asian!” Jester exclaims, marching towards Piper in her corner. “I’m Asian- you’re half Asian- everyone here but the new girl is Asian!”

“I’m only a quarter Asian,” says someone from another far corner, his curly haired head poking up over his laptop.

“It’s close enough, Muhammad!”

“Welcome to the research and technologies department,” Shinigami says to April, lips in a cat’s curl.

“They’re… lively,” April says, watching as Jester and Piper fuss with the GPS, a flurry of words coming from both of them.

Shinigami laughs quietly. “I find that it is a good place to go if you want to see people fight over nothing.”

April has the passing thought that Donnie and Mikey would probably get along with these people, if for different reasons. If she can find them, unhurt and apologetic for not even texting her back, April thinks she’ll try introducing the two brothers to these humans. They could do with a broader circle of socialization.

…Not that April has any leg to stand on, regarding small friend groups.

April has started to work up another wave of buzzing energy by the time she gets the GPS. It’s a durable little device, smaller than her palm. After that, leaving the semi-organized chaos of the R&T department, it takes April a full minute and a half to realize Karai has abandoned her. Again.

“You know,” April mutters, “I thought being a ninja would mean other ninjas couldn’t do that to me, but apparently not.”

“She is a year and a half older than you,” Shinigami says pleasantly.

“Oh don’t you start with that.”

“I do not know what you are talking about.”

April narrows her eyes at the woman. Shinigami plays at innocence.

“Where are we going?” April asks, rather than continuing with the topic that’s making her frustrated all over again. This isn’t the direction they came from on the way to the R&T
department.

“The armory,” Shinigami replies. At April confused glance, she scoffs, saying, “What, did you think we were going to let you go out in that?”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” April asks, glancing down at her yellow striped black jumpsuit, accessorized by a hoodie tonight since it’s a bit chilly. She uses this for most of her adventures with her boys; no one’s said anything bad about it.

“…I do not know where to even start.”

“Watch it. I’m short on patience as it is.”

Shinigami sighs dramatically. “Oh, April. You have my work cut out for me.”

April reevaluates just how worried she is about finding her missing friends. She finds that yes, unfortunately speaking, she is anxious enough about their disappearance and radio silence to keep putting up with this.

-/-

The red symbol stands out like blood.

That’s really the only way April can think of it, staring at the brilliant hue of the Foot clan symbol on the lightweight pauldron.

April runs her thumb over it, feeling its smooth lacquered surface on the metal. Its twin is already on her other shoulder, fitting as perfectly as the rest of her new armor does. Everything about the suit Shinigami put in her arms fits like a dream- or an old nightmare, maybe. Bespoke, made just for her.

April doesn’t know how to feel about this.

The Foot started out as one of their most dangerous foes. It stayed as such up until its dissolution- and even after that, it remained in their lives. Poisonous, lurking, and deadly. It’s what killed master Splinter. It’s what caused the whole war in the first place. It’s a force that has done irreparable damage to April small family, and nothing will ever erase that.

But. It’s supposed to be different, now. Karai isn’t the Shredder, however much the man tried to twist her. April might not fully trust Karai with personal things, but with life or death? With their shared friends and family? It doesn’t take a second thought to say yes.

Maybe that’s enough for April to stomach doing this.

_Do it for them_, is what she tells herself. It’s nothing worse than what she’s already done for her friends’ sakes. It’s just a symbol; one that represents something different now, under the rule of Karai and her soldiers.

April reminds herself that the new soldiers seem like actual people; that they all laugh and tease and act like any regular person would with their friends. She reminds herself that Karai and Shinigami won’t force her to do anything like the Shredder made his soldiers do; that they’re
incapable of it, and wouldn’t ever do that to her anyway. April reminds herself she’s not an untrained civilian anymore.

She’s the one holding the sword, now. She’s the one bearing the colors of black and red. She’s in control.

April clips the pauldron into place, standing straight with her shoulders back. She glances at the full-length mirror that covers a portion of the wall, placed there so that anyone getting fitted for armor can see how it sits on them.

April is unfamiliar with the outfit, but she knows her own face. Even with her hair in a tight braid, even with a carefully hidden thread of anxiety in her gaze.

She picks up the face mask from the table nearby, flips her hood over her head, and covers up even those things.

-/-

April will admit that the boots are good, at least. Thin enough she gets flexibility, thick enough her arches don’t hurt from hitting rooftops. The wind only touches her upper face, the bottom half obscured and her hood over her head. She’s the only one in their small band of soldiers with any visible features- definitely another perk of the rank Karai gave her.

April still doesn’t know how she feels about that, being given so much authority all at once. She doesn’t feel like she earned it. She doesn’t even know what to do with it, besides use it to find Donnie and Mikey.

Which they’re close to doing, hopefully, as they close in on the location marked on the GPS. The streets below have quieted, the lull between nighttime traffic making a perfect opening for them to slip through the shadows, descending from an apartment complex and slinking along the side of a condemned building. It’d been a general store, or something, going by its faded front sign.

The front is locked, but that’s to be expected. Signalling wordlessly, April takes point. Better it’s her who Donnie and Mikey see first, rather than the blank faces of Foot soldiers- though, there’s a chance they won’t know it’s her, given her new outfit…

April pauses at the backdoor, which has been partially covered by a large decrepit mattress dragged in front of it. She glances up at the second story, an apartment for the former owners of the store. She only has to gesture at them for the Foot soldiers she’s with to understand- two of them nodding and quickly scaling the walls. That leaves April with the other two troop members, who draw their blades as she does.

Better safe than sorry, right? April can sense lifeforms inside the building, but… they don’t feel right. It doesn’t feel like her friends.

Which could mean anything, since they’re all magnets for disaster. It could be the brothers- it feels like mutants- so it could be them under the influence of something, which would explain their unannounced disappearance, the refusal to communicate, it’s happened once, it’s happened multiple times, it could have happened again…

They really do have a terrible track record with mind control.
April feels like a physical vice is around her throat, constricting slowly as she tries to keep breathing even, controlling her thoughts so they don’t spin further out of control. With effort, she stems the flow of power that threatens to spill out with her budding panic, and puts her hand on the doorknob. Feeling the notches inside, she pushes on them like a key would, and opens the door slowly.

Neither of the Foot soldiers she’s with seem to notice that the door was originally locked before April touched it. She doesn’t volunteer the information of her psychic abilities- they wouldn’t understand, or worse, they’d be afraid.

(April doesn’t have human friends anymore, besides Casey. But he doesn’t count- he knows about the brothers, he knows about her, and he doesn’t care. April doubts there’s any other human in the world who could be so comfortable with what she is. Not even her dad- especially not her dad.)

April steps into the back of the store, looking around at its dismal conditions. Any food or products stored here have been long since removed and the store stripped bare. April steps further inside, and realizes there’s been upkeep to the room. There’s a broom in a corner, and a makeshift garbage can filled with recent trash. Its dingy, drear, and dark- but obviously someone has been taking care to make it livable anyway.

She hears something moving, right then. Footsteps, from the front of the store. Multiple sets.

April takes a cautious step, her boot making a quiet tap on the floor. The footsteps in the other room stop.

“Hello?” April asks, breaking the silence of the building. She dares to let hope rise in her chest. “Guys? It’s me. We- everyone’s worried about you guys… You just disappeared, no one’s heard from you in days…”

She hears another shift of feet on the floor. She motions for the soldiers following her to hang back, sheathing her sword and stepping carefully to the doorway to the front. Pushing her hood back to expose her easily recognizable hair, April peeks out, watching for threats.

She finds a pair of eyes in the semi-dark, only visible thanks to a tiny camping flashlight. Its batteries are dying, only sustaining a stifled glow.

It’s still enough April can see the scaly face of the mutant, even with their deep hood over their head. Their large eyes blink at her, throat spines rippling as they swallow nervously.

“-Camryn?” they ask in a hoarse, startled voice.

April’s heart sinks. She reaches to her face and takes off her mask, revealing the rest of her features. “No. I’m not whoever you thought I was- and you’re not who I thought you were, either. I’m sorry.”

April feels a flare of sadness from the mutant, who is cringing further back from her, warier by the second. “Who are you?” they ask fearfully, eyeing April’s armor and weapons. “We- we aren’t hurting anyone, I swear. We didn’t know anyone wanted this place, we just… needed somewhere to sleep.”

We. April was right about the second set of footsteps, and upon further investigation, she spots another mutant hiding behind the first. They’re also a reptilian mutant, though instead of a bearded dragon, they resemble a chameleon.

Both mutants look utterly terrified of her. They aren’t even trying to defend themselves- they’re
just shrinking down and hoping she goes away. Leaves them to their squatter’s residence and dying light.

April doesn’t think she can do that. These two aren’t like her friends; they’re not self-sufficient. They’re completely vulnerable. It’s only a stroke of luck that it was the Foot who found their location before anyone else- the next ones to do so probably won’t be so neutral towards mutants.

Taking a breath, April squares her shoulders and speaks, even if she doesn’t really have a plan. “I… I’m April,” she says in a gentle voice. “I’m not here to hurt you, or your friend. I… I’d like to try and help you.”

--

The bearded dragon mutant’s name is Corey Gallagher, and the chameleon mutant’s name is Marcelino Costa. They’d both been employees in an exotic pets store before they’d been mutated. April listens to their story, sitting on an upside down milk crate, and vaguely recalls hearing news about a pet store unleashing a dozen new mutants into the city.

The mutagen got into the water, clearly. Just about every being in the shop was mutated- including Corey and Marcelino, the two humans washing out the lizard terrariums at the time. April feels badly that she and her friends hadn’t done more than a passing investigation of the accident- there hadn’t been anything they could do by the time they heard about it, and all the mutants involved had either gone and hidden themselves away, or…

Well. What happened to the other mutants is something that April tries not to think about, every time she sees a news story about some unfortunate soul being taken into police custody, or injured in a traffic accident, or- sometimes, when it’s really bad- something worse.

They can’t be everywhere, April and her team. They can’t save everyone. They can barely save themselves half the time, and just trying to get through each day is hard. April can’t take on the burden of those lives, can’t add them to the weight of everything else she’s trying to balance right now.

That doesn’t mean she can meet Corey and Marcelino’s eyes and not feel the press of guilt on her lungs. She pinches her palms with her nails, swallowing back the information she knows- about the mutagen, about how it ended up all around New York, about how there’s a cure-

Except, there isn’t really. What mutagen there was still untainted was collected by the Shredder in his final weeks. Donnie can do a lot of things, but producing a miracle from nothing isn’t one of them. If they wanted to undo the damage done to Corey and Marcelino by mutagen, they’d need more mutagen to do so. And no one’s found any intact canisters in months.

April can only ignore the bitter taste of failure in her mouth and keep going. It’s surprising how easily the Foot soldiers she’s with agree to taking the two mutants back with them; April had expected at least a little resistance to the idea.

“Don’t worry. We have a bit of experience with this, now days,” says one of the soldiers to her, voice low so they’re not overheard by Corey or Marcelino. It takes a moment for April to realize the speaker is in fact Rio. A brief sweep with her powers, and April confirms the aura of the woman.
Huh. Well, alright then. Rio seems nice enough, and April doesn’t sense any ill intent aimed at the two mutants… so she decides to trust those assurances.

April tries to feel happy they’re helping these people, but all she feels is a selfish disappointment. It wasn’t Donnie and Mikey. She knew it was a longshot, since no way the two of them would move somewhere so exposed- not willingly, anyway- but it still frustrates her that this is just one more night without progress.

One more night she has to worry, and wait, and wonder- is this by their own will, is this someone else’s, why did they leave, why won’t they talk to her-

April’s anxiety builds into a near intolerable level. She has electricity in her limbs and a clamp on her throat. She doesn’t have enough reasons to think Donnie and Mikey are okay that she can just use logic against the fear. She wants to tell herself worrying so much is over the top, but what if it’s not?

What’s enough and what’s too little? She can’t find balance- it feels like she never manages to meet anything in the middle. Too little- people get hurt, people die- too much- people get hurt, people get killed-

April hears something rattling nearby, as they all wait for their ride to show up. She sees the others looking at the source of the rattling, she follows their gazes- she finds the windows of the foreclosed store shaking in their frames, growing in intensity along with her gripping panic.

April sucks in a harsh gasp of air, and forcefully calms herself. She does the breathing exercise her dad taught her, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling…

The windows stop rattling.

“…They never did that before,” whispers Marcelino, huddling closer to Corey.

“New York,” says Rio derisively. Despite the mask, her eye roll is visible in her body language. “I swear, nothing in this city can be normal for even ten minutes.”

“Ah, I think that is the normal around here,” says another soldier to Rio, and the four of them have a little laugh. Even though they’re still skittish seeming, their two new companions manage a small chuckle each.

April doesn’t laugh. She keeps quiet until an unmarked van rolls into the alley to pick them up, and remains just as quiet all the way back to the church.

-/-

April doesn’t know what to do with herself when they arrive. Part of her thinks she should follow with Corey and Marcelino, make sure they’re taken care of, reassure herself that the Foot really has changed, but…

She’s used up a lot of energy, going out in hopes of finding her friends and ending up let down. April knows letting the disappointment get to her isn’t constructive, but she just… can’t help it right now.
She’s considering making a call to Leo or Raph- they’ll be up at this hour, maybe they’ve found something she hasn’t- but someone approaches her before April musters the energy to.

“You good?” Rio asks, face visible again now that they’re back on base. April senses a brush of mild concern from the woman, and nods gingerly.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just… I knew it was a long shot, but I was hoping, you know?” April shrugs, feeling a little silly. This isn’t Rio’s problem.

“We’ll find them,” Rio reassures her, firm but kind. “I’ve heard enough stories about your friends to know they’re tough. They’ll be alright.”

None of those promises can be kept, least of all by a stranger who doesn’t even know the brothers- but… it’s still nice to hear. It’s nice to know someone cares even just a little.

“I hope so,” April replies.

“So… you sticking around a while longer?” Rio asks, raising a hand and scratching the back of her neck. “I mean, if you were Katsumi or Mei, you’d have to do post-mission debriefing and paperwork… but I don’t know if you actually count for that or not. I can take care of everything by myself, since this was such an easy run.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble,” April says, guilty again for putting this on Rio. “I don’t really know what I’m supposed to be doing, either… I could give the paperwork a try if you showed me how?”

Rio waves her off. “You don’t need to, honestly. Forgive me for saying this if it’s out of turn with you, but I think your rank is mostly just because you’re close with master Karai, not that she actually expects you to fulfill its responsibilities. You can probably just hang around, or maybe find something to do? You could probably just go home, too.”

The thought of going back to her apartment, of having to sit with her thoughts as they turn restlessly on themselves, each possibility worse than the last to consider- April shakes her head. “I’ll stay. Do you know who I could help out? Nothing too… illegal, though.”

Rio snorts. “April, I think you’ll be hard pressed to find something here that isn’t illegal. For one thing, I’m positive this building isn’t up to any safety code I know of.”

“Please?” April asks, managing a smile like she finds the joke funny. She doesn’t, but Rio wants her to, so she’s trying.

“Well… the kitchen might need caterers to the basement levels.”

Catering. April can do that.

Getting some directions from Rio, April sets off. She lets a bit of her power slip out of her core, spreading like a spider’s web around her; so thin it’s practically not there. It’s intuition, nothing more. After her accident outside the store, letting herself get out of control like that, April won’t risk more than letting herself have a vague hunch of which hallway to take.

April does find the kitchen, and meets a staff member coming out its doors. He apologizes and says they’ve already sent down the late evening meal cart, but offers for her to come with him and help pass out the food.

They talk as they go. His name is Eduardo. He’s a year older than April and taking classes at a local college. He wants to be a culinary chef one day, but couldn’t afford the courses until he
started working for the Foot clan. April congratulates him on getting the chance to pursue his dream, and privately wishes she had that kind of goal in her life. Any kind of goal, really.

They’re stopped halfway to the bottom levels by another kitchen staff member—she tells Eduardo they missed someone’s specialty meal on the cart and they need to go make one for that person right now. Eduardo mutters a few curses, points April in the direction of their former destination while shooting off rapid instructions, and then hurries back the way they came with the other chef.

April is left to her own devices in the halls her Sensei’s killer once walked. She sighs, because that’s just typical for her luck.

The stone passageways aren’t so bad anymore, now that someone’s installed actual lights in them (April always did view the dramatics of the Shredder’s interior decorating as tacky and inconvenient). It’s still very obviously not a welcoming place to be, but April supposes whoever the food is being brought to is used to it.

She stops just as she comes within hearing of her destination, the noise of people talking to and over each other making its way down the hall. April stops because of a splash of color catching her eye. Vibrant pinks and blues and purples, all at knee level and concentrated in one specific spot.

“…What?” she says aloud, staring at the children’s chalk drawing scrawled across the wall.

April then startles as the skitter of claws against stone enters her hearing—she whirls, memories of taloned enemies flashing through her mind—and April has her sword halfway drawn when a small grey blur hits her legs.

April yelps and stumbles, grabbing whatever’s attacking her with her power and launching it into the air. A tiny scream echoes through the hallway as she does—April quickly freezes her enemy in mid-air, holding them there as she finally gets a good look at them.

Luminous yellow eyes stare at her, wide with blown pupils. A short fluffy tail thrashes behind them, just as frantic as their cries.

April realizes her attacker is a cat. Or— a *kitten*, really, if a very big one.

The kitten starts sobbing.

April has a second realization. This isn’t just a large kitten—this is a *mutant child*.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry,” April says, bringing the kid down from the ceiling as quick and gentle as she can. She rushes to be underneath them, catching the kitten mutant in her arms. “Oh, shit—wait no I can’t swear around kids— I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was just… you. I’m really, really sorry.”

The kitten sniffs, their cheek fur damp from tears. They squirm, mewling as they try to get down, and April complies hurriedly, not wanting to upset them any worse. She kneels as she does, staying in that position even as the kid shrinks away, casting wary and wounded looks her way.

“I… I really am sorry,” April says earnestly, ashamed that she reacted like that towards a *child*. “I’ve just— I’ve had some bad experiences, here. I didn’t know you weren’t one of the bad people who used to live here. You’re not hurt, are you?”

The kitten mutant stares at her mutely, big yellow eyes watching her every twitch. April sighs.

“Where’re your parents?” April tries. “It’s not safe for a little kid to run around here.” Even if said kid is a mutant one. *Especially* if the kid is a mutant one.
The kitten stares at her for another long moment, and then raises one hand to point towards the end of the hall, where they came from. April offers them an encouraging smile.

“Okay, good. You wanna take me to them? I want you to be safe with your family again. Please?”

April receives no reaction for another pause, but she waits patiently. She doesn’t want to spook them again. Her patience is rewarded and then some, as the kitten mutant approaches her slowly, little paw pads quiet on the floor, and raises their arms at her.

April is stuck for a moment, surprised and off-guard. Then, she gently takes the kitten mutant into her arms.

“Alright. Yeah, good. Okay.” She shifts them to be mostly against her hip and tries not to press them against her armor, cradling what feels like less than forty pounds of fluff. “Let’s- go find your family, alright?”

The kitten mutant stares at her silently, their tiny padded fingers clinging to April’s armor edges. Their sharp little claws sink into her suit underneath, but April doesn’t mind the slight prickles.

“Not much of a talker, huh?” April says to them warmly.

Her little friend meows squeakily. April just about combusts from how cute that is.

She takes them down the hall, approaching the staircase down to the level they’re headed for. Taking each step carefully, April does her best not to jostle her passenger. She doesn’t have much- or any- experience with little kids. She’s never had siblings, never had any babysitting jobs. This is probably the longest she’s interacted with a kid since she was in grade school. She hopes she’s doing alright anyway, despite how their meeting started out.

April vaguely remembers where they are, the winding stairway headed down to what was a prison block. She’s nervous suddenly that it is still a prison block and she’s carrying a prisoner right back to their cage. Her arms tighten around the kitten reflexively, a thrum of power sweeping out of her senses to check for cruelty, for suffering-

She finds a dozen or more scattered auras. None of them feel like they’re hurting. Some feel drowsy, some feel saddened- but no one is in physical or mental agony. Most are even moving around very actively, bubbling with all the normal emotions of everyday people.

April pulls back her powers in time to save herself a headache, reading so many emotions all at once. They reach the bottom of the stairs at that point, and it’s… nothing like she was expecting.

