Raven to Fox

by Andrew Jstn

Summary

AU: Neil's mom ran without him, he was sold off to the Moriyamas soon after, growing up with Kevin and Riko. It'll all be explained in the prologue.

It starts with Neil leaving the Nest after Kevin and Jean ran and going to the Foxes, trying to work out everything from transferring teams to transferring from Backliner to Striker while trying to solve issues he has with Kevin because of everything they went through. Neil learns what "family" means and that sometimes people are worth fightin for.

Notes

I'll change ratings according to the chapters/give trigger warnings/mark triggering content!
Timeline: Prologue is set from the time of Kevin's "skiing accident" until summer vacation, from then on it's like in the books, the start of Neil's Freshman year.

Triggerwarnings:
A few paragraphs (marked ***** in the beginning and end) describe rape. Not explicitly, no details, but it's there and I think a warning is adequate.
Everything else is about how Riko treats his teammates, so you'll have to prepare for knives and violence.
Mentions of past-violence when Neil thinks about his father.
Neil was staring at the scene in the hallway. Jean had turned away minutes ago. The both of them saw it coming. Had seen it coming for weeks, in fact. But Riko actually calling for Kevin to come… that changed the game. Neil sighed and pressed his lips together.

"You're gonna take care of the mess, Four, right?"

Neil looked down and nodded. "I will." He hated being addressed by the number tattooed to his cheek, but it was better than being called Nathaniel, so he didn't say anything. Neil almost scoffed at that thought. As if he'd ever stand up for anything to Riko.

Jean swallowed and laid down, rolling onto his side, facing the wall. Neil sighed as Riko called for Kevin again.

Neil flinched when Kevin opened the door of his and Riko's room.

"Sorry, Riko. I was wearing headphones. What is it?" Kevin knew better than to ask why the door to Neil and Jean's room was open. He knew that Neil's presence meant pain. He also knew better than to let his fear show.

Neil turned away now. Closed his eyes. Took a deep breath. He still flinched when he heard Kevin's body slamming against the wall. Kevin's stifled groans and cries. Kevin's begging. Why didn't that fucker stop begging? He knew it infuriated Riko. Fool!

Neil thought of what had brought him here. He tried to be grateful quite often. He didn't manage to a lot of times. His father had sold him off to the Moriyamas when he was a child. He hadn't seen him more than once a year since then. Hadn't seen his mother at all. She'd run off. Left him. He'd grown up with Riko and Kevin. Then Jean. He'd only proved himself worthy quite recently, which is why Jean was assigned number three instead of him. Neil could live with that. He'd only start college next year anyways. He wasn't even an official part of the team yet. Jean getting his number before him was only fair.

He looked up when he heard a crack and regretted it instantly. Riko had won today, when Tesuji had pitted him and Kevin against each other to make out who the stronger one was, but every Raven knew he cheated. That's why he broke Kevin's hand now. Beat him up this badly.

Neil pressed his lip together as he saw the tears streaming down Kevin's face. As he saw Riko's smile. As he saw how Riko pressed his fingers into the part of Kevin's hand that didn't look normal. This went on for several minutes, until Riko let go. He laughed and shrugged a little.

"I'm sending a mail to the magazines, telling them how incredibly bad you are at skiing. That's where you broke your hand, right, Kevin?"

Kevin was sitting on the floor, hiding his hand in his lap and letting his head hang loosely. When he didn't answer, Riko kicked him in the ribs heavily. "Right, Kevin?" he asked again, while Kevin barely managed to remain conscious.

Neil heard a sob and a really jittery "Yes, Riko." Then he heard a door shut. He was out of his room instantly, grabbing Kevin under the shoulders, hauling him up, pulling him onto his bed. He turned around and locked the door, before getting the first-aid-kit from their bathroom. He handed Kevin painkillers and a glass of vodka. That's how Kevin preferred his pills. And basically everything, these days. Neil splinted Kevin's fractured hand and did everything he knew to do in that moment.
Kevin took a sip from the bottle whenever he had enough breath left to do so and whenever his crying was weak enough to hold the bottle properly. Jean remained in his section of the room. He didn't know what to do.

Neil sighed and closed his eyes when he was done with Kevin. The boy had passed out hours ago.

The next day was the day of the winter banquet. Kevin had gotten himself drunk as soon as Riko told him that he could leave whenever he wanted to, from now on, but that everyone preferred him to leave as soon as possible.