April looks around at what used to be jail cells, and wonders at the change that’s happened here. There are curtains where there were iron bars, there are warm lights in every corner of the room, there are people- humans and mutants, moving around one another, handing out dinner plates piled with food, claws and nails and fur and feathers and thin human skin all blending together in the throngs.

April is stunned.

And then her furry friend meows loudly right in her ear, breaking the moment. Not a second later, April feels three small bodies impact against her legs, and it’s only by using her powers to hold herself up that she avoids toppling over.

“Oh, uh,” April stutters, staring at the three pairs of bright yellow eyes. “Hiiii… there? This your sibling here?”
All three kitten mutants stare at her silently, short tails waving. April is starting to feel a bit uncomfortable with the silent treatment.

“Do you guys… talk, or…?”

“Ozzy! Amy! Marley, Marvin! Get your fluffy little butts over here this minute, or so help me!”

The four kittens all squeak in fear and try to use April as a human shield. There is suddenly a very tall shadow looming over them all and April looks upwards with a wince, meeting light brown eyes with pinprick pupils.

“Um, hi?” April says, staring up at the very tall cat mutant. They’re almost taller than Splinter had been, oh god. “I- I found this little guy on my way down here.”

The cat mutant’s whiskers tremble as they sniff, taking in April and their kids. Then, they step back, giving a tooth little grin.

“Thank you,” says the cat mutant, “I can’t turn my back on these four for five minutes, I swear. Thank you for bringing Ozzy back safely.”

“It’s no problem, really,” April says, and tries to offer the kitten latched onto her back to their parent. Little claws drag against her clothes. Ow, ow, ow.

“Oh, Ozzy boy, come here already,” the cat mutant scolds, taking the wayward feline into their arms. They give the squirming kitten a lick on the forehead, making a gentle purring sound as they do. “This one is such a little troublemaker, always running off on his own- it sets a bad example for all the others, and then poof! I can’t find a single one of them.”

“They’re very cute, though,” April says, glancing down at the other kittens still hiding behind her legs. One is grey like Ozzy, another a mottled tabby, and the one rubbing their cheek against her thigh is such a dark brown they’re almost black. Their parent meanwhile is a much lighter brown, with a few stripes here and there of orange.

The parent cat extends their hand. “I’m Natalie. I’m the adopted mum of these four and their big sister.”

“I’m April, it’s nice to meet you all,” April replies, taking the hand and shaking. She has a little fit inside her mind about the little paw pads Natalie has, and how soft her fur is. April thinks part of her is quietly dying even while she does her best to remember her manners.

“It’s very nice to meet you, too. This is Ozzy, you two already met.” Ozzy mewls unhappily as his mom licks his forehead again. “And the other grey one is Amy, the tabby is Marley, and Marvin is our little chocolate drop. And this is Aretha. C’mon, hon, don’t be shy.”

April is surprised when a head pokes out from behind Natalie’s long skirt, little nails clutching at the fabric as their eyes meet. April doesn’t recognize what type of lizard the child has been mutated with, but she admires the cream and coffee sort of coloring they have. They’re also dressed in overalls, with a hole cut in the back to accommodate the winding tail they’ve got.

“Aretha was my red ackie before we all got mutated,” says Natalie, stroking the mutant child’s head. “My other four kiddos here were kittens my friend passed off on me, since she didn’t have space for them while she found real homes for them all.” Natalie laughs a little. “I probably should have known letting kittens into the same room as a weird goo canister I found on the roof was a bad idea from the start. Ah, but what an accident- it gave me all of you guys, right?”
The three kittens hiding behind April finally leave her, going to their mom’s skirt and pawing at it, meowing for attention. Aretha shrinks back shyly behind Natalie, holding onto the long tail her parent has. Natalie makes a good effort to hold another kitten, while the other two continue clinging to her skirt.

“Well, nice meeting you, April,” Natalie says, starting to shuffle their group along. “Sorry to cut this short, but I really gotta get these five fed before one runs off again.”

Before April really thinks about it, the words, “Do you want some help?” tumble from her mouth. She’s surprised at the offer, and even more surprised at it being accepted.

-/-

“They don’t talk yet, since they’re technically still just babies,” Natalie explains over dinner, feeding one kitten after another. “We’ve only been like this for about… two months, maybe more? They’ll probably talk whenever they’re ready- like Aretha here. She’s just shy around strangers. She talks plenty when it’s just us- and I think her age works out to be something like a preteen, so that makes sense all around.”

April gives Aretha a glance. The shy monitor lizard is still averting her eyes, but she does briefly wave a scaly hand at April.

April smiles and waves back. And then stifles a noise of pain as Marvin starts tugging on her braid again. “Ow- hey, no- buddy, please, we already went over this, it’s just hair, it’s not that interesting I swear-”

Natalie hisses at her son. Marvin releases April’s braid from his claws and darts back across the room- jumping into a pile with his siblings Amy and Ozzy. Marley is the last one being fed, one bite of carefully minced meat and warmed formula milk at a time. Aretha is eating her plate of food without assistance, claws picking up cuts of easy to swallow bites.

April has just a small muffin for herself. She’s not really helping, honestly, besides keeping the other kids inside their room whenever they try to make a break for it. The space is a bit cramped for six people, but given the alternative… it’s positively homey with its additions of a bed, dresser, and other small bits of furniture. For the most part, the room is filled with toys and pillows all varying degrees of shredded.

There’s also a cat scratch post in a corner. It’s a very practical thing to have, if one that makes April stifle an amused smile. It reminds her of the giant wheel Splinter had, and the sun lamps the brothers use. Little inhuman things that are just domestic staples of their lives.

It makes April’s heart hurt, thinking of her missing friends. She’s only nibbled at her muffin, the flavor of banana unappetizing despite it being a favorite of hers.

“So, April,” says Natalie as she releases Marley from his mealtime, “you seem a bit… young, to be a member of organized crime. How’d that happen?”

“Oh- no, I’m not a Foot soldier,” April says.

Natalie looks to the bright red Foot clan symbol on April’s shoulder.
“…Usually, at least,” April amends. “I’m friends with Karai- or, sort of, I guess. It’s a little unclear. She’s helping me find my other friends, though, which are her brothers and also mutants—”

“Mutants? Oh, dear,” Natalie says sympathetically. “I hope they’re not in trouble- I don’t know what I would’ve done if my friend didn’t set me up here. It’s dangerous out there for us.”

“I know,” April says, voice quiet. She knows better than most just how dangerous it is out there, for mutants, for anyone, really. “I… I hope they’re okay, too.”

Natalie reaches to April, taking her hand. On instinct, April nearly draws away, keeping distance between herself and a relative stranger- but Natalie’s touch is soft, kind. Her emotions read as only empathy, warm as sun.

“I’m sure you’ll find them soon,” Natalie tells her, pads and fur gentle around April’s hand. “You seem like a capable young lady, and the boss lady running this whole thing certainly is, too. It’ll turn out alright with you two on the case.”

Beside her, on her portion of the little bench they have, Aretha nods along with her mom’s words. Though her personality is more demur, her aura reads like Natalie’s- sweet and open and caring.

April hasn’t met anyone this- this nice in what feels like forever. Or normal feeling, despite Natalie’s appearance and situation. She’s used to spending time with people who’ve always got a trick or knife up their sleeve, and avoiding basically everyone else out of self-preservation. Too many thoughts and emotions and possibilities pressing against April’s skull; heady and heavy and too much to handle.

But. It’s not like that, here, right now. Natalie is like a steady beacon of positive energy, and her five kids are sparklers of wonder and newness. It… feels good. It feels safe.

“Thank you,” April says, a tad hoarsely.

Natalie gives her a kind smile, long whiskers trembling. She releases April’s hand after giving it another squeeze, and encourages April to finish her muffin.

April finishes her muffin. The flavor is better, this time.

-/-

April nods off without meaning to, sometime after Natalie pushes warm tea into her hands and the kittens get their nightly grooming. It’s relaxing to watch Natalie’s rough tongue work, and while at first April feels like she’s intruding, the mutant woman’s comforting presence lulls her into restfulness before April realizes it.

When she wakes, there’s a blanket over her, the kittens and Aretha are cuddled up together on the bed in a pile of fluff and scales, and Natalie is reading a book in a pillow pile.

April, for what feels like the first time in a while, doesn’t think she had any nightmares while she slept. It’s not easy for her to get a decent night’s sleep; not with past events and present worries disturbing her consciousness. Mostly, it’s just sensations and the recollection of past feelings. It’s bearable so long as April refuses to let any of it get to her.
Though, typically, she’ll wake up still tired. April is bleary and achy from sleeping upright, in armor no less, but she’s not completely exhausted. It doesn’t feel like it’s been all that long a rest, but it’s been enough to restore her energy somewhat.

“I- sorry. How long was I out?” April asks, trying to not sound so sleep dredged. She stifles a yawn.

“Only a few hours,” Natalie reassures her softly.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have-”

“It’s fine, hon. You looked like you needed it, and we’re night owls anyway. Or I guess night cats and night lizards, haha. The kids’ll be up again in another two, probably, and I’ll… cat nap before then.”

April stares at Natalie for a moment, and then snorts and laughs quietly. The cat woman grins, pleased by April’s elicited amusement.

April stretches slowly, getting out of the pile of pillows she fell asleep in. It’s a good way to accommodate mutants’ inhuman bodies, providing large pillows to sit on instead of chairs that’ll interfere with tails. Also, pillows are easier to work around in a small space than chairs.

“What time is it?” April asks, sighing as her spine pops.

“Almost seven,” Natalie replies.

Oh. Oh shit.

April groans, semi-happy mood evaporating. “I was gone all night,” she despairs. “My dad’s gonna give me a disappointed stare again.”

Natalie chuckles. “Then you better start on your apology speech now. Also, it’s a weekday. Shouldn’t you have school today?”

Ah, right. School. April understands why there’d be an expectation she attends classes like every other teenager.

“Right, gotta make it to school, too,” April says, and doesn’t mention the fact that she skips frequently.

She says goodbye to Natalie, with multiple thank yous said as she does; for the company, for letting her stay here, for basically everything. Natalie gives her a handshake and the assurance that whenever April has a moment, she’s welcome to drop by and see them all again sometime.

April doesn’t know if she’ll take Natalie up on that offer. April hasn’t spent time with anyone outside her blood family and circle of odd friends in… a long while, actually. There’s too much risk in getting close with anyone in her school- what if they end up in the crossfire of a fight, what if they find out about what she and her other friends are, what if they’re not even real?

April has learned the hard way why keeping a distance is better for everyone. Never mind that her powers go haywire, her sense of morality is shot, and she can’t stop tensing up against threats that are only in her head.

But… Natalie isn’t a regular person. She’s an extraordinarily kind and giving individual, jumping right into the role of a mother to her kids without hesitation and offering April comfort even if
they’re strangers. Natalie is a mutant. Natalie is abnormal in a way that April kind of, sort of, not really but close enough is, too.

Maybe it’d be okay for April to let them be… acquaintances, at least. Casual friends at most.

April tracks down where her civilian clothes went. Apparently, someone washed, dried, and folded them for her. April stares at the stain free, smell free clothes for a solid minute. Then she sniffs them.

They smell like lemons and dryer sheets. It’s a good smell, even if April feels weird about some person doing her laundry without permission. It makes her feel guilty about putting that task on someone else- April really should have washed this outfit after the third time she wore it in a row- as well as uncomfortable with the invasiveness.

She takes off her armor and new suit, and puts on the freshly washed jumpsuit and hoodie anyway.

April leaves the Foot clan’s base as the sun really starts to rise. Skyscrapers are still throwing the streets into shadow, but slants of light break between them here and there. New York never really sleeps, but the morning is the same here as it is everywhere else in the world- busy, busy, busy.

April shoves her earbuds in as she starts running. She dilutes how much information is trying to make its way into her brain by doing that. As much control as she’s managed to get of her powers, it’s not perfect. Threads of thought, emotion, and possibility still slip through. It can turn being stuck in a large crowd from an inconvenience to a headache inducing frustration. Or, on a really bad day, it can escalate to causing her to breakdown.

April got more than three hours of sleep today, so. She’s handling it pretty well. April glances at her phone messages once she’s on a train, tamping down on the reflex to shove the people around her away. Normal civilians shouldn’t evoke a fight or flight response in her, seriously. If that could stop happening someday soon, April would appreciate it.

Her messages show a few from Leo and Raph, some from Casey, one from her dad, and unfortunately, zero from Mikey and Donnie.

April checks her dad’s- he says he saw her out of her bed this morning, hopes she’s gone to try and make it to school, and says he loves her. April bites her lip, weighing her options. She knows her dad really, really wants her to go to school more. He’s told her he hates watching her stunt her own potential.

April admits she’s got a lot of potential for a lot of things, but her dad can’t blame her for the fact that most of them are… less than positive.

She chews her lip, debating. Finally, the guilt of letting down her dad- who is trying so hard for her, for their family’s wellbeing- outweighs her desire to just go home and curl up in her bed.

And so, April gets off her train at the next stop and transfers to one going the opposite direction.

It starts with a tightness in her chest. April leaves the subway and jumps on a bus, and the tightness extends to her throat. She waits the ten minutes the ride takes, skipping through her music selection without letting a song finish before she chooses another. Her leg is bouncing by the end of it, with her heart beating too fast or not fast enough.

April gets off her bus. Another two dozen students pour out with her, none of them so much as glancing at her as they do. April ends up going with the flow until she’s halfway up the steps to her school.
April stares at the remaining steps. She tries to make herself walk up the rest of the stairway and through the doors.

Her feet don’t move. Her hands are in her pockets and they’re clenched in fists. Her tessen feels like it’s obvious to the entire world, nestled in the crook of her side under her hoodie. April feels like she doesn’t belong here; doesn’t properly fit in with the other few hundred teens heading inside for a normal school day.

April tries to take a slow breath. It ends up a harsh gasp instead.

Her control is slipping, she can already feel it—there’s so much going on around her. She thought she had enough of her power locked away, but she doesn’t, and even still standing outside April is starting to feel claustrophobic. Her mind slides towards static, overwhelmed as she starts sensing emotions that aren’t hers, intentions that have nothing to do with her own, potentiality for nearly anything to happen with this many people packed into one space, so many lives and voices and—

April can’t do this.

She turns on her heel, puts down her head, and runs away from her own high school. She doesn’t hear anything outside the drone of whatever song is playing in her earbuds right now. April does her best to not hear, see, or feel anything at all.

She makes it to a thin alley between businesses nearby, puts her back to the graffitied wall, and tries to cry as quietly as possible as tears induced by sensory overload flood her eyes.

--/

April has a few theories about her powers. She used to talk about them with Donnie, but after… what happened between them, she can’t bring herself to do that anymore. It stresses him out. It stresses her out. They’re still close, but there’s just… things they can’t do together anymore.

She won’t ever forget how the week following that night, Donnie couldn’t meet her eyes for more than a few seconds. How his brothers, Casey, and Splinter watched her out of the corner of their eyes, whenever she was in the room with them. How the first time after that—over three weeks later—April used her powers to levitate her phone from her bag by the side of the dojo, and Donnie had—everyone had—startled so badly they surprised April into dropping her phone.

The crack in the screen is in one corner of it, still. A combination of self-flagellation and lack of energy keeps April from getting it fixed.

Sometimes, she thinks about using her powers to fix it. About doing the same thing she—She—they did, but on a smaller scale. To something that isn’t alive.

Those thoughts are always followed by immediate revulsion.

April could. April knows she could. But she doesn’t. She can’t let herself. And it’s not just the trauma of—of murdering one of her closest friends holding her back. It’s the fearful thoughts of if I can do this, what else can I do? What will happen if I let this power grow? What part of me will change if it does grow?
April knows why she was born the way she was. She knows who did that to her, to her entire family, too. Sometimes, she doesn’t know if it’d been better if she’d never been born or not.

She thinks about how many people the Kraang hurt in order to get to her- how many people they hurt while they used her- how many times some horrible tragedy could be tied back to the O’Neil family. She thinks about how she wasn’t born so much as bred. A perfect hybrid to fuel a global genocide of all life.

April doesn’t talk to anyone about those things. About how she wonders if people might have been better off she hadn’t ever existed. Still, she knows in all likelihood the Kraang would have found someone else to be their lab rats, and caused the apocalypse with them instead. April isn’t special, she’s just unlucky.

Unlucky enough to lose her mom when she was an infant. Unlucky enough she got her dad kidnapped when she was the real target. Unlucky enough to drag other people into her disaster life in order to protect herself. Unlucky enough to never have real control of her powers when they needed it. Unlucky enough she let someone get into her head. Unlucky enough she let that person lead her astray. Unlucky enough she let that person force- guide- coax- convince her to kill her own best friend. Unlucky enough to watch someone she loved die right in front of her and fail to have the strength to save him. Twice, within weeks of each other.

April is unlucky. Completely and utterly.

She’s fairly certain she only has herself to blame for that.

---

April’s memory is a bit fragmented, making it back to her apartment. Somehow, thankfully, she makes it into her room and shuts the curtains; curling up on the floor next to her bed and taking a long while to just breathe.

Eventually, her thoughts become organized enough that she can start to really come back down. April reminds herself where she is- her home, her room- that she’s all alone- no one in the apartment, no one in her head- and that nothing horrible is going to happen right now. The anxiety is just making her feel like it is.

She’s okay, she’s okay, she’s okay. Inhale, exhale.

April lets her head fall back against her mattress slowly, legs extending out. She stays sitting there for another few minutes, readjusting to feeling something close to calm. The fallout of a breakdown has left her exhausted, even with her extra hours of sleep.

April’s body is still twitching at perceived danger, so she knows a nap is out of the question.

She gets up gingerly. After putting on pair of comfortable pajamas and her nice studying headphones, April wanders out of her room and into the emptiness of her apartment. The silence of it is mitigated by quiet, calm music.
Her dad isn’t home. He’s probably at work. April is grateful for the solitude, feeling too raw still to interact with anyone. She ends up moving towards the kitchen, vague appetite returning to her. If nothing else, she’ll try and feed herself so she doesn’t crash later on.

April opens the door to the fridge and finds a wrapped up plate of food. There’s a note stuck on it, saying ‘for my daughter. hope you had a safe night.’

April feels guilt creeping into her thoughts. Her dad does so much for her, deals with so much so their family can keep limping along- and all she does is cause worse anxiety for him basically every day.

April takes out the plate of food. She eats the eggs, fruit, and toast cold.

She tricks herself into eating the whole thing, as well as actually being productive. For every part of the meal she finishes, she has to go clean a room in their home in order to eat the next part. She eats the fruit and then cleans the living room. She eats the eggs and cleans the kitchen. She eats the toast and takes a broom to the hallways.

The tasks are mindless and repetitive after so many years doing them. April feels like it’s the least she can do for worrying her dad so much, and it’s a pre-emptive apology for not being able to go to school today. Which, he won’t even mention beyond the encouragement that she tries to attend tomorrow, and does some homework in the meantime.

Sometimes, April wishes her dad would get angry with her. Sometimes, she wishes he’d be open with her about how much of a struggle it is for him every day. April wishes he’d just admit to having the feelings that radiate off his aura day in and day out.

She knows he has them. They hurt to feel, and practically above all else, April wishes she knew how she could make it so her dad never felt like that ever again.

But… her powers aren’t meant for that. They’re dangerous, destructive, and unpredictable.

April will slit her own wrists before she hurts her family again.

It’s barely after nine when her house is clean. April hovers for a moment, trying to figure out what else she can do. She remembers the stack of unfinished homework and thinks, ‘well, I’m done everything else.’

It only takes a half an hour before her lack of concentration forces her to admit defeat.

April puts on her real world clothes again and takes her restless energy outside.

If even Karai’s network is struggling to find Donnie and Mikey- April should have expected that, if they don’t want to be found then they won’t be- then maybe April should just… give blind luck a shot.

April concentrates on finding a balance between overstimulation and not enough input, running an aimless route through her neighborhood and steadily further away. One of the cons of New York City is how insanely packed it is; every single block of it is full of people, pets, and wild animals. Even with her ability to (unreliably) track mutants, the sheer volume of auras around her screw with April’s radar.

More than once, she feels a tremor of something has happened in the air, followed by a trepidation of that something being significant, as well as a confusing mix of positive and negative. An event that is equal parts good and bad.
April doesn’t know what to do with that. She doesn’t understand how her friends *disappearing off the face of the earth* could possibly be a good thing.

So. April stops thinking. And just runs.

-/-

One would think April would check her phone messages frequently, given the situation right now.

April does not, in fact, remember to check her muted phone messages until closer to evening. Which is only after she’s run what feels like a good chunk of the city and back; eventually deciding the hunch that the missing brothers are still closer towards their home is correct. She’ll tip off Karai about centering their efforts on the radius outwards from the lair.

April hears her dad in their home as she slides in through the window, taking care that her feet make no sound. She gets back into her pajamas and exchanges her earbuds for her good headphones, restarting the playlist she’s been listening to on repeat since she left. It’s then that she notices she’s got a handful of messages from her friends.

Leo and Raph ask the same thing- *is she sure* she hasn’t heard from their brothers, did she notice anything weird about them lately, and so on. April replies with brief messages that are nearly identical; no, she hasn’t heard from them, and no, she didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. Mikey’s behavior is often mysterious and unpredictable even to a psychic, and April is long used to the faint background static of Donnie’s ever churning mind. She hasn’t exactly spent a large amount of time with either of them recently, but when she did April never noticed anything too strange. Any shifts or spikes in their emotions were chalked up as just one of their bad days.

They all have them. Every single member of their team has bad days. The general agreement seems to not comment on each other for it. April, since the brothers especially can be cagey with their privacy, has respected that unspoken agreement. She can’t deal with the anxiety of accidentally alienating herself if she pushes for more than they’re comfortable with.

April moves away from those thoughts by reading Casey’s texts next.

Which, as it turns out, are about him asking why she didn’t come to school today. *You didn’t stop when I called after you, dude,* reads part of the text, and April realizes she’d run right past Casey this morning. She puts a hand over her eyes, groaning. Some psychic she is, failing to sense one of her best friends when they were practically right next to her.

*Sorry,* April texts back. She types a few different follow-up texts before backspacing all of them, unable to pick one.

*I was having a-

*I remembered I needed to-

*I felt like I was gonna die or throw up or-

*Anxiety attacks just be like that sometimes-*

She eventually settles on *I’ll try to show up tomorrow and not totally space out on you.*
April’s warm thoughts cool, becoming tired again.

Can’t, she texts. I already committed to something else.

To what???

April’s door opens suddenly and she can’t reply to Casey’s text, her thoughts blank and her hand is around the hilt of her sword before she consciously processes the action of grabbing it from beside her bed.

Her dad stands in her doorway, hands raised and face a little pale. He’s saying something April can’t hear through her music.

She shoves her headphones off her head, forcing her hand off her sword and taking a slightly shaky breath.

“Sorry,” April says, deeply embarrassed and ashamed. Scared, too. What if she hadn’t caught herself in time? What if she’d thrown a shuriken or kunai? God. The thought makes her throat clench and stomach turn.

“It’s okay, I shouldn’t have startled you,” says her dad, voice almost hiding its tremor.

That’s wrong, though. It’s not okay for her to draw a weapon on him just because she didn’t hear him knock. Her dad isn’t like her friends- with them, they all get startled sometimes and lash out. But they’re all trained and conditioned to respond in time to deflect an accidental attack. April’s dad definitely isn’t.

April could seriously hurt him if she forgets herself in the wrong moment. The fear of that is with her more days than not.

“I’m sorry,” April repeats, shoving her nerves down and taking another breath, forcing the inhale to be slow and even.

Her dad watches her with saddened eyes- April hates making him look at her like that, and it happens too often. “It’s fine, hon. I just need to knock louder and you need to play your music a little quieter.” He laughs at his own joke, adding an easy lilt to his words that April can tell isn’t real. “I was checking in to see if you came home again yet.”
April nods, eyes sliding away from her dad. “Yeah… I just went out for a run. I cleaned the house first, though, and I ate the food you left me. Thanks for that, by the way. I really, really appreciated it, dad.”

He smiles at her, stress lines in his face creasing gently. “You’re welcome, April. And speaking of food- feel like helping me put together a dinner that didn’t come out of the freezer?”

April feels tired, mostly wants to take a nap before she has to head out soon as it gets truly into evening, but she manages a smile for her dad anyway. “Sure. Can we make cheaters macaroni?”

He grins. “I already got out the Kraft Dinner.”

April laughs, and gets off her bed. She leaves her headphones and phone there, following her dad into the kitchen. He feels like stress- like anxious thoughts mingled with ones of concern- but April can bear with it. Pull up her shields a little higher so it doesn’t affect her own anxieties.

And besides, underneath those surface emotions, there’s a wealth of kindness and love aimed towards her. It’s those that April tries to focus on whenever her dad has a particularly bad day. He’s doing well today, actually, so it’s a simple thing to ignore the overcurrent of stress around him, and just enjoy making an easy but delicious meal together.

It’s as they’re making it that April makes a mistake. Her dad asks her to pass him the milk to add to the noodles, and both of April’s hands are busy chopping celery and carrots sticks. She uses a trick she does when she’s helping make supper in the brothers’ home- April spares a thought and feels for the milk next to her cutting board. She lifts it with her powers and sends it over to her father at the stove.

His abrupt yelling startles her into losing concentration- the milk hitting the floor loudly and the cap popping off. April curses and whirls, diving for the spilling container and picking it up. She’s asking what’s wrong, did he burn himself-?

But April glances up at her dad’s face, and understands.

The floating milk jug- her casual use of her powers like that- scared him.

“I- I wasn’t expecting a poltergeist helper,” he says, clearly forcing the humor in his tone. His laugh is weak and fake.

“Sorry,” April says, heart clenching, frustrations and shame pressing thorns against her throat. She doesn’t respond to her dad’s assurances that it’s fine, he just needed a warning- April hands the now quarter emptied milk to him and moves away to find a towel to mop things up.

While her back is turned, she hears him sigh, and his aura twist with regret and conflicting thoughts. April shores up her shields completely and blocks everything out.

-/-

April forgets, sometimes, in the comfort her home and her dad’s presence, that he… has a lot of negative associations with her powers. That it’s unkind of her to flaunt the reason so many terrible things have happened to them right in front of him.
Her mom is gone because of April. And then April and her dad afterwards, they moved around almost yearly when she was little because of the Kraang- because they were still looking for her, watching for them. And when they came for her again, they took her dad, too, and it took months for April to get him back.

Her dad has been hunted, imprisoned, mutated, *mind controlled* - all because of her. Because of the power April holds inside herself.

Her dad’s happiness- or rather, unhappiness- is one of the biggest reasons April looks to herself and what her existence has brought into the world, and wonders.

Would it have been better if she’d never existed at all?

She didn’t even fulfill the purpose she was born for, anyway. April doesn’t regret telling the Kraang where they could stick their world domination plans, there’s no way she could ever. But that doesn’t stop the thoughts that come to her on low days.

*What use is a weapon in times of peace? What do you do with something that’s designed to destroy, but won’t? What becomes of it? What will become of her?*

April used to have a pretty clear idea of what she wanted to do when she got older. Now, though, with mediocre grades and an inability to attend her classes- with the weight of weapons on her person at all times, the reflexes of a hardened warrior living just beneath her skin, her struggle to find contentedness or at least tolerance in normalcy-

Now, April doesn’t know what she’ll do.

--

For a while- nearly two full days and nights- nothing happens.

It’s infuriating.

Neither Donnie nor Mikey reach out to anyone. Karai’s people still can’t find a trace of them. April keeps doggedly showing up at the church and finding ways to occupy her time- better than sitting at home or wandering on her own.

Karai sends April on a lot of solo scouting missions. April can’t say she minds that much. She gets to stretch her legs, have some alone time with a goal, and continue her training of controlling her powers. The R&T people- amidst a very interesting lightshow going on in the corner, involving a small fire- give April locations to look into, along with GPS, and April goes to evaluate the factual quality of what their informants tell the Foot about rival gangs.

It’s not an overly interesting job, most of the time. April goes and hides herself on the roof of a building next to her target, sits down, and meditates for a while. She tallies how many people she can sense in the building, shuffles through the intentions shifting in the air, and if she really feels like it, infiltrates the building for firsthand evidence.

Sneaking around into places is so much easier when you can tell when someone is coming your way, as well as use invisible force to hold a door shut while you escape out the window.
It often leaves plenty of time to scour the area for any signs of a certain pair of missing turtles. Grid searching all alone is hard work, but it’s worth it. April knows the areas she’s assigned are ones that have potential sightings of Donnie and Mikey- a favor from Karai as April pays one in turn.

So far, none of them have yielded results, but April gets the scouting done anyway.

April writes down all the details she confirms, submits them directly to Karai, and then finds something else to do. April familiarizes herself with the church’s winding halls and secret passages- learns what’s where and who works there. At first, she keeps to herself, not wanting the experience the awkwardness of integrating with people who don’t want her around, but for whatever reason, April finds herself welcome practically everywhere.

Maybe it’s her connections with Karai. Maybe it’s the word of her skills making its way down the grapevine. But often, when April reflexively checks the aura of someone, they only have positive intentions aimed towards her.

It’s… strange. April almost wants to verbally double-check if that’s really what she’s sensing, but no, that would be weird of her. And it’s nice. So many relatively happy moods surrounding her aren’t something April feels regularly. She and her friends are very up and down with emotions- it can depend on a metaphorical coin flip, honestly. Sometimes they’re doing alright, and sometimes they’re really not.

But that just comes with living this life, right? It’s just the price of doing what they do to survive.

April can handle it. She has to.

Night four with no progress on finding the missing duo is nearly halfway over, with April still busying herself with odd jobs. Karai hasn’t given her any more locations to check tonight, beyond two earlier in the evening. Now it’s past midnight and April is absently polishing some swords in the armory. She’s maybe even considering taking a nap… possibly heading home so she can get real rest… go to school tomorrow, perhaps…

A knock on the open door startles her out of her thoughts, and April has her weapon aimed at it in a split second.

The woman in the doorway doesn’t even flinch at the sword April is pointing at her. Naomi raises an eyebrow, amused.

“You’re quite jumpy,” Naomi comments mildly.

April flushes a little, lowering the sword and mumbling an apology. Naomi waves her off.

“Just put that all away and follow me- we’ve got places to be.”

April starts doing so, sheathing the sword she was working on and cleaning up the polishing tools. “Where’re we going?” April asks, placing the sword back on its rack.

Naomi gives April a smirk that crinkles her long scar, eyes brightly excited.

“You, me, and the rest of our troop just got a new assignment. We’re accompanying master Karai and Shinigami on a raid.”

Chapter End Notes
we’ll either have a Very Long second chapter, or this might end up as three. it kind of depends on how much longer the latter half of april’s part of TD gets.

hope you guys share the love i have for april- and all the other women here, too. apologies for the massive number of OCs in this chapter, and for the fact that they're not going anywhere any time soon. 2012 tmnt, in retrospect, has a limited cast to realistically play with in writing. we needed not just more women, but more side & supporting characters in general. (and to anyone who dislikes how majority of my OCs are women or thinks its unrealistic..... 2012 tmnt burned its own house down and its my city now.)

i’ll see you guys.... soonish? hopefully. ily all, thank again for reading <3
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The shades in which life comes in are not black and white. They are mostly grey, overwhelmingly so. How you choose to navigate that haze of grey- how you choose to define your values in morality- is entirely up to you.

Chapter Notes

hey everyone! sorry for the delay on releasing the second chunk of april's chapters. my workplace decided to drop a ton of drama on me... and i had a pretty low swing of depression. but! i'm back in business again, with a clear plan for how to deal with the drama and also wrap up april's third chapter. (i'm sorry, she's my only free agent here. she built the entire gd world for TD to play out in.) also, i edited this sort of on the fly, so while i'm fairly sure there aren't any errors i don't fully trust myself to have found them all. lemme know if you see any, and i'll fix em after my work shift today.

hope you guys enjoy, and thank you as always for being so patient :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April knows she’s definitely not going to school tomorrow. But… maybe she’ll finally find Donnie and Mikey.

Between the two choices, April doesn’t even have to think about it.

Karai tells her quietly, before everyone is sent out, that she’s giving April a location that has potential to yield clues. There’s been a disturbance in that branch of the Don’s gang, which could mean the surrounding area might be where the missing brothers are. It’s not too far from Purple Dragon territory- which is, unfortunately for the dragons, right in the middle of the brothers’ turf. It meets all the criteria they need to warrant further investigation.

So April dons the new armor she’s been gifted, places a mask over her features and pulls down her hood, and slinks out into the night with soldiers tailing her.

Her heart starts to pound as they close in on their target- the part of her that’s been set aside for so many months finally waking again. April feels like there’s pure energy just under her skin, eager, excited, electric.

She hasn’t had a real fight in what feels like ages. It’s a little scary that, on a level, she’s happy about the chance to take down a new enemy. The thrill of it is spiking adrenaline in her system and it’s making it a little difficult to keep her movements poised and precise. The desire to rush is potent.

At least the discomfort of working with Foot soldiers is keeping April’s mood properly sobered. With the scouting team, it wasn’t as noticeable, but with a full sized troop backing her… April is
acutely aware just how different this is from her missions with her real team.

Foot soldiers waste no movement, spare no seconds, and make not a single sound besides the quiet impact of their feet against rooftops. Their formation is tight, practiced to perfection no doubt. Sooner than April would have anticipated, they’ll arrive at their destination without even a moment’s pause before.

April is unused to this. With the brothers and Casey, there’s always someone talking, joking, snapping about staying focused- generally wasting time to be ridiculous and messy, like they always have. The soldiers around April are fluid figures of shadow and deadly intent, and she feels their moods settle on her like a thick blanket.

It’s almost a little suffocating, but at the same time… strangely exhilarating, to be in such a large group of people in perfect synchronization.

April recalls her dad talking about mob mentality affecting how an individual acts. With April’s empathy powers, she’ll have to mind herself that she doesn’t allow it to influence her. Not… too much, at least. After all. It’s been a long time since April got into a decent brawl. It can’t hurt to let herself indulge just a tiny bit…

April reaches out mentally and finds Mei, Katsumi, and Naomi’s auras in the group. They’re marked by small patches on their uniforms, subtle signs that they’re higher ranked than the others. April’s visible eyes say enough about how highly ranked she is. (Which is, again, fairly uncomfortable, but what can she do?) As they come to a stop, standing on the roof of the building next to their target, April focuses her ambient senses onto the calm soldiers. They should keep her from being overwhelmed by anyone else.

Mei and Katsumi glance at April for a second- April nods confirmation that they can order whatever plan that’s been set up- and with a quick hand gesture from Katsumi, they move as a wave of blades and black.

Windows are popped open silently, allowing the entry of soldiers to the upper level of the small business- the front to whatever miscellaneous illegal activities the Don uses it for. There are three steps to this plan. Step one: they surround their enemies from above and below.

April is a part of the group that’s taking the high ground, readying herself for the ambush as they all creep into position.

Step two: they subdue their targets.

A shift in Mei’s footing, and they descend.

There are only nine opponents to deal with. This isn’t a particularly busy branch, though it is a very flexible one and thus worth taking. And since the soldiers outnumber the gangsters two to one, the struggle will be short and swift.

No one is expecting them to come from the level above, nor are they expecting the windows and doors to be busted down right after. The rooms are quickly consumed by chaos and shouting. April charges into the fray, ready for a taste of the action. Soldiers in her way move without question, allowing her a straight shot at the nearest wild-eyed enemy.

She catches a man’s arm before he can fully draw his weapon- a gun, dangerous but boring- and snaps his wrist a direction that forces him to drop it. She follows that up by twisting his arm behind his back, yanking on it and kicking him downwards at the same time. His wordless yell and the
noise of his shoulder popping out of its socket are almost drowned out by everything else.

April grabs his head and hits him with the butt of her newly drawn sword. The nameless man crumples and she moves onto new prey.

There’s very little left, unfortunately. The only ones remaining are a lucky few who’ve holed up in a back room with a lot of guns. April watches the Foot soldiers skirt the line of fire, rapid debate between them about how to approach the obstacle. She makes the choice for them.

Bullets are nothing. She’s had lasers shot at her for the better part of her teenage years- among other things, anyway. Back then, she couldn’t have done this. Now, however, her abilities are thrice what they were. April knows the path of the deadly pieces of metal in the air, and with a swell of her power, rushing out from her hands, she redirects any of them that might hit her. She’s at the wreckage of the doorway almost too soon, a handful of kunai swapping places with her sword.

The faces of the gangsters are priceless.

April knows they can’t see her mouth, but she can’t help but grin as she throws the kunai. She’s no expert, but a touch of telekinetic power guiding her power makes up for it. Each blade lodges itself through the backs of their hands, putting a stop to their hail of bullets.

April didn’t quite plan for that to happen, but at the same time, she did. She blinks a few times, suddenly off-kilter.

She watches as the gangsters moan and cry out as their hands bleed; their fingers stiff and unresponsive as blood streaks across their skin. April feels the weight of more throwing knives in her hands, another unplanned response- and they disappear from her fingers, only to reappear imbedded in the shoulders of the two men who try to rush her despite their injuries.

April thinks a part of her has slipped away. She’s in control of what’s happening right now, but she also isn’t. Like she’s both the actor and observer to a play.

Figures brush past her to collect the fallen men, and those brief touches jolt April back into her body. All at once, she can sense every ounce of pain she’s inflicted on the people before her, and April stumbles away as fast as she can.

April finds herself stuck pressed against a hallway wall. She sucks in shallow breaths and tries pushing away the waves of pain coming from within the room.

It doesn’t quite work, her mental shields shaken by the results of her attacks. Her power has always been a double-edged sword to her- for every gain she makes, there’s a price to pay. The price, this time, is sharing the agony of her victims.

She retreats, yanking her awareness back to herself and walking quickly away from the room and its terrible pain. April feels her chest getting tight, throat constricting, the effects of everyone’s heightened emotions around her taking their toll on her already weakened shields-

April is looking for another fight, still, so she nearly draws a weapon on the next person that’s in front of her.

“Ma’am?” says the Foot soldier. They don’t flinch at the gleam of a blade. “We’ve collected them all in one room, excluding the ones back there. They’re ready for you.”

This is the last step to this raid. Step three: interrogation.
April stares for a beat, and then shakes off her daze. She lets her sword slide back into its sheathe. “Right. Good. Uh, thanks.”

This would not be the place to lose her shit, not with witnesses and probably casualties around. What’s even gotten into her, anyway? She’s been in battles a hundred times over at this point. People get hurt during them, one way or another. She hasn’t let that get to her like this before.

(She hasn’t been in a real fight since Splinter died. Hadn’t been in any prior to his death, either, except for… except for against her own family…)

April isn’t the same person from before those two battles. Her powers and mind aren’t the same.)

April doesn’t notice she’s come to stand in the middle of a room until it’s too late. Foot soldiers are holding six of the gangsters in a semi-circle around her, the prisoners’ hands bound behind their backs by zip ties, forced to kneel. One of the missing gang members are hauled into the room as April takes it all in. The last two are dragged in a beat later, blood soaking their fronts and April’s kunai still buried between their pectorals and shoulders.

April looks away from the sight. (Coward. She still can’t face the damage she’s capable of.)

Instead, she looks to the real leaders in the room- Mei, Katsumi, both of their auras are compelling and intertwined, and Naomi’s a steady thrum of confidence- and April gets a nod of approval from Katsumi.

April takes a breath, settling her nerves.

“Who here has seen a turtle lately?” she asks in a raised voice, unable to resist the startling manner she phrases things. Silence is the response. April starts a slow pace, eyes sweeping over their prisoners. “Come on, you work for Vizioso, you know who I’m talking about. We dug up that you’ve been having trouble recently- interruptions to drop-offs, cancelled meetings, traded goods going missing… I want to know where my friends are, and it’s in your best interest to tell me.”

Still, none of them respond. April feels a flicker of irritation catch inside her, becoming a flame and growing larger. Her earlier panic is swiftly consumed by that fire.

“Tell me where you saw them,” April orders them. “Tell me where you saw them.” When they continue to stay stubbornly silent, she sighs. “Get them on their feet.”