Neil, Kevin and Jean went over to the Foxes. Renee smiled brightly at Jean, who looked at her just like the broken man he was. The both of them left for 'a cigarette', which usually meant a lot of talking and a little making out. Kevin talked to Dan, a girl with gorgeous hair, and Neil just seriously didn't want to be alone with the Ravens. All of them knew what had happened to Kevin, none of them cared. In addition to that, he was only here because he was 'related' to Kevin and Riko. He was not a part of the Ravens yet.

Kevin told Dan, who'd introduced herself briefly, about his broken hand and they seemed to get along fine, thought the both of them seemed to hold back because of Neil.

Neil flinched heavily when he felt a huge hand slapping his shoulder, but relaxed when he recognised Matt. He played for the Foxes.

"Hey, Neil Josten, right? Nice to meet you! Think we should give Kevin and Dan a second? I think we should!"

And like that, he pulled Neil a few feet aside.

"What's this about?" Neil asked and frowned at the man who was several inches taller than he was.

"Sorry, man. Just seemed like they needed a sec to talk about shit. I don't know. Not really my place to care, is it?" Matt laughed and pushed against Neil's shoulder softly. "So, seriously, you're great on court! Watched some games from your high school and wow, you're amazing! Typical Raven, aren't you? You're not even a Freshman and you're such an awesome backliner, seriously! Respect!"

Neil frowned a little more at the man in front of him and shook his head slightly. "I don't know. Thank you?"

That's about how the rest of the talk went. Neil looked around all the time. He wanted to talk to Kevin, know what he was gonna do now. But Kevin was gone and Jean only showed up when their bus pulled out of the parking lot.

Neil looked around, already knowing that he wouldn't find Kevin again. Knowing that this meant he wouldn't see him again.

Maybe ever.

The next six months were a torture on both the physical and the psychological level. Riko didn't let the Jean or Neil sleep for longer than six hours a night, for four months in a row. He was harder on Jean than on Neil, for whatever reason. He starved him, providing him with the average amount of food a 12 year old would need, being extra hard on Jean during training. Then of course there were
the nights he pulled Jean out of their room for an hour, playing with him, waking the others, and bringing him back to Neil when he was barely conscious anymore. Neil took care of Jean the way he'd taken care of Kevin, but he felt like a failure anyways. He could always clean up Riko's mess, but he couldn't ever protect them.

Jean had lost incredible amounts of blood one day. Cuts all over his upper body, back, thighs, biceps. A black eye, a broken cheekbone, fractured ribs… it was too much for Neil to deal with. Too much for him to take care of. That was the night Jean called Renee, crying, begging. Hours later, she showed up, storming into their room. She had cried and she was furious. She hit Neil over and over again, telling him to be glad she didn't bring her knives. Telling him he'd suffer for what he did to Jean.

Neil might have been able to fight her, he'd have been able to defend himself at least, but this… he deserved it. He let her hit him until he was sore and she was calmer, let her take Jean. His ally.

"I'm sorry," Jean whispered on his way out.

"It's alright. I'll live. I'm fine."

Jean nodded and for a second Neil thought… maybe. Maybe if Jean believed in him he'd be able to stand up against Riko.

The thought vanished as soon as he heard the news of Jean transferring to the Trojans. Riko came to his room soon after. "Four, you're sleeping in Kevin's spot now. Grab your stuff."

Neil was a fool. He was, for ever thinking he could survive Riko. He didn't know what exactly Riko had done to Jean or Kevin, but he knew it wasn't this bad. Riko pulled knives over his skin, breaking it here and there, hurting him again and again. Neil was tied at his wrists and feet, which was some kind of compliment, he supposed, but didn't feel like one whenever Riko sliced up his ribs and lower arms.

"Looks like you've finally snapped, right, Four? Looks like you're cutting. Oh no… missing Jean as much, faggot? You fucked him, right? I know you did. And now that precious little Three is gone, you're cutting. Suicidal? I think so. Oh Four, why didn't you come talk to me sooner?" Riko sliced him up over and over again, leaving tiny scratches and scars that would break and bleed at every harsh touch or sudden movement.

"I'm sorry. You're right," Neil mumbled, because what else was there to say? Setting anything straight wouldn't do him any good. He hadn't been in a relationship with Jean, of course. And he was quite sure he wasn't gay, but… how could he know? He basically assumed, mostly.

His thoughts vanished when Riko sliced the razor blade along his wrists again and again. He pressed his teeth together but couldn't muffle the screams a lot. "Oh no, Four, poor you. But don't worry, I know how to take care of you. I brought someone to fill that gap. I'm going to sleep, Four, have fun!"