Her request is fulfilled immediately- soldiers hauling kneeling prisoners roughly to their feet, ignoring curses and exclamations of pain. April glares at them all, waiting a beat, and then letting power slide out of her core. She reaches to the gangsters, brushing their auras and minds. April senses fear, anger, hatred- she swallows the bitter taste of those and holds steady.

“One last time,” she says, tone starting even and climbing in emotion as she continues with, “or I swear to god, I will make you wish you’d never lied to me to begin with. Answer me when I ask this. Where. Did you. See them?”

Eight of the captured gangsters are still drawing blanks- though, some are starting to really be scared of her.

It’s the ninth person that lights up in April’s senses.

She rounds on him, eyes blazing. “YOU,” she accuses with a shout, marching over to him and grabbing his collar. The soldier holding him lets go and allows April to keep shoving the man backwards, cornering him against the wall and pinning him there with a kunai’s blade to the throat.
“Where did you see them?” April hisses, pressing the tip of her weapon against his Adam’s apple. “I know you know something. I know you’ve seen them! Tell me now!”

“I-I-”

“Spit it out already.”

“Long time ago, I swear, we been keepin’ clear of their hotspots. The turtles aren’t mutants we wanna have beef with; that’s way above our paygrade.”

“Then what’s with the trouble you’ve been having lately?”

“Small time gang, basically just popped up- Purple Dragon wannabes, pushing at getting a chunk of turf for themselves. I-I think they got a mutant with ‘em, but, uh. It’s not one’a the turtles. ‘s just a lizard or something.”

April stares at him hard, pushing her connection to his mind deeper in. As far as she can without entering his subconscious with astral projection; it’s hard to ignore the impulse to push deeper anyway, override his mindscape and just take what she needs... April shudders internally, sickened by her own thoughts. Refocusing, she threads through those claims, examining their truthfulness.

April’s powers find no lie in the gangster’s words. She curses silently at the waste of effort on her part. Pulling out of his mind, April shoves those more dangerous thoughts in her head back down into the pit they belong in.

She drops his collar, letting him slump against the wall as she steps back. Katsumi slips up to April’s side, then, and whispers, “I mean no offense to your interrogation skills, but perhaps I could… try my hand at things? I am well versed in the art of persuading a caged bird to sing.”

Katsumi flicks her wrist, and three long needles appear between her fingers. April feels the intent of those tools, as well as the remnants of the pain they’ve caused.

The man is stiff as stone against the wall, eyes wide and skin pale. His aura reeks of fear. His fellow gang members do as well. It’s all making April’s stomach knot up uncomfortably.

“No, it’s fine,” April says calmly, keeping her recoil of disgust at Katsumi’s offer of torture to herself. “I know he’s telling the truth.”

“Oh? How?”

“I just do. Please, let me leave it at that.”

Katsumi considers her for a moment, head at a slight tilt and gaze palpable even with her mask on. Then, she stows her needles away again and steps back.

“Of course,” Katsumi says politely. “Is there anything else you require with our prisoners?”

April shakes her head, walking towards the edge of the room. “No... They don’t have anything useful for me. I’ll wait outside while you guys finish up with whatever you need to do here.”

“Very well. It will take only a short time.”

April is just rounding the corner of the doorway when the faint sound of metal slicing through the air reaches her ears, followed a split second later by something thick being cut.

April is frozen as she hears a body hit the floor.
The screaming starts right after.

April can’t make herself turn around. She just stands there, listening to the people they’ve captured cry out for their murdered friend. The emotions that explode into April’s senses almost wind her-the overwhelming horror, grief, fury, terror-

She stagers, hands clutching her head. She can’t shut it out. It keeps flooding in, like her shields don’t even exist, drowning her in too much, too much pain. April’s heart is loud and heavy in her ears, almost louder than the footsteps coming up from behind her and the drag of something on the floor.

April is gently pushed out of the way as two people pass her by. She makes the mistake of looking downwards as they do.

They drag the man she’d interrogated by his arms, his head hanging backwards. The angle pulls the gaping wound across his throat even wider than it already was, fresh blood still pouring from the cut veins and arteries.

April blanks out.

-/-

April catches up with herself later, her hands against rough stone as she bends forwards, head down.

The cold night wind is brushing against her face. She’s missing her mask. Figures move around in the edge of her vision, unfamiliar, but April is too shaky to run.

A hand touches her back. April lets out a sound that’s sheer terror and vicious reflex, spinning and gripping the limb. She holds it in a lock, ready to break it.

Naomi’s scar is the only thing that stops her. April recognizes it first, before she does the rest of the woman’s face.

April’s lungs burn. Her body feels like it’ll fall apart at the seams any second now.

“It’s okay,” Naomi says softly, letting April hold her arm at an awful angle. “I get it. The first time is always the hardest.”

The first time?

The man’s near decapitation rips through April’s memories, her present- and she drops Naomi’s arm.

April throws up on the rooftop she somehow managed to get onto; gloved hands back against the wall and head once again down. Tears streak her face as she retches, her mind too full of fractures to bring herself under control.

Naomi’s hands come to rest on her back again, gentle and soothing. April hiccups and coughs. The bile burns as bad as her eyes do.
It’s a miracle she doesn’t snap and blow anything up.

April knows she’s retreated from reality. She knows she’s not fully present, that she needs to be (she can’t lose control, she can’t lose control-), but she just can’t pull herself back together.

Everything hurts. She’s scared and doesn’t want to go back to that. April wants to be somewhere warm, familiar- her bedroom, her apartment’s living room, the lair, the farmhouse, with them- but she can’t parse what’s happening around her enough to formulate a plan to get to those places.

April ends up somewhere warm anyway. It’s enough for the time being, and she slips away completely.

Her mind doesn’t rest even then. Visions follow her every step through unconsciousness. Spectres and shadows, laced with the feelings of terror that chill April to her very soul. She walks through the halls of her school, sword in hand, her classmates all missing from the abandoned hallways- something stalks her through those hallways, crushing under its feet the scattered supplies and backpacks the missing students have left.

April is alone in her school save for that stalking thing. She feels it getting closer with each new hall she turns down, but she can’t figure out how to run. Her thoughts are muddled, important things she needs to remember evading her grasp. Each step she takes in the direction she wants takes all her effort. If her concentration wanes for even a moment, she begins to lose her way, wandering aimlessly as the thing grows closer and closer and closer…

April knows she could turn around. Then she could fight it.

But could she? It feels so big, so impossible to defeat. April feels the grasp of fear locking like a cage around her chest, shortening her breath with every step forwards.

Her sword leaves a long trail of blood behind her, the stain traveling up its length and further up her arm. April wants to wipe it off, but she can’t.

The thing is so very close behind her. She can feel its breath on her neck.

April’s eyes open to the underside of a bed, heart stuttering in her chest. She holds rigidly still for a long, long few moments, breathing suddenly hitching and coming fast. A few tears slide down the sides of her face, dripping into her hair and ears.

April gasps for air until she starts to breathe something close to evenly. She scrubs her eyes and ears, erasing the tears. It’s only then that she can slowly sit up, shaky hands feeling the mattress and sheets underneath her. She’s on a bed… under another bed.

It’s a bunkbed.

April stares around herself comprehensively. Rows of bunkbeds surround her, each bed fitted with what look like nice blankets and pillows, all of which in varying states of tidiness. A few other people are in the room, curled up under their blankets. April can only see them because of very low lights along the edges of the room, near the bottom of the walls.

She has no idea where she is, or how she got here.
And, upon a startled examination, she has no idea where she got the comfortable pajamas she’s in. They have winged pieces of sushi on them. After the dreams she’s had, April is having a difficult time adjusting to the abrupt change in pace.

Quietly as she can, April shuffles off the bed and puts her bare feet on the soft carpet. She leaves the bed behind, creeping through the bunk room with her arms wrapped around herself. No one rises from the other beds, which is a relief. April feels frazzled and knows she’s on a hair trigger.

Where is her sword. Where is her tessen.

With a sickening lurch, April needs those things in her hands right this instant.

Her exit from the bunk room isn’t the most graceful or stealthy; she’s out the door before she realizes it and stops just short of slamming it behind her. The panic from earlier- from before she blanked out- threatens to return in full force the longer she’s confused. April doesn’t have her weapons, her armor, any idea where the fuck she is-

The chatter of voices coming down the hall startles her. April jumps badly enough she’s abruptly another six feet away from the three people coming her direction; very close to lashing out with her telekinetics.

Two women and a man blink at her, all of them dressed in casual clothes. April belatedly recognizes them from the troop.

“Ah,” says Rin- April remembers her from that one breakfast and their spars. Rin smiles at her, piercings twinkling in the overhead lights. “You’re awake. That’s good. The captains and our doctor were getting a little worried about you.”

Even more belated than her recognition of who she’s speaking with, April manages to shove away most of the intense panic she’s experiencing still. “Um… yeah, sorry about all… that.” April feels completely embarrassed for her behavior. They’d been in the middle of a mission and she’d derailed it all because she couldn’t-

The torn throat of the dead man flashes through her thoughts and April’s heart seizes up.

“April? April, are you okay?”

As much as she’d like to just curl up on the floor, April knows she can’t. This isn’t the place for that; she shouldn’t cause more trouble than she already has. Besides, it’s not anyone’s fault but her own that she can’t handle a little gore. She’s killed plenty of times- Kraang drones, mindless mutant creatures, whatever flavor of the week aliens they met in space… and humans, too, probably. She and her friends were at war with the Foot for a long time; there had to have been a moment when the slice of April’s weapons left damage her target couldn’t recover from.

She’s just never been around afterwards to see the result of that damage.

(Except… except for that one time.)

“I… I’m fine,” April says, far quieter and less certain than she’d like. “Just… tired, I think.”

Rin gives her a sympathetic look. “Nights like this will take it out of anyone, huh? Even prodigies. C’mon, Dr. Martinez will probably want to look at you. We’ll sort you out and then let you get some more rest.”

April’s head isn’t on straight enough to refuse. She lets herself be led through the church’s inner...
maze, conversation between Rin and her fellow soldiers flowing over April without note. She doesn’t have it in her right now to feign being capable of normal socialization.

Though, she does mull over Rin’s comment. Prodigy. April hasn’t ever even considered assigning that title to herself, and no one else has either. Besides her… odder qualities (mutant powers, genetically manipulated family history, scattered martial arts training, etc.) April has been comfortable with being called a gifted student. Not a prodigy, just gifted in the sense that memorization and repetition in school is easy for her.

If she were a prodigy in anything to do with ninjutsu- which Rin is probably referring to- master Splinter would have told her. But, he didn’t, so obviously she’s not one. If anything, the praise is only given to her because Rin hasn’t seen the brothers in action yet. April has a few years of training. They have a lifetime’s. It doesn’t take much thought to know who’s going to be more skilled.

April doesn’t realize how far she’s followed that train of thought into her own head, and it’s not until she bumps into Rin that she comes back to reality.

“Got another one for you, doctor!” Rin is calling out, ignoring April’s clumsiness.

“If one of you ignored a twisted ankle again and it’s swelled up like a baseball as a result… don’t expect any sympathy from me.”

“Aw, doc,” coos one of the soldiers with April and Rin. “You’re so mean to us,” he laughs, “even though we’re saving you supplies and time by doing that.”

“You’re wasting both those things when you come crying to me later on,” mutters the irritated voice inside. April finally peeks around Rin and searches for the owner of it.

There are a handful of people sitting on stools and beds, in the process of being treated for minor wounds and gashes needing stitches. Four different medical staff persons are working on them, ranging in appearance. Only one of them is looking at them all in the door, and April’s senses inform her that this woman feels like calm authority personified. She’s got her dark, dark brown hair tied up in a bun, not a strand out of place, and rimless glasses perched on her nose. If April hazards a guess, she’d say the doctor is in her late thirties.

“Well, it’s not us who need patching up anyway,” Rin says quickly, grabbing April by the shoulders and pushing her to the front of their group. April squeaks, surprised. “Ms. O’Neil here needs a checkup after her ordeal. Take care of her!”

There’s a rush of wind right after that, brushing against her back. April doesn’t have to glance behind herself to know she’s been abandoned. She stands in the doorway, hovering outside the infirmary and feeling vulnerable in just pajamas, unarmed.

The woman just sighs, waving her in. April tiptoes forwards, unsure of what to do next.

“Have a seat,” says the woman, pushing her glasses up her nose and giving April a brief onceover. “You’re not bleeding anywhere, so if you wouldn’t mind waiting a minute…”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” April says quickly. “Take your time, please.”

And just like that, she’s relegated to the background as the woman’s attention turns back to the unfamiliar Foot soldier she’s splinting the arm of. April takes a seat on one of the stools to the far side of the room, patiently waiting her turn. She wants a moment to get her head around things anyway.
The infirmary- April is assuming that’s what this is, anyway- is large enough to accommodate four beds and three small mobile tables between them. The rows of tall cabinets contain all the medical supplies needed, and the walls they’re up against as a pleasing light blue with cream accents. It’s an overall welcoming room, despite the smell of antiseptic and fresh blood.

April is all too familiar with how blood smells. It’s hard not to let that smell worm its way too far into her senses, hinting at the images that April might remember if she doesn’t keep herself calm and her head clear.

She can’t do breathing exercises- that would be counterproductive- but she can try meditating. Slow, shallow breathing, a clear mind, her powers gently curling and coiling inside her as she looks within for peace…

It helps. April is still jittery underneath her controlled emotions, still strung out feeling and on the edge, but it’s not as bad as it was. By the time the doctor calls her over, April thinks she can maintain a conversation.

“Hello, Ms. O’Neil,” greets the woman, letting April sit down on the bed. “I’m Dr. Valentina Martinez. One of our other doctors looked you over when you came back, but a double check wouldn’t hurt.” When April nods, Dr. Martinez continues while she shuffles through a small file of notes, “Your troop’s captains reported you having a panic attack tonight. Is this something that’s happened before for you?”

April bites her lip, hesitating, before saying, “Just sometimes… and only when I’ve had a really… overwhelming kind of day.”

Dr. Martinez scribbles that down on her notes. “Are you taking any medications currently?”

“Uh… a few. To help with. Things.”

“If you could please list them?”

April does. It takes a few tries, muddling through her memory to get the names right, but she does it. When she’s done, Dr. Martinez asks another question.

“You said you take antipsychotics. Do you have a pre-existing diagnosis for schizophrenia or bipolar disorder?”

“No, it’s, uh… it’s for something else.” April glances around at the remaining people in the room, anxiety rising again. She doesn’t want to talk about this. She doesn’t want to explain her powers and their origin around strangers- they won’t understand, and she risks adverse reactions.

April only really trusts her small friend group with her secrets. Those secrets are too complicated and dangerous for anyone else to know.

So of course, telling all that to a doctor trying to treat her… might not go over well.

Dr. Martinez raises an eyebrow at April’s lack of answers. However, she seems to just sweep that aside and proceed with other questions about April’s medical history. April is grateful for that, and hopes maybe she can get away with not explaining at all.

“Alright,” Dr. Martinez says eventually, setting aside her notes and taking a stethoscope from around her neck. “I’m going to check your heart and lungs. Breathe in when I tell you to.”

It’s just a regular checkup from there. April isn’t sure what she’d been expecting of what
constitutes as a mafia doctor, but the normalcy of the experience wasn’t it.

By the end, Dr. Martinez comes to a simple diagnosis. The only injury April suffered tonight is her pride, it turns out. April rubs her arms, hugging herself and feeling like she’s wasted everyone’s time.

“Sorry,” April says as Dr. Martinez finishes with her notes, “I’m usually never so… squeamish.”

“Don’t apologize,” Dr. Martinez says tonelessly. She doesn’t even glance at April as she stands up, walking away from the examination table. “Every new member undergoes a physical and psychological evaluation. You would have ended up here eventually, whether master Karai thinks it’s necessary or not.”

“Oh,” April says. She remains sitting on the table, ankles crossing and uncrossing as she fidgets in discomfort. The other patients have long since left, leaving just April with the four doctors. They’re all packing things into a large kit, now, and April can’t help herself before she asks, “Are you going somewhere?”

“Just downstairs!” one of the other doctors replies cheerily, offering an excited grin to her. His lab coat’s embroidery reads Dr. Ancel, and his young features lead April to think he’s in his mid-twenties.

“Still, it’s a hell of a trip. The stairs are a nightmare, so thank god for the elevator.” The complaint and oath come from the third doctor in the room, her cane hanging off her arm as she sorts through sealed packets of supplies. April has to subtly crane her neck, but she eventually spots the name Dr. Samra embroidered on the young woman’s coat.

“I second that opinion,” mutters the last doctor, a much older gentleman with a well-trimmed beard. His lab coat proclaims his name to be Dr. Falk, and April briefly is intrigued by the two missing fingers from his right hand- his pinky and ring finger.

“Less chatting, more packing,” Dr. Martinez orders sternly.

April watches them all a moment longer, not really having much else to do. She doesn’t want to face the troop, doesn’t want to face Karai or Shinigami- she doesn’t even want to call her friends. Or her dad. The thought of explaining her dad, that she’d been party to the murder of someone- April shuts that train of thought down before she has to throw up. Again.

No. No, she doesn’t want to face anyone she knows or talk about what happened. Not yet. She just… needs something tactile and grounding to do.

“Can I come with you?” April asks before she realizes it. Dr. Ancel gives her a puzzled look, and April explains quickly, “To help, I mean.”

That only serves to make him seem more puzzled. “That’s not really your job, right? Raj, is that her job? I can’t keep track of all these Footsies.”

“Her job is whatever she wants it to be, far as I know. And-” Dr. Samra shoots Dr. Ancel a narrow stare, “-I’m fairly certain we’ve all told you to stop calling the soldiers that.”

“But it’s funny.”

“Only to you and twelve year old boys.”
“I’m twelve at heart, you know that.”

“Children,” Dr. Martinez says in an annoyed tone, “could you please refrain from bickering and act like the qualified, functional adults you’re supposed to be?”

“Ah, let them flirt, Martinez,” says Dr. Falk. He chuckles as Ancel and Samra hiss and deny that statement.

Ignoring the background drama, Dr. Martinez turns to April and says, “We’re going downstairs to give vaccinations and checkups. You can come so long as you stay out of the way, and make sure to vomit into a trashcan, not onto my tools.”

“I won’t vomit,” April says peevishly, cheeks heating. “And- I won’t get in your way, either. I promise.”

Martinez doesn’t acknowledge her reply, but when the four doctors have everything packed up and are headed out the door, April is beckoned to hurry up along with everyone else.

-/-

April has been in a number of absurd situations, and yet, her life always manages to supply a new one.

She’s currently been tasked with mixing a cocktail of fertilizer, water, and soil vitamins in a big bucket. In her borrowed PJs, with giant kittens brushing up against her pant legs as they try to peer at what she’s doing, and probably in desperate need of a meal and shower. The fact that this is all in the midst of a vaccination clinic set in a former dungeon is just the kicker.

April is very tired, despite having spent a few hours asleep. At this point, she’s just letting this happen to her and accepting reality’s unreality.

“Is this done enough?” April asks, nudging Ozzy away with one leg as she hefts the bucket. A rustle of leaves and a peacefully serene face emerges from the vines covering the wall.

“…Yes, it’s perfect,” replies Cindy, her voice whisper soft and delayed slightly. Her body of vines-splayed across the wall of her shared room- shift and writhe slowly, like snakes dotted with small white buds.

April nudges Ozzy and Marley away from herself, staring at the deep pot Cindy has her roots sunk into. “So, uh… how do I…?”

Cindy laughs like how a breeze sounds, thick vines lifting away from the wall. “Here, let me. Thank you… for my dinner.”

“No problem,” April replies, handing over the bucket to the plant mutant. She then ushers the kittens away as she leaves, giving Cindy the courtesy of not staring at her while she pours the concoction into her large pot.

April had managed to keep herself from doing a double take, earlier. Cindy had been surprising, sure, but April has seen weirder things than a sentient plant. Besides, the former community gardener is as polite and sweet as anyone April has ever met. How could she be rude to someone
like that?

The kittens have no qualms, anyway; the way they kept batting at Cindy’s leaves and trying to gnaw on vines. April isn’t sure how she ended up on babysitting duty, but she did and she hasn’t been able to shake the four fuzzy siblings. Though- just as she’s lamenting that fact, having nearly tripped over Amy again- said four siblings abruptly abandon her, racing off. April only has to catch a glimpse of Aretha’s shiny scales to know why, and she smiles.

With her latest task completed, and her entourage gone, April meanders back towards the main room where Dr. Martinez and the others are. She’ll ask for another job, they’ll give her one, and she can blessedly keep not thinking about anything else. A perfect plan to deal with her mental shitshow- by not dealing with it as long as possible.

(April is fully aware this is a very bad method of coping. She is also fully aware that being fully aware of that fact isn’t going to stop her from doing it.)

Lost in thought, April doesn’t notice that someone steps out of a room in front of her, causing a mild collision of startled hissing on both ends.

“I’m sorry!” April says quickly, and then blinks.

“It’s alright,” replies Corey, laughing a little. “I should’ve known better than to not look both ways before crossin’ the street, so to speak.” His thin lips are quirked in a smile, and from the brief onceover April gives him, she thinks he’s looking much better than the last time they saw each other. What patches of cracked, flaking scales there’d been are healed, shiny and new. His color is richer, eyes brighter.

April’s previous not-thinking about her own problems are banished from mind; her happiness about Corey’s recovery swelling in their place. “I’m still sorry. So, ah, how’ve you been? Sorry I didn’t come and check in on you sooner…”

They end up talking, the conversation just lengthening unbidden. They chat as they return to the center room, where everyone is milling in and out for the clinic. It’s a messy, chaotic space, but for once April doesn’t feel overwhelmed. She has Corey to focus on, and besides, all the emotions around her right now are on the positive side.

“I’m really giving it consideration,” Corey is telling her, clawed fingers clasped together in front of himself, wringing them nervously. “Even if I can’t go back to my old life, if there’s a chance I could get in regular contact with my family again…”

“I think you should take the chance,” April encourages gently. “I mean, I might be speaking from a bit of a biased position… but sometimes people are more accepting than you think they’re going to be.”

Corey laughs and shakes his head. “Whichever mutants you’re speaking about, they’re lucky to have you as their friend.”

April hadn’t been talking about the brothers or the rest of her mutant acquaintances, actually- she’d been talking about herself. But, she doesn’t try to correct Corey, nodding mutely and listening to him as he continues with, “I’m just hoping my daughter will give me even half a chance to explain what’s happened to me. I. I almost went to her and my wife, a few times… but I couldn’t ever work up the courage to actually go inside.” He gets very sad for a moment, his mood sinking low in April’s senses. “I missed Camryn’s twenty-first birthday last month. We were planning on going out with the whole extended family for her first legal drink…”
Amongst the busyness of the room, the space around the two of them is somber. Grieving. April has known for a long time now the struggle that mutated animals face, grappling with identity and personhood. However, she didn’t quite know the full extent of the struggle mutated *humans* face. Mutant animals have to carve out and cultivate their place in the world. Mutant humans have to lose theirs, forced give up what they had and cling to whatever is left.

“You called me Camryn, the first time we met,” April says, heart aching. “Did you think…?”

Corey shrugs, giving a bittersweet smile. “I saw your hair first, since we only had the lamp. My girl has the same hair as you, but much curlier. It was stupid of me to think that she’d somehow found me, but hey, everyone is entitled to a little bit of hopeless hope, right?”

The slight waver to his words threatens to make April’s eyes sting. She fights the mist back and places a hand on Corey’s shoulder, squeezing it. “You miss her,” April says, her own voice wavering a little. “Of course you’d think I was her in the dark.” She smiles warm as she can, despite the painful second-hand emotions she’s feeling. “I hope you get to actually see her again soon, Corey.”

Corey sniffles and blusters, and abruptly draws April into a hug. His spines prickle her cheek, but April doesn’t mind. She hugs him back, knowing he needs her support. It makes her feel lighter, too; offering comfort to another person.

(Wasn’t it just a few hours ago that her hands were used to harm others? And yet, here she is, trying to help heal, even though it goes against everything she’s been trained into. Everything she was created for.)

“You’re a good kid,” Corey says, a tad hoarsely.

April bites back all the terrible things she done in the past— in the recent past— and just nods, accepting the words of praise.

By the time she leaves the church, reclaimed weapon in hand— she leaves her sword— April is tired enough to sleep again. She goes home with an ache in her chest and a coldness returning to her limbs. When she finds her dad in the kitchen, puttering around in his morning routine before work, a dozen anxiously pacing thoughts grind to a halt.

“April?” her dad says, surprised but not startled by her appearance. He gives her a smile. “Good morning, hon. Glad you came back safe.”

Tears unexpectedly flood April’s eyes at those words.

Everything hurts, the world is a terrible place, and she feels powerless to fix any of it. Even the things she’s directly involved in.

Clutching her dad close mitigates some of that despair, but not all of it. April only lets herself cry for a short while, not wanting to take any more of her dad’s time and energy than she has to. Still, he doesn’t ask her to stop through the whole jag. Her dad just runs his hand over her scalp and down her back, soothing her hiccups as April cries out everything that’s built up the past day.

“April?” her dad says, surprised but not startled by her appearance. He gives her a smile. “Good morning, hon. Glad you came back safe.”

Tears unexpectedly flood April’s eyes at those words.

Everything hurts, the world is a terrible place, and she feels powerless to fix any of it. Even the things she’s directly involved in.

April feels badly for how much she relies on her dad, how much she receives without giving enough in return— but she can’t pull herself away, either. Not right away. Not while the living nightmare that her life has become rakes its claws through her heart and mind.

She doesn’t explain why she’s crying, even as the crying fit subsides. April doesn’t know how she even would— how she could look her dad in the eye and say *I helped kill someone tonight, without*
even meaning to.

She passes it off as another meltdown post-overstimulation. She can feel the doubt her dad has, but he lets it go anyway. April pushes down that new source of guilt and accepts a breakfast of instant oatmeal and cut fruits. It all tastes like ash in her mouth.

-/-

April almost doesn’t go back to the church the next evening.

She spends the whole day sleeping fitfully, and when she isn’t doing that, she’s mindlessly working through her school assignments. She doesn’t even bother with proof reading the social paper she writes; she knows it’ll be garbage and she’ll have to redo it later on anyway. But, even if her homework turns out subpar at best, at least it fills the spaces in her head.

If she’s thinking about equations, or formulas, or the industrial revolution- then she isn’t thinking about last night. Besides, she’s way behind on her work and hasn’t been to school in days. This is something she should have done ages ago, if only to avoid expulsion.

April briefly wonders how many detentions she’s stocked up. Then has a private laugh at the idea of a school teacher confining her for anything, let alone missed classes and deadlines. Her respect for that kind of authority at this point is practically nothing. April can count on her fingers the number of people who’d even stand a chance of keeping her somewhere she doesn’t want to be, and even then, she bids the best of luck to her friends and dad.

She’s already been through plenty enough experiences with having her freedom stolen, thank you very much.

As the day creeps into evening, April looks out her window at the sun as it become hidden by skyscrapers. As much as she wants to just stay here in her room, this little bubble away from the world, she knows she can’t.

Donnie and Mikey are still missing. Leo and Raph are starting to get worried; sending her messages to just triple confirm she hasn’t seen their brothers. Casey has sent a few himself, a few asking if she’s doing alright, and a few along the lines of I’m scared for them, what if something’s happened?

Well, that’s not what he actually says, but it’s implied. Under his bravado and general ridiculousness, Casey cares for his friends with a wholeheartedness that almost scares April. She sometimes wonders if there’s even an end to that loyalty, and how far he’d have to be pushed for it to break.

(But she knows the answer to that question already. She came very close to ruining her friendship with Casey- with all her friends. April knows exactly what point he might snap.)

April goes through her steps to get ready- dresses in durable, flexible clothes; secures her tessen in its holster; takes her meds and drinks a power shake. She leaves another note on her door, explaining to her dad that she’s going out again tonight. He asked her this morning to consider taking time off from whatever she’s been doing; to relax and maybe just stay home. His concern for her had gotten lodged in April’s throat and made it hard to speak her lie. I’m fine, dad. It was just an anxiety attack. I promise I’ll avoid doing anything to cause another one, alright?
April could laugh at the dishonesty of those words. She knows she isn’t going to stop. It doesn’t matter what it takes- she’ll find her friends and bring them home, damn the consequences to herself. She owes them that much.

The church is in its sleepy transition between shifts when she arrives. Daytimers are finishing dinner, looking forwards to bed. Nighttimers are just waking up, shuffling around for breakfast and coffee. No one is particularly alert, and April is amused by the thought that this would have been the ideal time to attack the Shredder, not so long ago.

She pictures the horrible man in her mind… wearing fluffy slippers and a housecoat, halfway done a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. She pictures them having taken him out like that, and nearly glances around herself to share the morbidly hilarious image. But none of the brothers or Casey are here with her, of course, so she swallows the humor and trudges up to the level troop one is on.

It feels a little weird. Walking back to this group of people she witnessed murder someone in cold blood yesterday. April finds herself slowing her ascent, reconsidering. She doesn’t know if she can face the troop right now, not with the weight of what they did pressing down on her.

She makes a detour, switching destinations.

April is surprised that Karai is in the throne room when she enters. She’d thought her wishful thinking was the source of her hunch steering her this way, but no, the leader of the infamous and feared Foot clan is standing by the windows behind her throne. April announces her presence by climbing with audible steps, approaching Karai with purposeful casualness.

“April,” greets Karai.

“Karai,” April greets in return.

Karai flicks her golden irises towards April, not quite turning her head. “Can I help you with something? You’re interrupting my one moment of solitude tonight.”

“Yeah, you can, actually.” April takes her hands out of her hoodie’s pockets and crosses her arms. “What the fuck was that, last night? I didn’t sign up for that shit, Karai. I’m not a murderer.”

“You’ll find that you are,” Karai replies smoothly. “Or do the mutants, aliens, and various monsters you’ve hunted down not count? And let’s not forget the soldiers you and my brothers gave internal bleeding, or severe enough trauma that they died many painful hours after your battles.”

“You know what I mean, Karai,” April grinds out. She will not be manipulated the way Karai is trying to. “Those were fair fights- I had to do those things. I don’t kill regular people just to intimidate the competition.”

Karai doesn’t smile or smirk or even frown. She’s blank. “Did you read the news today?”

The question doesn’t throw April. “No. I didn’t feel like giving myself another panic attack.”

“Fair. But you missed some details about things.” Karai stops there and April resists taking the obvious bait for a few moments.

“What details?” she asks, patience wearing thin. “And don’t give me any bullshit, Karai. I can tell when people lie to me.”

“I know,” Karai says, and oh, April really hates the amusement in her voice. She briefly misses the
days when she was allowed to punch Karai in the nose.

“Antonio Phillis.”

April remains quiet, waiting for Karai to continue. The woman does so a beat later. “Twenty-four years old, no known dependants. The only ties to his community went through the Don’s gang. He had four counts of misdemeanor offenses, and several cases domestic violence and sexual assault that never went to court.” Karai turns to April, giving a cold, even look. “Whether you’d singled him out as your informant or not, he would have been the one we made an example of. We don’t kill indiscriminately, April. I’m not the Shredder.”

“You still killed him,” April says, though she feels herself being swayed already.

Karai shrugs. “I did what the law should have done a long time ago. And I know it’s a hypocritical thing to say- the Foot is just as guilty of crimes like that. But it won’t be ever again. Vizioso needs to know that things are changing in this city and a good way to show that is by picking off all his favored gang members. They may have escaped U.S. law, but they can’t escape mine.”

April takes that all in. Mulling over it and Karai’s reasoning.

“…It doesn’t make it right,” April settles on. Because if she agreed otherwise… who would that make her?

Karai gives a small smile. “No, it doesn’t. But it makes me slightly less wrong than them.”

April isn’t so certain about that- the morality of this whole situation is so grey- but she doesn’t say so. She just nods in vague acceptance, and excuses herself.

April sighs to herself outside of the throne room, pausing in the hall to collect her thoughts. The knowledge that Antonio Phillis was a horrible person… it makes it a little less sickening to have seen his corpse. A little black seed was planted in April’s heart a long time ago, feeding off the terrible things she saw and the irredeemable people she met. It’s ended up blooming inside her as the thought some people deserve to die.

She just isn’t comfortable choosing which people, specifically, deserve death. It brings back memories of feeling invincible, like the world should bend to her whims and no one else’s. That she was judge, jury, and executioner, and nobody could ever take that from her.

Then she’d woken up from that fantasy, and she still feels fearful static edge her thoughts, even now, just from thinking about it.

April starts walking again, trying to leave those old terrors behind herself. They cling at her heels all the way to the troop’s floor, not leaving her until she can let an ambient wave of companionable emotions wash over her.

“Apart!” Rio exclaims, the first person to spot her as she comes in. April manages a small hello has a number of people glance her way, right before Rio hurries over to fuss over her. “You doing alright, kid? You had a rough night; I was almost worried. Are you hungry? We got oatmeal tonight.”

“I- I didn’t eat dinner yet, but I’ll just get a snack later-” April cuts off and sighs as Rio ignores her; giving a shout at tonight’s chef to dish up breakfast-dinner for her. “I’m fine, Rio, I promise. Last night won’t happen again.”

Rio waves off the latter portion of her protests. “I’m not gonna say it isn’t dangerous for you to do
that, but I don’t really care either way. I just wanna know for absolute sure you’re doing alright.”

April nods. “I’m fine,” she repeats.

Rio eyes her for a long moment, and then nods. “Good.” Then she starts cackling, grabbing April around the shoulders and tucking her against her side. “Who would’ve thought the hotshot prodigy was blood shy? You acted like you’d already punched a few tickets.”

“I- well, I technically have,” April stutters, surprised by the mild manhandling. She finds herself sat on a barstool today, at the counter beside Rin and a few others. April feels herself flushing as basically everyone in the room chuckles and laughs. “I have, okay? They just weren’t humans, that’s all.”

She pretends she doesn’t sound petulant. She gets more good-natured ribbing in response to her claims, literally speaking in Rin’s case. The woman nudges April with her elbow, laughing.

“If you’re talking about killing animals,” Rin says with a teasing grin, “then I’m sorry to tell you that that’s not quite the same thing.”

“I didn’t kill animals, oh my god.” April takes an aggressive stab at the oatmeal that’s been put in front of her. “I just kept ending up in situations with, you know, mutants and aliens and… a couple monsters, too…”

“Aliens?” Rio snorts.

“Monsters?” Rin gasps, baffled.

“Ah!” Katsumi exclaims, and April glances over her shoulder at the table behind her. Katsumi and Mei are sitting together again. “You were here for the Kraang invasion, right? Were you not enslaved like other New York citizens?”

April nods, though she’d been thinking more about the alien races she crossed paths with while in space. “Me and my friends got away before anyone could snag us, and we came back a few months later to get rid of the Kraang.”


“Well, it wasn’t just me. I had my friends. Oh! And we’re the ones who got rid of the Triceratons, too, though we had some other friends of ours helping out.” April pauses as she feels a ripple of disbelief move through the room. That’s understandable; she was there for those experiences and even April has a hard time believing it sometimes.

“So, you are not a greenhorn to true combat, then,” says a smooth male voice, and Akihiro comes to stands at the counter near April. His mug of coffee steams gently in his hands, and he’s giving April a bemused smile. “I was worried for a moment, after last night, that I had lost to someone whose skills belie her experience.”

April flushes as a round of laughter comes from soldiers eavesdropping. She feels a little insulted, now, but more so embarrassed. It’s natural that they’d doubt her after how badly she reacted to a homicide right in front of her.

(It’s fucked up that her being okay with that kind of thing is an expectation of her, but hey. Nothing about April’s life isn’t fucked up.)
“I don’t usually do that kind of thing,” April defends. “I just…” She tries to find a way to explain the second-hand emotions that had been the biggest cause of her meltdown. “There were extenuating circumstances, yesterday. I wasn’t ready for, um, the reactions of the other gang members?”

Akihiro raises an eyebrow.

“There’s a little more to it, though,” April continues awkwardly. She’s dug herself into a hole, shit, shit, shit. She hadn’t planned on outright addressing her powers in front of the troop; she’d wanted to keep it a secret, even, since… it might change how these people look at her.

“Please enlighten us,” Rio says, coming from the kitchen with a pitcher of water, “because kid, you’re not making much sense right n-” Rio’s next words turn into a yelp as her foot slides out from under her- stepping on a splatter of oatmeal someone dropped- and she falls backwards. The pitcher of water goes flying, throwing its contents into the air.

It all happens in slow motion for April, who moves her hand before she even thinks to.

The whole room freezes, right before half of the people swear and back pedal away. Rio remains frozen, staring up at the suspended pitcher and water above her. She whispers a hoarse oath in Spanish, eyes wide.

April curls her fingers and the water slithers towards her, along with its pitcher. She lets the liquid swim around in the air, feeling like gelatin to her powers, and sets the pitcher down on the counter. April flicks her wrist and the water swirls, pouring into the jug and settling to a placid pool.

April lowers her hand. She glances around nervously, feeling the stares of everyone.

“So… yeah,” April says weakly. “That’s the ‘little more’ to what happened.”

The troop explodes into a flurry of questions and shouts. April winces and kind of wishes she could sink into the floor. That was such a stupid thing to do; why couldn’t she have just let Rio take the fall and keep her powers hidden a little longer?

Order is only restored as Katsumi and Mei approach April, snapping sharply in Japanese. Whatever they say, it quiets down the troop, leaving a terrible bubble of silence. April glances between the troop leaders, wary.

“Why did you not tell us you’re a mutant?” questions Mei.

“We as a team must be aware of everyone’s weaknesses and strengths,” adds Katsumi, expression pinched. “It can mean the difference between life and death.”

April fidgets guiltily. She’s kicking herself for not just taking the teasing and eating her oatmeal. Again. She needs to stop rising to provocation.

“Well?” Mei prompts.

“I’m not technically a mutant,” April finally says. She laces her fingers tightly in her lap. “And I figured that if Karai wanted everyone to know that, she would’ve told you guys. But… she didn’t, so I wanted to keep it to myself.”

“How are you only technically a mutant?” Rin asks incredulously. She’s the only person who hasn’t moved away from April and the counter, and is giving April a sideways look of confusion. “Mutants are all or nothing, right? What sort of thing did you get mutated with to have psychic
“powers?”

“I wasn’t.” April stops herself, shaking her head. No, the whole explanation will just be even more confusing. “Not all mutants are like that. Like Karai. She can shift back and forth, and I can do… this.” She demonstrates by lifting a handful of water out of the pitcher, making it spin briefly, and then dropping it back in.

“Is that the only thing?” Katumi asks, seeming a little less upset about things, now. It’s probably the lack of respect for protocol April keeps showing, rather than April’s powers being what upset her in the first place.

April thinks for a moment. It’s hard to name some of what she can do, and given how she keeps discovering more and more to her powers… best to just pick the ones she uses day to day. “I have telekinesis, obviously speaking. And I’m empathic- I can feel people emotions, and if they’re lying, but I can’t hear anyone’s thoughts.” April suppresses a slight smile as she hears a few sighs of relief. “I also have something… kind of like premonitions? I can want to find something or someone and even though it doesn’t always work right, I can typically track them down just by following hunches. I also sometimes get warnings, almost? Like if something is dangerous to me or my friends.”

She sits back as the room digests her explanation. April tentatively brushes over the emotions of the troop, and oddly enough, only finds the slightest slivers of fear here and there. Mostly, it’s confusion, disbelief, and… excited wonder.

Mei runs a hand through her short hair, letting out a heavy breath. “Okay. Okay. Good to know.”

“How much can you lift with your-” Katumi waves a hand, miming April making the water float. “That.”

“Telekinesis?”

“Yes. How much can you lift?”

“Ummm…” April tilts her head a little, feeling a little ember of pride glow in her chest. She isn’t scaring them off; these people are just curious. It’s a novel experience. “One time I lifted an oil tank truck and threw it at someone.”

Rin beside her gasps, a sparkle of delight coming from her. Rio, having picked herself off the ground, whistles appreciatively. Akihiro and his troop leaders all exchange glances, having an obvious silent conversation. April thinks she’s not imagining it that it seems like an impressed one.

“Huh,” Rio says. “Well, thanks for saving me from making a complete idiot of myself.” She grins roguishly. “Working with you just got a lot more interesting, kid.”

April laughs, startled to sense that Rio means that, and in a positive way no less. She’s never expected normal humans to accept her and her powers. She almost doesn’t know what to do with all the curious questions coming her way, or the excitement that bursts anew every time she gives an answer.

A short time later, Naomi comes into the room and looks around in confusion. “We having a celebration about something?” she questions, raising an eyebrow at the way most of the room has clustered around April and the counter.

“Uhh… or something?” April says. Her cheeks hurt a little from grinning so much, but she only smiles wider as the troop laughs with her at Naomi’s wondering expression.
With yesterday being so busy, tonight is a day off for any troop involved with the raids. Which means everyone ends up doing whatever they feel like doing. April trails the troop members through their evening activities, trying to be unobtrusive but mostly failing. It’s hard to blend into the background when people keep coming up to her every five minutes with something they want her to levitate.

“Does it taste different?” asks one of Rin’s friends, staring at the woman.

Rin finishes her glass of milk, letting out a satisfied gasp. “Mmmmmaybe?” she says, concentrating very seriously on figuring out if milk that’s been levitated tastes differently or not.

April laughs, feeling lighter than she has in days. Even under the circumstances of why she’s with the troop at all, tonight is… okay. Maybe even close to great. She doesn’t feel so strung out anymore; the worry for her friends diminished to a slight murmur in the back of her thoughts. She almost can’t remember the last time she was in such a good mood.

She’s so relaxed, sitting in a comfortable loveseat in the communal room, that she doesn’t realize someone is approaching until they’re right next to her. April glances up in surprise, meeting the eyes of an unfamiliar Foot soldier. Rin and her friends on the couches go quiet, listening in.

“Miss,” says the man respectfully, inclining his head. “Master Karai has requested you come to the Research and Technologies department immediately. It’s about your missing friends.”

April almost can’t believe her ears.

“Seriously?” she asks, swimming in disbelief. No way it’s finally happened. No way would this moment be so anticlimactic.

“Seriously,” replies the man.

April is up and out of her chair before that reply is even finished. She sprints through the church’s stupidly tangled halls, ignoring any shouts of alarm as she whips past people. She skids into the chaotic R&T department not more than a minute later, maybe even less.

Karai and Shinigami, together as usual, are standing with Jester and Piper by a collection of computer screens. April resists the urge to shove everyone out of the way and take control of the keyboard. She manages to keep it to just powerwalking over to the huddle and breathlessly saying, “You found them?”

“Yes!” cheers Jester. They- April has stopped trying to figure out which sex Jester is at this point-gesture to the middle computer screen, grinning. “Piper here took a chance on hacking a few of the buildings in the general area you had us looking at-”

“I was bored of traffic cameras.”

“-and she managed to find this single piece of footage!”

April glances at Karai and Shinigami, looking for confirmation that this is real and she’s not hallucinating. Karai nods. Shinigami gives a smile that for once isn’t smug.
“It’s them,” Karai says, and April knows she’s not imagining the flicker of warmth those words give off.

April swallows, clenching her fists. “Play the clip,” she says, shaking inside a little. “Please.”

“Of course,” Jester replies, and they tap one of the keys and the video loops back to the beginning. April leans closer without conscious thought, staring intently at the slightly grainy footage taken from security cameras. The camera is one that was placed at the back of the building; giving a good view of the tight alleyway.

For a few seconds, nothing happens. Then, a manhole cover a little ways from the building lifts. April can hardly breathe, watching as the metal disc is held still for a few beats- checking for any witnesses- and then is pushed away completely. A figure emerges, the all too familiar shape of his shell, musculature, and skateboard giving him away. Another figure follows the first out, standing up far taller than the other, bearing a side bag and a long bo staff across his shell.

April almost wants to cry in relief.

“They’re okay,” she says hoarsely, hands going to cover her mouth as she rides out the sudden emotion. Donnie and Mikey leave the alleyway, vanishing into the darkness, and the video stops. It’s barely twenty seconds long, but it’s enough. It’s enough.

A hand is placed on her shoulder, and April is surprised to find that the gesture comes from Karai. The woman is looking at her calmly, almost gently. “How do you want to proceed with this?” she asks quietly. “You can have a squad, or a whole troop.”

April swipes at her eyes and then drops her hands to her sides. “Isn’t that your call?” April questions, trying to be subtle about the sniffling she makes.

Karai takes her hand away from April and shrugs. “You’re closer to them than me. I’ll trust your judgement on this more than my own- just this once.”

April chuckles, smiling wryly at Karai. That’s a joke. Karai is joking with her, and it’s as much a surprise as the comforting hand on her shoulder was. April considers her options for a moment, letting her powers leech out from her core. She closes her eyes, feeling for which path her intuition is leaning towards.

“I… I think I should go alone, for now,” April says eventually. She opens her eyes and meets gazes with Karai and Shinigami. “Maybe some backup outside range of discovery. Now that I’ve seen them, even just for a few seconds… we know that this probably wasn’t an unwilling kidnapping. They left for a reason, and I doubt they’d appreciate us busting down their door with the cavalry. Plus, it’s easier for me to conceal myself if I’m on my own. Stealth is gonna be needed here above all else.”

Karai tilts her head, and then nods. “A decent plan, O’Neil. We’ll make you a troop leader yet.”

April rolls her eyes. “You and I both know that would go terribly.”

Shinigami titters. “Oh, but it would be so funny.”

“Don’t you have better things to do than antagonize me?”

“No really, no.”

“Not that this isn’t highly entertaining,” interrupts Jester, fearless in their addressing of their boss,
their secondary boss, and April- who might as well be a proxy boss. “But I think Miss O’Neil should get a move on. This is from tonight, a little after nine. They haven’t come back yet, so this is the opportune moment to strike!”

“I’m not attacking them,” April reminds. “This is a scouting mission.”

“Eh, potato tomato,” Jester says flippantly. April snorts, and thinks she hears Shinigami make a similar noise. Though, when April looks her way, Shinigami is pretending she’s never made such an undignified sound in her life.

“Well, this has been a nice chat,” Karai says, wrapping up things. “April, take what you need and get a move on.”

“Well, this has been a nice chat,” Karai says, wrapping up things. “April, take what you need and get a move on.”

“Sure,” April replies. Then a thought occurs to her as Karai turns to go. “Uh, wait. Could you keep this between us for now?”

Karai’s expression doesn’t change from its pokerface. Shinigami raises one immaculate eyebrow.

“You want us to not tell their brothers we found them,” Shinigami says slowly. “The same brothers who have been calling us every night and texting constantly because they are so worried.”

“Wait, they’ve been calling?” Karai asks, frowning.

Shinigami dismisses Karai’s confusion, stating, “It was just the blue one, he was just looking for new answers to the same questions.” Karai doesn’t seem entirely satisfied with that explanation, and the two women start having a silent conversation with narrowed eyes and pursed lips.

April neatly sidesteps whatever Karai and Shinigami have going on there, continuing with her original request. “Anyway. Yes, I want you to keep this from them. I want to find out more about what’s going on with Donnie and Mikey before that.”

“Why?” Karai questions, breaking her staring competition with Shinigami. “This whole thing would be over soon as they all got back together.”

“And our phone bill would not be so high,” Shinigami adds in a mutter.

“I just… I have a hunch.” April knows that’s not a very good way to explain it, but she can barely explain it to herself nine times out of ten. Premonition really sucks sometimes. “Please? We can do it soon as I know a little more, and I’ll call you as soon as I’m done, or I’ve talked with them.”

Karai narrows her eyes, dubious. “You’re sure about this one, O’Neil? I will never hear the end of it from Leo if I keep this from him for no reason.”

“Nor will I,” Shinigami says long-sufferingly.

“I am. I’m sure.” April feels her conviction swell in her chest, a sense of correctness to her actions she couldn’t hope to speak aloud.

Karai sighs. “Okay, fine. But if they find out, it’s you who takes the blame, alright?”

“Naturally,” April says dryly. Crunching noises break the tension of the conversation, and all three of them look to the source.

Jester and Piper freeze, a bag of vending machine popcorn half eaten between them. Jester swallows their latest handful of corn. “Sorry. It’s just- your lives have so much drama in them. It’s
better than TV.”

At the flat stares they receive for their comment, Jester coughs and shoves away the snack; nudging Piper with their elbow to get her moving. Piper hiccups, having swallowed too quickly, and then nods jerkily. “I’ll go get your GPS. This time, without it being stuck in Croatian mode.”

“We don’t need that mode,” Jester shouts after Piper as she hurries off.

“Keep badmouthing my language modes and I’ll stick your computer in the most obscure dialect I can find!”

“Always fun seeing you guys,” April says, bemused.

“And it’s always fun seeing you, Miss O’Neil! Now, tell me. What’s this I hear about you having psychic powers?” As April splutters, stunned Jester knows, they grin at her. “I have a far-reaching grapevine; I would’ve found out sooner or later. SO! What kinds of psychic powers do you have? Can you read minds? Or levitate objects? Oh, oh! How about mind control?”

April backs away from the enthusiasm of Jester, desperately looking to Karai and Shinigami for help. They just smirk at her, because they’re terrible.

“Have fun, April,” Karai says, and then leaves April at the mercy of extremely curious tech nerds.

-/-

April finally manages to assert herself enough to escape Jester and the other R&T members. The impulse to head directly to Donnie and Mikey’s location is what spurs her on, barely able to force herself to stop and inform Katsumi and Mei of what’s happened.

“We’ll leave immediately,” Katsumi assures her, and has a small team chosen in what seems like an instant. She’s accompanying April personally, as well as another handful of soldiers; Mei and the others will remain on base and on call, in case this turns out to need emergency backup. Rin is included on the squad that’s coming with them, and she gives April an excited bit of encouragement as they all dress.

April can hardly focus on the pep talk. Her mind is filled with buzzing anticipation, worry, and restlessness. Again, she curses that because of its size, the Foot clan is slower to mobilize than April and her friends would be. She bites back her frustration best she can, and takes off running before everyone is even on the rooftop.

She doesn’t notice until later that she left the squad far behind. It’s only because of the communicator clipped to her ear that April keeps in contact with the others.

“You move very fast, April,” Katsumi says in a slightly winded voice. The others are waiting on the edges of the area, hidden unless April calls for them.

April is a little confused by the remark. She hadn’t even been going her top speed, saving her energy in case shit hit the fan. “Sorry,” she says, filing away the comment to mull over later. “I’m heading in, now. I’ll stay in touch.”

“Good luck.”
The call is ended, and April starts a slow and careful trip to where the cameras taped her friends.

She finds the manhole easily enough. April spreads a net of her power over the alleyway, feeling for signs of mutant presence. She finds none, except for the barest traces around the manhole. She’d called Jester before she arrived in the neighborhood to check if the brothers had returned yet—she hasn’t, so April takes the plunge down into the sewers.

It’s only because of how long she’s known the brothers that she can spot the signs. It isn’t obvious at first, nearer to the surface, but as April ducks through an adjacent tunnel, finding an ancient entrance to tunnels below, she begins to spot the trail. The storm door should have been impossible to open, but there’s a secret latch on its side. Just like there is on another, not far from this part of the city.

April opens it and ducks inside, shutting it quietly behind herself. She surveys the narrow stairwell, seeing a clear path where dust has been scuffed away. She ghosts down the steps and out the next door, entering tunnels again.

From there she has to pause for a moment, feeling around for some indication of which direction she should take. She turns left, following her instincts. The scuff trails don’t work as well on the crumbling floor of this tunnel, so she has to rely entirely on her powers.

She finds again a trail to follow, later, and has to start getting creative. There are pressure traps on the ground, concealed by the gravel that’s begun to cover the tunnel floor. April can tell the traps aren’t deadly, but she knows that they’ll activate a security camera, probably a proximity alarm, too. She has to feel out where each one is, how large an area it covers, and then take a running leap over them. It’s only because she can lift herself with her powers that April can avoid giving herself away.

When she’s gotten past what she thinks is the last of them, April takes a moment to breathe and silently berate Donnie’s paranoia. There were a lot more here than there are around the lair; but that makes some sense, considering that having just two fighters is much less defensible than four. April is just glad she spent so many evenings helping Donnie recalibrate the lair’s traps. Having his security methods memorized is invaluable right now.

Squaring her shoulders and standing up properly again, April sighs and keeps going. She’s almost there, she can feel it.

April finds her destination a short while later, and what she finds is as astounding as it is confusing. The Shellraiser is parked in the end of the tunnel, the roof tall enough to accommodate the large vehicle. Beside it is what looks like a walled off subway station, sealing the interior off from the cool air of the underground.

April can’t help but stare. It’s only after she remembers she’s on a time limit that she can make herself go over to the door, an actual door into the subway. She touches the handle gingerly, and turns it even more so.

The door creaks slightly as it swings inwards. April peers in at the entrance, and is surprised to see it’s almost like a regular home’s. There’s a carpet to wipe shoes and feet on, walls that have been painted, and though April can’t see much more than that, given the dim lighting, she has a feeling that the rest of the subway station looks much the same.

She doesn’t know how to feel right now. The subway, it feels warm, safe, in her senses. This isn’t a place that was built on fear or desperation— it was a place built on care, on love. This is a home.
April is unsettled by those implications. It means that for whatever reason Donnie and Mikey disappeared, they did so of their own volition, and without an unknown enemy driving them to it.

April steps back from the doorway, breathing slow and shallow against her face mask. She’s relieved they’re okay, but this… this tells her that something much deeper has happened, and no one but the two brothers knows what that is.

April then gets a shiver down her spine, and she knows she needs to hide. She spares a split second to shut the door to the subway station, and then vaults up on top of the Shellraiser. She lies down on her belly, pulling up the hood of her uniform to conceal her bright hair. She waits, seconds ticking by, and then hears the footsteps she knew were coming.

Voices come soon after, and April feels a lump form in her throat.

She barely breathes as Donnie and Mikey return to their new home. She knows that the slightest slip could give away her presence; the brothers have the same training as her, but years more to have practiced it. April feels especially wary of Mikey, recalling moments when she managed to evade all the other Hamato siblings, only to be caught by surprise by their most lackadaisical brother.

April waits a few minutes after the door shuts behind them, and then drops to the ground, softening her landing with her telekinesis, and takes off running.

She escapes undetected.

-/-

April asks to see Karai, the moment she and her squad arrive back at the church.

She only half hears what’s said to her, outside of the agreement to take her to Karai. April’s thoughts are too loud, muffling the world around her, and she feels like her head is going to burst. Nothing makes sense. Not a single damn thing makes sense and it’s driving her insane.

April hears a polite “ahem,” for her attention, and she realizes she’s been let into a room that she’s never seen before. The double doors are shut behind her, and April blinks at the lounge she’s standing in. Karai is sitting on one of the luxurious couches, legs crossed and paperwork splayed across the coffee table. Shinigami is coming out from behind a minibar to the side, two steaming cups of tea on a tray for her and Karai.

“Well?” Karai prompts. “What happened?”

“The news is not broadcasting any explosions,” Shinigami says with a hum, sitting down next to Karai, “so I would guess that nothing much happened at all.”

April tugs down her hood, pulling off her face mask as she does. She goes and sits heavily on the couch, running a hand over her scalp and feeling lost. She takes another moment to compose herself, head down.

“…They did this willingly,” April finally says, eyes still on the carpet. She’s still trying to reconcile the Donnie and Mikey she knows, and the ones who’ve run away without a word to
anyone. It’s not working, honestly.

“And?”

“And I don’t think it was because of some enemy they haven’t told us about. They built a home. This wasn’t spur of the moment. They planned this- for weeks, maybe months.” April raises her head finally, meeting Karai’s gaze. “I don’t understand. If they weren’t in danger, or none of us are in danger… why would they leave without telling us?”

Shinigami shrugs and lifts her teacup to her lips, taking a sip before she speaks. “They are still teenagers, are they not? Perhaps this is their rebellious phase.”

April shakes her head. “No. Not them. They’re not like other teens. Their day to day survival depends on them sticking together and working as a team. And you haven’t known them as long as I have; they’ve lived together their whole lives, I’ve almost never seen one of them alone. They’re practically glued together, so…”

“This is weird for them,” Karai finishes. April nods, and Karai lets out an exasperated sigh. She sits forwards and exchanges her paperwork for a cup of tea. “I’m not sure how we should move forwards with this, then,” Karai admits, sitting back again, fingers wrapped around her cup. “If they left willingly, and severed contact at the same time for the same reason, then maybe we shouldn’t interfere. The four of them might not appreciate meddling in their business, no matter how much Leo’s been running up our phone bills.”

April clasps her hands together, squeezing her fingers. “You really think we should keep quiet about this?” she questions. “Leo and Raph… they’re worried. And they’ll get more and more worried the longer this goes on. And we’re just supposed to watch that happen?”

“What do you think we should do, then?” Karai challenges.

April almost answers without thought, but then bites her lip, stopping herself. She feels something, inside her, twisting away from telling Leo and Raph about their brothers. And she doesn’t understand why that is- why her powers would be hinting at her to keep silent about something like this.

“I… I don’t know,” April answers, dread pressing on her chest.

Shinigami regards April’s indecision with mild interest, then stands up. “I’ll make some more tea and get some snacks. I assume this will be a lengthy meeting?”

Karai sighs, leaning her cheek on her elbow, propped up on the back of the couch. “Probably. Sorry, Shini. I know you had plans for us.”

“It is fine,” Shinigami huffs, setting an electric kettle up. She sniffs disdainfully. “It’s not like I reserved a table at one of the best restaurants in New York, one I had to book months in advance.”

Karai gives April a wry smile. “I’m definitely going to be hearing about this one for the next year,” says Karai, though it’s with a fond tone.

“Sorry,” April says sincerely. “I… I should have had a plan for this, I didn’t mean to interrupt yours.”

Karai waves April off. “It’s fine-”

“No it isn’t!” Shinigami interjects.
“-okay it’s not completely fine, but I should be involved with this anyway. They are my little brothers; however troublesome they can be.”

April smiles gratefully. She doesn’t think she could go through this decision making on her own; her loyalties are divided and so are her instincts. She loves both sets of brothers, she can’t pick one over the other so easily. And while the gut reaction to bring Leo and Raph to their brothers’ new home is a strong one, her intuition practically revolts against the idea. There’s more to this. She’s missing pieces, and it’s making the full picture very hard to see.

Shinigami comes back with a platter of cookies and crackers, and hands April her cup of warm herbal tea. After that, they sit and debate and theorize. They run through the list of still active or MIA enemies they have- not many, and Karai has eyes on what ones that remain- and then start looking at possibilities of Kraang influence. It’s dropped fairly quickly, due to the fact that April knows she would have sensed something like that. After Irma… April got better at reading the people around herself.

It helps that her powers are far more developed now than they were then, but that’s beside the point.

They reach a stalemate after hours of that- hitting after midnight when Shinigami puts her foot down and reminds them they have lives to get back to. One night of sleeping on this won’t change anything, and she refuses to have her and Karai’s time together disrupted any longer.

April finally, finally catches on, seeing how the two women are always together in a whole new light. She flushes and apologizes with minimal stuttering, excusing herself.

She really should have noticed that Karai and Shinigami have that kind of relationship. She should have noticed it ages ago, because god damn it isn’t she supposed to be a psychic? April, to save some of her wounded pride, blames it on the fact that her friends are remarkably professional around others, outside of their private quarters.

April, lacking better ideas, ends up back in troop one’s dorms. Katsumi and Mei are nowhere to be seen, but Rin and her little friend group- most of which were on the mission tonight- spot April near immediately. Rin takes one look at the probably unfortunate expression on April’s face, and then ushers her off to change into comfier clothes than armor.

April ends up on a couch, given yet another cup of tea and told to rest, relax for once. April wants to get up, to keep moving so her mind can’t tangle up on itself- but she’s stopped firmly by Rin, and also Rio, who has joined in on things. Naomi watches from over the top of a novel she’s reading, smirking as April fails to escape being bundled up and taken care of.

A flurry of conversation goes over April’s head, a mixture of different languages she doesn’t know a lick of, and then there’s suddenly a movie playing on the flat screen on the wall. April comes to understand, as soldiers pull up chairs and lay out on blankets, that she’s been forced into a movie night without her consent.

She should be doing something. She shouldn’t be just sitting here, letting her almost all of her friends worry about the two who’ve done something unbelievable and cruel. April can’t stop now, can’t let herself stall and sink into a pit of overwhelming emotions and thoughts.

But Rio and Rin won’t let her off the couch, and Naomi hasn’t lifted a finger to help. Even Akihiro, sat at a table away from the movie crowd, engaged in poker, is abstaining from assisting April in any way. She’s trapped, and probably for however long this film is.
Subtitles in English appear at the bottom of the screen as it starts. As the first bit of Japanese dialogue comes over the speakers, April sighs, knowing she’ll have to actually focus on the movie to know what’s going on.

A guilty part of her isn’t so upset about that. About being stuck on the couch at all. It’s an excuse to avoid making any big choices, just for a little while longer. April can’t help but burrow a little deeper into the cushions, sipping slowly at her warm drink. She promises herself she’ll keep working on the problem right after the credits roll.

She can’t stop her eyelids from drooping, however, and before she even registers it, she’s drifted off to sleep.

-/-

Something touching her shoulder startles April out of her dreams and she whips her fist out at whatever’s gripping her.

Someone neatly and gently deflects the sloppy blow. April’s bleary mind takes another beat to catch up with her reflexes, and she blinks owlishly at Rin.

“Hey there, sleepyhead,” the woman says sweetly, face free of what little makeup she typically wears. Her piercings are mostly missing, too, save for her septum piercing.

“…Huh?” April says intelligently.

Rin laughs, the sound kind. “You slept right through the night, April. It’s almost after eight in the morning, now.”

April squints, disbelieving. No way.

“C’mon, we should head back to bed soon, and Rio and Naomi wouldn’t get off my case until I promised to make sure you ate something.”

“Um… thanks.” April sits up slowly, feeling blankets slide off of her. She’s mildly surprised that she’s somehow acquired two comforters, as well as an outrageously soft pillow under her head. She runs a hand over her hair, feeling the fuzziness of the braid from yesterday.

Rin holds out a hand for April to take. April clasps the woman’s hand and allows herself to be pulled from her comfortable couch-bed.

April eats at the counter with Rin, an echo of last night’s beginning. She’s been given leftovers, chewing steadily mouthfuls of reheated stir-fry and noodles. Rin makes some small talk, but she’s tired, too, and seems to pick up that April isn’t much of a conversationalist right now. They lapse into comfortable silence; Rin nursing a cup of tea, and April letting the warmth of her food spread through her body, making her feel slightly less half-dead.

Still. She’s… so tired. April has been running on nothing but stress and anxiety lately, spurred on by her need to locate her friends. Now she’s done that, and… doesn’t have a clear next step.

April doesn’t want to search for that next step yet. She wants to go back to the quiet darkness in her dreams, undisturbed by bright lights or nightmares conjured by her PTSD.
“So, where do you feel like crashing?” Rin asks as April puts her dishes in the washer. “We would have put you in a guest bedroom, but waking anyone around here suddenly is a bad idea. In example: you, trying to punch me.”

April winces. “Sorry. I- I don’t sleep well most of the time. And I’ve been through a lot of experiences where I tended to wake up to someone attacking us.”

Rin gives her a wry smirk. “Kid, do you think there’s a single person in this building who hasn’t had experiences like that? I think this is the one place you’ll find a support group for that kind of thing.”

“Fair enough, though I kinda doubt any of you have spent months at war in space.”

“Excuse me- you did what now?”

April laughs, and here in the mid-morning hours, sleep deprived as hell and weary in her bones, she manages to feel light just for a moment.

“I’d like to sleep in a guest room- and I’ll tell you about my space adventures on the way.”

“Oh my god, I am so mad that you’re twelve or something and you’ve done all this insane stuff already.”

“I’m nearly- or already, maybe- eighteen!”

“How do you not know that for sure? It’s your age, April.”

“I’ve been through some time travelling shit, okay?”

“Oh my god. Spill.”

April does spill. She skips a lot of the sad or horrible parts- the grueling weeks of searching, the tension of having an entire world to save, the multiple near misses- and focuses on easy things. The parts that were fun, even just for a single cycle. April tells Rin about the intergalactic Denny’s they found (the franchise is much wider spread than they’d thought), about seeing butterfly like creatures the size of elephants and elephant like creatures the size of butterflies, about the gaseous planet that was safe for them to breathe on, but reacted like helium does and made them into chipmunks for hours-

April hasn’t ever talked about space with anyone but her friends. She tries not to remind her dad that she’s six months older than she should be, or about the multitude of space faring aliens in the universe. He gets pale, and a little scared. Rin on the other hand listens to every story like it’s the most amazing thing she’s ever heard- and maybe it is. April knows her life sounds like science fiction; it’s just hard to notice when she’s the one living it.

They end up sitting on April’s guest bed, still talking for a long while, up until April yawns so wide her eyes water a little. Rin chuckles, but then yawns herself.

“Okay,” Rin says, rubbing her eyes, “we are definitely not done with this, but we seriously need to sleep. Me more than you.”

“Sorry,” April says, voice feeling a little sore from how much she’s been talking. “I kind of got carried away there.”

“Do not apologize! It was so, so interesting. I can’t wait to tell-…” Rin cuts off, pausing for a
moment. She inclines her head forwards, leaning towards April. “Do you mind if I tell my friends? It’s very exciting, but if it’s supposed to be secret…”

April considers for a moment, and then shrugs. The troop knows about her powers, and they know her best friends are mutants. Adding the fact that she’s explored space is not as much of a leap as it should be. “Go right ahead. Honestly, it’s kinda nice to share… I’ve been sitting on this for months.”

Rin grins. “Thank you. I will be sure to credit each tale to you-if you’ll tell me more later.”

April giggles, stomach fluttering with happy feelings. “Deal,” she says, and she means it. Despite the topic, it feels so normal to talk with someone else like this. April hasn’t had a normal friend since… well, since her last normal friend turned out to be a murderous double agent, and not even a human one at that.

She neatly sidesteps in her head the fact that Rin is a highly trained kunoichi, and probably doesn’t meet the parameters of ‘normal’.

“Goodnight,” Rin says as she shuts the door behind herself.

“Goodnight,” April replies, and the door clicks shut. She looks around herself, at the reasonably nicely furnished guest bedroom she’s in. She’s above the troop’s floor, set on the same one as Karai’s quarters are, and she can feel how nice the sheets are under her hands. This is definitely a room intended for important guests of the Foot clan, given the size of the bed and the suite’s bathroom. April has so much space to herself she doesn’t know what to do with it.

She is, however, still incredibly tired, even with the hours of sleep she’s already had. So that takes care of her choice pretty quick.

She turns off the bedside lamp and slides under the comforter. Sleep claims her even quicker than it did while she was on the couch.

--/

April is running, trying to catch up with the two people walking ahead of her. “Guys!” she calls, her voice echoing along the sewer tunnel’s length. “Donnie! Mikey! Wait for me- where are you going?”

Neither brother so much as glances back at her, let alone slows down. April pushes her strides faster, feet splashing rain water everywhere. She can’t seem the close the distance between them, no matter how fast she runs.

Donnie and Mikey turn a corner up ahead, and April has a moment of panic as she sprints to it, skidding around and trying to find them again.

She sighs in relief as she spots them in the middle of the atrium; water pooling around them at shin level and drifting down tunnels on all sides. April slows to a jog, smiling as she approaches her friends.

“You guys need to slow down,” she informs them, shoving her bangs out of her face as she pants. The brothers are still facing away from her, the angle not permitting her a look at their faces.
“Guys? Hey, hello? Anyone listening?”

They turn towards her in unison and April’s hands fly to her mouth as she chokes on a scream.

From the center of their chest is a wide trail of blood, coating their front and dripping into the water. Their eyes are tired as they look at her, not even trying to staunch the bleed.

“Shit- shit, guys-” April rushes forwards, pushing her hands against the sources of the blood. She can’t find them immediately- she starts feeling for the open wound. “Donnie, your medical kit, quick.” He doesn’t move, just watching her dispassionately. April feels wild emotion build in her, and she presses against the hard cartilage of their plastrons, trying to hold back the blood with just her fingers.

“Guys!” April begs.

“It’s fine, April,” Donnie says gently, grasping her wrist with both his hands. “That won’t help, anyway.”

“Why not?!” April snaps, eyes stinging. She can still feel blood slipping between her fingers, and she searches desperately for the wound to close it.

“It’s on the inside,” Mikey says, just as gently, and starts to pry her hand away from his chest. April tries to push back, but they’re both stronger than her. She tries to hold them still with her powers, attempting to lash restraints around their bodies and keep them from letting themselves bleed out.

Her grip on her power withers and dies, and April gasps in shock as it recedes back into her core, almost disappearing completely.

“Guys, Donnie, Mikey, please,” April tries, tears sliding down her face.

Her friends shake their heads, expressions apologetic.

“It’s okay,” Donnie says.

“It’s not your fault,” Mikey says.

“This happened without you.”

“You can’t help like this.”

April finally loses the fight to keep her hands on their chests, and she stumbles backwards as they push her away. The water soaks deeper into her shoes and pants, her clan uniform suddenly a hundred pounds heavier from the waterlog.

April starts another attempt to convince them to let her help, but footsteps splashing through the water causes her to whirl around. Shadows race along the wall as two more people head their way, and April knows it’s her other friends. They can help, they’ll make their brothers see reason-

April hears an opposing set of splashing footsteps at her back- again- and whirls a second time just as Donnie and Mikey vanish into one of the dozens of tunnels.

“No!” she yells after them. “Come back!”

They don’t answer, but the other two footsteps arrive in the atrium, accompanied by the voices, “April-” “-did you find them?”
“Yes!” April cries, heart leaping. “I- they were here, and I had them, and- oh god, guys they’re hurt. We have to find them quick or-”

“Your hands have blood on them.”

April stops, confused by Leo’s words, but then looks down at her palms. They shine a gristly bright red, already becoming tacky against her skin.

“I- I tried to help,” April stutters, and she feels sick, staring at the horrible red. She drops to her knees, ignoring the way the water soaks her up to her waist; shoving her hands into the murky river and washing them viciously. “They wouldn’t stop pushing me away, I- failed, they weren’t listening, but I…”

She trails off. The only sound for a few seconds is her scrubbing in the water, and April has a brief flicker of relief as blood starts to cloud the water. Her hands are clean, now, so she stands back up.

She freezes when she sees the blood has spread even further up her arms, staining her clothes all the way to her elbows.

“No, n- no,” April whispers in horror. She looks up at the brothers, searching for assistance- and she’s met by guarded stares, watching her and her bloody hands.

“Where are they, April?” Raph asks in a low voice.

“They just left! I saw where they went; I’ll take you there.” April turns to point out the way, but suddenly she doesn’t remember which tunnel Donnie and Mikey took. Her eyes flicker between each gaping maw, panic bubbling in her chest. “I, I… I knew where they went, I swear…”

“You lost our brothers,” Leo accuses.

“No! They ran away from me!”

“You hurt them, too,” Raph adds.

April spins around, defensive anger sparking. “I wouldn’t ever hurt them!” she all but shrieks. “I want to find them just as much as you do!”

“Then why aren’t you taking us to them?”

“B- because-”

“Why is their blood on your hands?”

April wants to curl up, heart breaking at the words being thrown at her. “I- I tried to help them,” she repeats, and she makes the mistake of looking down at the water, just for a split second.

The small cloud of blood from her hands has bloomed outwards, wide and large, and April finds herself standing in a pool of it. She shakes. Staring. She tries to reach for her powers- to push away the blood, to speed up the water, to make it go away- but again they slip from her grasp. April is taking harsh breaths in and out, throat raw and eyes burning.

Leo and Raph approach her, raising their hands to her. They grab at her arms, pulling her close. “Why did you lose them?” Leo asks, sorrow scarred into his face. His hands smear the blood on April’s arms, staining his scales, too; Raph’s are just as red as his mask, as well.

“We need them back,” Raph says, grip tightening on April’s arm, her bones creaking.
“I- I tried, I’ll keep trying, I swear-”

“You know where they are. You know where they are and you’re keeping them from us.”

“They’re our brothers, and you’re hiding them? April- how could you?”

“How could you, April?”

“You let them get lost-”

“You let them get hurt-”

“How could you.”

“How could you.”

April strains against the two sets of hands, but can’t break away. More hands join to grip her arms, her shoulders, her legs- Leo and Raph and Leo and Raph and Leo and Raph and more, more hands and desperate words. Pained voices, tearful cries, each hand crushingly heavy on her body.

April has a sudden surge of strength and she screams- her powers abruptly returning as she throws them all back. April pants, blindly defending herself against anyone who’s left.

The tinkle of glass hitting the carpet, landing on top of other shards, is what brings her out of the nightmare fully.

April is standing on her bed, up against the wall and ready to fight the shadows around her. Her blankets have been thrown off the bed, lying in a heap against the other side of the room. Her pillows, too, have been ejected from the bed. A dresser that had been empty is turned on its side, and a large framed photograph opposite to April’s position is more cracks than picture anymore.

Slowly, like her legs might break if she moves too quickly, April lowers herself onto the bed again. She remains there for… who knows how long. Breathing. In, out, in, out… shaking all the way through from what she’s just survived.

Gradually, she lies down on the sheet covering her mattress. She curls up tightly, and cries into the mattress for a long, long time.

-/-

April rouses again some hours later, back and limbs achy from the weird position she’s slept in, and she shivers from the lack of blanket. She gingerly sits up, popping the air in her joints as she does, and April lets a out a yawn. It then takes a bit of fumbling for the lamp. Once it’s on, blinding as it is, she manages to grab the little alarm clock on the side table.

The two gold hands indicate the time is just after six thirty. Since April was up for eight earlier this morning, she knows the six thirty is the PM one.

She groans, feeling her stomach and bladder complain at the same time. Okay. Enough wallowing and sleeping away her problems. Time to get up and force herself back into order.

…The room, too, because seeing the damage she did in the light makes her feel horrible. Guilt
wracked nightmares or not, April shouldn’t have let her control slip so badly that she fucked up the lovely guest room she’s been given. She hasn’t let it get this bad in months; not since her first weeks of mourning after Splinter’s death.

April swings her legs over the edge of the bed, shivering as she looks around at the mess. She quickly decides she’ll clean it up after she’s taken care of more urgent things.

April investigates the bathroom, finding fluffy towels and shampoos. She indulges in a hot shower, curling up under the spray and nearly falling asleep again. It’s as her thoughts begin to wander back to her dream, as well as the dilemma she’s dealing with, that she can stand up and start washing. Painful emotions are a better wakeup call than any coffee.

April dresses in the borrowed clothes again when she gets out; she’s worn far dirtier, and gone days without a change of clothes. And besides, she’s never been one to be overly fussy with her appearance. A t-shirt, some jeans, a ponytail and shoes- she’ll throw them on within minutes of waking up for school, and that routine remains as she pulls the soft long sleeve back over her head. It’s a little big on her, at least a size and a half; but April doesn’t mind, letting it hide her fingers and embracing the look. At least her pants fit correctly for the most part, only slightly too long.

April stares at herself in the still semi-fogged mirror, after. Her hair hangs wet around her face, dripping onto the towel on her shoulders. Her eyes have dark bags under them, and April can see every bit of stress that’s been eating away at her, clear on her face.

Or maybe that’s just her perception of things. Maybe she’s not quite so transparent with her misery.

April sighs and moves on from her wallowing. She takes the time to feel out the water in her hair, then grasping most of it and pulling it away from her head in a stream. It slithers like a snake right into the sink’s drain, gurgling on the way down.

April takes another short while, putting her room back to rights, before she can comfortably re-enter society. The cleanup isn’t a professional job- there isn’t much she can do about the picture’s glass, other than pick up the shards and throw them out. But, it’s good enough. Hopefully.

April will find someone to apologize to, later. For now, though, she needs food, and possibly… some company. Cleaning hadn’t been the most enthralling task ever, and her thoughts are trying to wander. There’s only so many times she can go over her unfinished homework assignments in her head.

April returns to troop one’s level. She’s relieved that it’s only the early birds in the kitchen right now; Katsumi at the table, her usual coffee and eggs, while Rio, Akihiro, and two other women April hasn’t gotten to know yet, all work together around the stove and counters. Preparing a breakfast-dinner for everyone else.

“Good evening,” April says, and she smiles at the warm, if sleepy welcome from the soldiers.

Rio waves a yolk covered spatula at the barstools, and April obediently sits down on one. It only takes a moment before a steaming cup of coffee is pushed over towards her; cream and sugar added they way she likes it, and a leaf design in the foam. She laughs in surprise, looking to Akihiro.

“You remembered how I take my coffee? And did foam art?”

“I am a man of many talents,” Akihiro says, expression perfectly straight. “Observation is one of the key principals of ninjutsu. The foam art is a bonus from a job I took some years ago- I am, as you kids say, hip.”
April just about snorts into her coffee and chokes. Katsumi giggles lightly from the table. Rio and the other two women in the kitchen groan and laugh, nudging Akihiro’s side. “You’re a corny old man who knows exactly when he’s making a bad joke,” Rio accuses.

“It’s as adorable as it is cringey,” remarks one of the strangers. She’s a mix of races, with deep, dark skin, and a bone structure like a bird’s, eyes sharp like Katsumi’s. Her short dreadlocks have small rings of metal clasped around some of their lengths, shining silver in the kitchen’s lights as she stirs a big pot of soup.

“Underboss lady thinks it’s funny, so I do, too.” That comment comes from the pale woman April remembers from her first night here- her thin blonde hair done up in a messy bun, pieces falling free and hanging in front of her frosty grey eyes. The large spoon she’s scraping out a rice pot with knocks against a glass bowl, dropping a few grains on the counter. As she turns to replace the pot, April gets a look at her back. She’s got the tips of bird wing tattoos peeking out from her sleeveless shirt, in elegant black lines. And, she’s on the shorter side, which is a bit of a relief, because April is a little tired of frequently being the shortest in the room.

“You are all being very mean to me, and so early in the evening, too.” Akihiro is once again laughed at, and he smiles his serene smile, the typical expression for him. April sips at her coffee, letting the room’s atmosphere adjust her to people again. She stares around at those people, a wondering thought forming in her mind.

They all act so normal- the soldiers. Even ones who are older, scarred; clearly having done this most of their lives. April is trying to understand how they do that. How they can separate the two halves of themselves. April knows the lines between her civilian life and night life have bled together, leaving April as something mixed up and out of place.

She doesn’t fit in anywhere, really, but that’d been why she bonded so closely with the brothers and Casey. They don’t fit in anywhere, either, and April hadn’t even realized the root of their collective friendship until ages later. None of them mesh with anyone else, so they tangled themselves up and forgot about the rest of the world.

Or, that’s what April did. And that’s what she wants to go back to. It’s not even been a full week, but she’s sorely missing her friends. That familiarity; their presences around her, known by heart and memorized completely.

And here she is, keeping secrets that will just keep them all apart even longer. She’s only hurting herself- and she’s hurting Leo and Raph and Casey, too. But if she tells the others, she’ll hurt Donnie and Mikey, and herself, again, because she’d have betrayed them…

April feels a pit inside her chest, caved inwards and empty. She’s tired, confused, and scared. She doesn’t know what to do at all.

“That’s an awfully long face for so early in the evening,” says someone, and April raises her eyes from her coffee to meet the gaze of the woman with dreadlocks. The woman leans against the other side of the counter, towards April. “Especially considering you found your friends yesterday. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s got you so down?”

April almost reflexively declines to answer. It’s second nature, given how dangerous it can be to give out information about her friends. But… troop one has been nothing but supportive of her, and April did partially come up this way to have company…

“I… don’t know what to do,” April admits, and she hates that that’s the truth of things. “About my
friends, I mean. I know where they are, I know that they’re safe, I know that there isn’t some secret threat out there… but I still don’t know why they left like that. And I can’t do anything until they tell me.”

“Didn’t you try talking with them?”

“I couldn’t. If they’re this determined to disappear, I doubt me barging in without warning is anyway to get them to open up to me. I have to wait for them to approach me first, or…” April trails off, not wanting to talk about how much she worries about losing her friends’ trust. It took what felt like ages for things to go back to normal, after… that night, and the unforgiveable thing April did.

She can’t lose that trust again. She knows, deep inside herself, that it would tear open that wound all over again. But- even if she keeps Donnie and Mikey’s secret, she’ll be keeping it from Leo and Raph, which is just as bad because then she’ll just lose their trust instead.

April can’t win, no matter what option she chooses.

“Sorry,” she says, “I don’t mean to just dump all that on you.”

The woman shakes her head. “Oh, don’t worry. It’s fine. I don’t mind being a listener; if you need to talk, talk away. Oh, and I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced yet.” She extends a hand to April, smiling kindly. “I’m Lupita.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” April replies, shaking hands. “And, well, you probably know me already.”

“You pulled some X-man shit in the kitchen, right in front of all of us, and scared about a year off my life. If I didn’t know your name just from you getting assigned to us by master Karai herself, I certainly would have after that.”

“Same here,” interrupts the other unknown woman, giving April an amused smirk. “I have yet to end up on a mission directly working with you, so I was planning on us never really interacting-”

“Because you’re an anti-social porcupine,” teases Lupita. Rio guffaws and gives Lupita a high-five.

“Both of you shut up, or I’ll poison the rice. Anyway,” continues the woman, waving at April with her spoon, “I’m Vivian, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget you after you leave. It’s not every day I get to work with a mutant psychic, after all.”

“Her and her friends,” Rio says, huffing. “All of you are weird as all get out, but you, one of the normal looking ones, is probably the weirdest out of your group.”

April laughs more for their benefit than her own. “Yep, that’s me. Just your run of the mill New Yorker, except for pretty much everything about me.” She smiles and lets the others laugh, but she can only maintain the expression for so long. Dread and exhaustion creeps back into her bones, and April lifts her coffee to her lips. Maybe caffeine will make her feel less shitty.

“Oh, now would you look at that,” Akihiro tuts. “Her melancholy returns.”

“No, I’m- I’m fine, it’s nothing,” April insists, trying to shake off her negativity. She forces a smile, but from the concerned looks she gets, it isn’t as sincere as she’d like it to look.

“Avoid, kid.” Rio steps away from her eggs, handing off the spatula to Akihiro as she comes over to the counter. “I know we haven’t known each other for very long, but if you need to talk, we’re happy to listen. You don’t gotta be invincible all the time, least of all here.”
“We take care of our own,” says Katumi, and April doesn’t have to turn around to know the woman’s expression is an honest one.

“What she said,” Rio says, nodding at Katumi. “So, yeah. I don’t know how much we can really help, but we all know how to keep our mouths shut. Nothing leaves this room, promise.”

“Scouts honor,” Vivian says, tone light, but her aura showing she means it.

April searches them all for deception, feeling the emotions they’re feeling right now. Though she’s spent a week with them already, April hasn’t noticed until now how genuine they feel towards her. Rio and Lupita really are concerned for her, as well as Katsumi, Akihiro, and Vivian.

April nearly lets her resolve crumble away, but she stops. She shores back up her senses; pushing away the foreign emotions of sympathy and remembering herself. The troop has been good to her—kind to her—but still. It hasn’t even been a full week yet.

How she deals with her situation isn’t really their business, no matter how much distress April endures on her own, no matter how tempting it is to lay her fears and worries bare. She’s already shared so much about herself and her friends; she needs to draw a line and remind herself what happens when they let people get too close too quickly.

So, April pulls herself back from her moment of weakness, smiling gratefully to the people around her.

“Thanks, but… I think I just need to do some more deep thinking on some stuff. I’m okay.”

The expressions she’s receives are ones masking slight disappointment, others persevering concern. April maintains her smile. It’s hard and it kind of hurts but she has to. The good intentions of outsiders can’t hope to stand up to the unrelenting shitstorm her life can turn into, any hour of the day. April had a nightmare and she trashed a room while she was still asleep—and she’s done far worse damage when she’s conscious. No, as much as she likes the troop, as much as she appreciates that they’ve accepted her into their team… the bottom line is that only five people can handle April and her problems.

(At least with the brothers and Casey, April has knowledge they stand a chance against her. They have the skills and unfortunate experience, dealing with her as a wounded ally and a dangerous enemy. The troop wouldn’t even know what hit them until it was already over.)

“If you’re sure,” Rio says, lips pursed. When April nods firmly, the woman sighs and relents. “Alright. It’s your business, kid.”

“Thank you,” April says regretfully, apologizing silently for getting everyone worked up and making the situation so awkward. Changing the subject is the highest priority right now. “So, uh. What’re you guys making?” Her appetite is barely there, but she’s desperate.

The shift in conversation is abrupt and obvious. For whatever reason—maybe pity—they let her get away with it. Talk resumes as the foods are named, and the attention on April’s teenage angst is lifted. She privately sighs in relief.

Not too long later, Vivian sets a bowl of rice in front of her, which is followed by Lupita placing another filled with miso soup next to it, and Rio rounding the meal up with a plate of neatly folded eggs and small fruit squares.

“Eat,” Rio says firmly. “If we’re not talking, then you’re keeping your mouth full.” Lacking the option to refuse, April sheepishly picks up the chopsticks on the plate and eats.
Katsumi leaves briefly to go get her own things from the table, taking the spot next to April again after. April mechanically eats, letting her mind try to sort out some kind of bullet list to what she needs to deal with tonight. She has to plot her next scouting mission to Donnie and Mikey’s new home. She has to do maintenance on her sword and fan. She has to maybe track down Karai and Shinigami and talk about next steps. She has to decide who she’s going to betray.

April feels sick at the last thought, but swallows her bite of rice anyway. She concedes that her freshly awakened mind is not ready to deal with things. April reengages the conversation, joining in as Akihiro is regaling an amused audience with his time spent in Cuba. An assassination job that required weeks of prep, all four of them absolutely necessary for his taking out his target. The actual kill had somehow involved a highly venomous jellyfish, a case of mistaken identity, and several pineapples.

While the story itself is gruesome and amoral as possible, April still finds herself laughing along with the others as Akihiro concludes the tale. She can’t talk to any of them, but she can still talk with them. She can still, maybe, be friends with them. Their respect of her secrets might just be the reason she feels that could really happen.

Though April’s many problems remain, her meal is warm and the company is warmer, and for a brief fleeting moment, she’s okay.

-/-

It’s only as the rest of the troop starts to file in that April realizes her mistake.

“My dad!” she exclaims loudly, startling Katsumi and Mei beside her. April stands up, stool nearly falling over. “I need my phone- any phone! Oh my god, I can’t believe I totally forgot about him, he’s gonna be so worried.”

“There’s a phone in the common room,” Rin volunteers from the table. She laughs brightly as April rushes a goodbye and sprints out of the room.

April punches in the numbers on the landline phone quick as she can, powers sparking from her fingertips and sending magazines fluttering to the ground. She bites her lip and sits down on the couch, curling up on herself as the phone rings and throw pillows start to float around her.

“—Hello?”

“Dad!” April says breathlessly. The pillows drop back to the couch, some bouncing onto the floor. “Dad, dad, I’m so sorry. I had a rough night, and a lot of stuff happened, and I just- I slept all day, I’m so sorry.”

“April, it’s okay! Calm down, hon. I knew where you were, don’t worry.”

“You, uh. You did?”

“Yep. Your, uh, that girl you’re friends with? Karai? She sent someone over to give me a handwritten letter and explain that you were staying over for the day. It was all very formal- and I was in my PJs of course.”
April lets her head drop back against the couch, letting out a heavy sigh of relief. She’s smiling, though. “Sorry about that. People around here tend to be…”

“A bit strange?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s not much of a change from your other friends, now is it?”

April snorts and laughs. “Okay, no, I guess not. But the boys are more likely to just break in and tell you, or tape a note to your window on the outside.”

“It was glue, not tape. And I still can’t believe they did that.”

“Yeah… they don’t always think things through.”

“You either, considering you disappeared on me like that. Explanation or no, you’ve been gone for two whole days, April. I want you home. Please.”

April feels guilt churn in her gut. She can hear the worry in her dad’s voice; how stressed he is by her extended absences from home.

She hates doing this to him, but doesn’t know how she could stop now. Her friends need her. She can’t even think about anything else until this is resolved. But, at the same time…

“…I’ll be home in less than an hour,” April tells her dad. She feels torn, wanting to stay, but also knowing she has to go.

“Thank you,” says her dad, and the tired relief in his voice cements April’s choice. As much as she loves her friends, her dad comes first right now.

-/-

In the end, April only spends about five hours with her dad.

He’s been awake all day, going to work on top of worrying after her. He’s already fairly tired when April comes home, and by the time midnight inches around, he’s practically falling asleep sitting up.

April is the only one even paying the slightest attention to the movie on screen; most of her focus is on her phone, anxiously checking and rechecking if she’s gotten an emergency text from Karai or Shinigami yet. Anything could happen while April isn’t keeping watch over her friends. She can’t afford to screw up and let them get hurt; their brothers would never forgive her, and April would never forgive herself.

She still hasn’t decided if she should tell Leo and Raph where their siblings are.

April turns off the movie and helps her dad to bed.

As he’s finished in the washroom and is heading into his bedroom, her dad pauses and asks, “April, honey?”
She’d been hanging out in the hallway so she could say goodnight to him. April closes her phone screen and stuffs it into her back pocket, giving him her full attention. “Yeah, dad?”

“Will you… Could you stay here, tonight?” he requests tentatively. “I know you’re busy, and that you going to school tomorrow isn’t going to happen, but… I’d feel a lot better if I knew you were here. Safe.”

April can sense his emotions- the anxiety and stress she’s causing him, every single day. April struggles to swallow around the lump in her throat.

“Yes, dad. I’ll hang around tonight.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

He raises his arms and April steps over to take the hug. Her dad’s beard scratches against her ear, and his pajamas smell like the laundry detergent they always buy. He’s hugging her tightly, using nearly all his strength, while April holds back. Her dad is bony and has a slight gut, nowadays. April lost basically all her extra fat ages ago; she’s pure muscle, now.

April briefly thinks about when she was so small her dad had to bend over to do this with her. How big and safe those hugs had felt. Now, she’s barely on her tiptoes, and he feels delicate in her arms.

He’s protected her for so long, gave up so many things to keep her safe and let her grow up like a normal kid. April isn’t that kid anymore, and she’s definitely not normal, either. It’s her turn to be the one to protect their small family.

“G’night, dad,” April says, and she closes her eyes for a moment, listening to his murmured words in return and committing the sound of them to memory.

Once he’s gone to sleep, his aura calming to a tranquil unconsciousness, April lingers only a short while longer.

She whiles away an hour, tidying up their home. She looks at pictures hung on the wall as she does, thinking about how naïve her younger self was. April’s thoughts then turn to wondering what that younger self would have done, right now. Even just three or so years ago- what choice would she make right now? Without all the grey that’s colored her morality?

She finds that she can’t even imagine that mentality anymore. And so, with her dad in bed and her questions remaining unanswered, April slips out the window in her bedroom and heads back to the church. She leaves a note on her pillow, falsifying the time she left at- it says she left early in the morning, a lie to her dad.

April feels guilty for so many things as it is. Why not add one more to the list?

-/-

“Have you made a decision yet?”

“…No. Sorry.”

Karai makes a little judgemental hum. April rolls her eyes and ignores the condescension.
“If you’re so impatient, why don’t you decide it yourself?” April asks snappishly. A part of her would be grateful, really, to no longer have the weight of this choice on her shoulders. Not that she’d ever tell Karai.

“Because they’re your friends,” Karai replies smoothly. “I’m not all that worried about them; it’s you who went hunting all over for New York for them.”

“They’re your brothers.”

“Brothers who’ve known you for longer, and would trust far more than me.”

April frowns. “What? No, Karai, they trust you. Where’d you get the impression they don’t?”

Karai shrugs. And then doesn’t answer. She instead arranges a few more tacks on the map of New York—black for the Foot’s turf, purple for the Dragons, red for Vziosos’s people…and a few others April doesn’t know by name. They’re in Karai’s study, which has a lot of junk shoved into one corner and slash marks on the walls. April has chosen not to comment on the obvious reasons for the destruction. She has her own family related issues and knows the aftermath of venting when she sees it.

“You know Leo would believe anything you told him, right?” April pushes, sidling a little closer to Karai and the map. “Like, even before we were allies, let alone a kind of fucked up family, he trusted you.”

“Well… I mean, maybe a little. But still. He’s team leader; if he trusts you, then everyone trusts you.” No response. April sighs, and adds, “And I, sort of, you know. Trust you. Too.”

Karai snorts, breaking from her ‘brooding crime lord’ character. “And I, sort of, you know. Trust you, too,” she parrots back, slightly smarmy, and yup, April remembers now why she sometimes still wants to roughhouse with this woman.

“What are you, twelve?” April says derisively. “I was being serious.”

“Oh, clearly.”

“I do trust you, April. I wouldn’t have let you use my resources to find my brothers if I didn’t.” April is quiet as Karai turns to her, something like friendliness in the woman’s expression. “You’re both a very capable kunoichi, as well as a highly valuable person to have on our side. Your powers in a fight are unmatched. Your intuition and premonition are invaluable. If you say we need to find Donatello and Michelangelo, then we need to. I trust you to be able to tell when a situation warrants true concern, and I trust you to have my back no matter the outcome.”

April blinks. She’s stunned. “You really think that about me?”

“I’m being completely serious, too.”

“Oh, clearly.”

“I do trust you, April. I wouldn’t have let you use my resources to find my brothers if I didn’t.” April is quiet as Karai turns to her, something like friendliness in the woman’s expression. “You’re both a very capable kunoichi, as well as a highly valuable person to have on our side. Your powers in a fight are unmatched. Your intuition and premonition are invaluable. If you say we need to find Donatello and Michelangelo, then we need to. I trust you to be able to tell when a situation warrants true concern, and I trust you to have my back no matter the outcome.”

April blinks. She’s stunned. “You really think that about me?”

“You’re different than the people I grew up with. Your loyal is based on emotional ties, not personal gain.” Karai crosses her arms, tilting her head and letting her sharp bangs shift into her equally sharp eyes. “I trust you because you’re an honest person, compared to me.”

“I… Thanks, Karai.” April doesn’t really know how to react to all this. This is one of the few times Karai has been open about her feelings and opinions. No tricks, no agenda. “I trust you, too. For real. You sometimes do things I don’t agree with, but you’ve also helped us and a lot of other
people when you didn’t have to. What you’re doing for the mutants, here… you’re more compassionate than you let on.”

Karai nods vaguely and turns back to her map. April shuffles her feet, glancing away and feeling awkward.

“That was a lot of feelings stuff all at once,” Karai says after a beat, breaking the silence.

“God, yeah,” April agrees. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Yes. And we never talk about what was said here ever again.”

“Fine by me. So, what’s the next step with your hostile takeover of New York? Who am I beating up next?”

“The outposts we hit were small time- just a scare to let the higher ups know we mean business. We’re moving onto stage two, now.”

“Which is?”

“Finding the source- or sources- of the anti-mutant weaponry.” Karai smirks, cold confidence seeping into her expression. “And then eliminating them.”

April feels herself smile, the core of her powers giving a little shiver of excitement. “Now that is something I can get behind.”

-/-

If nothing else, April gets some training done as she monitors her friends. Donnie and Mikey haven’t left their new underground hideout, so she’s relegated to killing time restlessly. Karai’s grand plan to crush the anti-mutant weapons trade can’t go into effect until they’ve located solid intel on who and what is where.

So, April plays a game with troop one that she’s played with the brothers and Casey dozens of times.

“You’re sure you’ll be okay?” Rio asks, grimacing at the circle they’ve made around her in the dojo.

“We’re just doing hand to hand tonight,” April reassures her, “so it’s hardly dangerous. It’s just when we break out actual weapons that I need to be careful.”

“Uh… right. Okay.” Rio looks to Mei, who is supervising things, and she gets a shrug in response. Mei looks interested in how April is going to do, fending off ten enemies all by herself, coming at her from all directions, while she’s blindfolded.

April happily ties her blindfold on. With everything that’s been going on, she’s slacked on her own training regime. If she wants to remain in control of her powers, she has to be consistent with her practicing. The room is in her mind’s eye, the ten opponents lighting up as she senses their auras. Their emotions and intentions briefly clutter April’s mind, but she shoves them away easily enough. For some reason it’s been louder lately, those feelings that don’t belong to her. April puts
that on a mental list to figure out later and loosens her stance, ready for the spar to begin.

“Hajime!” Mei shouts, and the first person charges her. Unsurprisingly, it’s the eager aura of Rin coming at April.

April ducks a fist, coming back up to exchanges blows and blocks with the woman. Rin is taller than April, and April is shorter than most people. Not many ninjas are used to fighting someone her size, so she gets Rin in the ribs from an unexpected angle. Rin huffs, winded, and April tosses her out of the ring with a light push of her telekinesis.

The next two don’t waste time- Naomi, wanting to test April’s abilities, and Rio, not so concerned anymore if April can endure this training exercise.

April grins and dodges Naomi’s initial attacks, not faltering for more than a split second as Rio nails her in the back. April wheezes and turns them on each other- holding Rio’s feet in place for a moment and tripping Naomi towards the other soldier. April steps back before Naomi’s parting kick can land, laughing at their grumbles.

Akihiro is next, which is more of a challenge. He’s slower about his attacks, planning rather than trying to get her by surprise. His calm guardedness is like dark, tranquil water. What lurks under the surface doesn’t create any ripples as it stalks her.

April laughs a little, brimming with energy. God, does it ever feel great to challenge herself like this again.

Her fight with Akihiro lands April on her back, the older man overbalancing her as she attacked him. April recovers almost immediately, springing back up faster than Akihiro can react and sweeping his leg out from under him. His waver in balance opens a chance for her to land an open palm blow to his chest and send him the rest of the way down. April then shunts him out of the ring with her powers, sliding over the tatami mats like a puck. She isn’t worried about offending him, however, because his aura is alight with amusement and his laughter follows his defeat.

April fights a few others she’s familiar and unfamiliar with. She recognizes Vivian- ice, ice, ice, the woman is a tundra inside- and Lupita- her aura burning with determination and vigor. April tires a little as it goes on, her internal sight of what’s around her slipping. It isn’t a skill she’s perfected yet, so it can be difficult to maintain longer than about five minutes at a time. It results in her missing her targets and receiving punches and kicks. By the time Mei calls it, April has allowed herself to slump to the floor and tapped out of the spar.

“You okay?” Naomi asks, pulling April’s blindfold off with careful fingers. April blinks in the sudden light, and then gives a smile.

“I’m fine,” she says, though her body aches and her lungs burn. April shoves her sweaty bangs out of her eyes, laughing a little. “This is the type of training I’m used to anyway. I’m a tiny bit out of practice, is all.”

Naomi shakes her head at April, muttering about stupid teenagers not knowing their limits. Which is silly, because this isn’t April’s limit. Not even close. With her eyes uncovered, she could keep going easily. She just won’t, because she needs to have plenty of energy leftover in case an emergency with her friends happens.

Something freezing cold on the back of her neck jolts April out of her thoughts; she shrieks as she grabs at the water bottle Rin is teasing her with. Rio barks a laugh at April’s loud reaction to the chilled refreshment. April throws a dirty look at both women before she drains half the bottle in
She checks her phone while other soldiers do some sparring, listening to casual and goofy conversations they have through it. It’s a relaxed session; April’s friends have been located, and they don’t have another mission just yet. It gives her a moment to scroll through texts she’s missed during the day.

…And during the evening, too.

*If you really couldn’t stay, you should have been honest with me.*

That’s the text her dad sent her. It was sent at about two-thirty, a half hour after April snuck out. April’s stomach churns hollowly, guilt about how disappointed she’s made her dad eating her up.

*Sorry,* she texts back, and it’s not nearly enough to make up for her actions. She closes her phone and shoves it into her bag anyway, ignoring it.

Karai thinks she’s an honest person. With the lies she tells her dad, the secrets she’s keeping and kept from her friends- April feels anything but honest.

Chapter End Notes

i got an ask on my tumblr recently, about how some people might want me to actually reply to reviews on here? i didn't know that, since i personally never really expect interaction from an author i leave a comment with.

so i guess if you want a reply to your review, please put a note somewhere in it and i'll do my best to talk back!

End Notes

Lemme know what your thoughts are in the comments below, please and thank you.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!