Riko usually undid the ropes when he went to bed, but Neil was left this helpless tonight. Riko turned the light off and Neil heard the creaking of the mattress when he laid down. Then he heard the door open. Steps approached and came to an halt next to the bed. Neil couldn't make out a face, only a shady body, and he felt the blood leave his face.

"Riko? Riko, I…," he started, but stopped. Oh no.
"No need to thank me, Four. He's there to fill the gap Jean left. Physically. So… thank me when he's done, yeah? Good night!"

*****trigger warning - rape; four paragraphs*****

Neil closed his eyes and tried to stay calm. He didn't, of course. Moments later, he was screaming. He tried to stay still, as well, in favour of his wounds. He didn't manage to do that, either. Soon, he was pulling at the ropes, crying, ripping open the cuts. Everything hurt. Neil threw up into his bed. When the man was done, he left and Neil shivered. Riko laughed a little.

"Is there anything you want to say? C'mon, Nathaniel, I'm listening!"

Neil swallowed hard. Everything hurt. This was disgusting. He wanted to curl up in the shower. "Thank you, Riko," he managed, voice shaking.

Riko laughed again and waked over to Neil, undoing the ropes. "You're welcome, Four. I knew you'd like it. And since you stayed here for a week now, I thought you might want to know that my father is dead. Died early this morning. Now take a shower, would you? And change everything on your bed, your vomit smells disgusting."

*****end of triggerwarning*****

Neil sat up really slowly and watched Riko take sleeping pills. Three of them. He'd be passed out for hours… Neil showered and scrubbed himself clean four times until he decided that he wouldn't be able to wash the memories off… man… then he went to Riko's room again. He'd only "moved in" on the day Riko decided to tie him up, so his bag was packed. He picked it up and pressed his lips together. Pain… he swallowed painkillers from Riko's nighstand and looked at the wallet that was laying next to them. Neil had considered running months ago. Around when Kevin left. The dream became a plan when Jean was gone. And now… Riko wouldn't wake up for the next… 12 hours maybe. He'd make it quite far in that time. Even farther with money…

He took all the cash there was. Ended up with - no shit - almost 3500 $. How could a person keep as much cash at home? But Neil realised he didn't need to care. Not anymore. He'd be gone.

Neil couldn't believe it when he sneaked out with nothing but one big suitcase. The stairs were a challenge and tears were streaming down his face when cuts all over his body broke and opened.

He took the bus and swallowed hard. Where was he headed? As if he didn't know…

What am I doing? Neil thought, when he got off the bus at Palmetto State University.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Neil meeting the monsters + dealing with shit.
Wymack+Abby take care of him and so does Andrew

Chapter Notes

No trigger warnings for this one. Mentions of past violence. That's it.

UPDATE:
Apparently, I need to set a few things straight. There are sexists in this story, as well as homophobes. That's kind of a given, looking at the books. Aaron is a homophobe at this point and uses slurs, and should anyone be uncomfortable with that, I can work over this. You can always comment or write me personally!

What I was trying to say is that I'm not those things, my characters are. Sorry for the confusion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil ran his fingers through his hair and flinched when he felt his skin rip. He sighed and shook his head. Why was he doing this to Kevin? It was summer vacation. He might not be here. Then again, where else would he be? Where else had Neil to run to? Jean was even farther away and Neil didn't know if he'd even take the risk of taking Neil in. Even after everything Neil had done for him, he wasn't sure they'd be courageous enough to pay that back now.

Neil sighed deeply and called Kevin when he was standing in front of the Fox Tower...

"The fuck?" Kevin picked up and Neil bit his lip for a second, before feeling a sudden burst of pain. Riko had messed up his lips as well, of course.

"Kevin? This is… Nathaniel." Neil was a name he'd chosen, but everyone around him chose not to use it. It was unfair because this was his attempt to leave his father behind, years after he'd been left behind by him. Sure, they used the name publicly, but he was Nathaniel to all Ravens in private.

"Wait… what are… where are you? How is Riko letting you call me? Did something happen?"

Neil closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. He hadn't slept in three days. He was done.

"Could you let me in? I'm standing in front of the Fox Tower and I kinda don't know where to knock..."

Neil heard the beeping sound, meaning that Kevin had hung up. Not even a minute later, the taller man showed up in nothing but sweatpants and hugged Neil close. It hurt like hell but Neil closed his eyes and leaned in anyways.
"He didn't take his father's death too well?" Kevin asked and Neil shook his head a little. He was crying. God, what a girl he was!

Kevin let go of him and took his suitcase, motioning for Neil to follow him upstairs. "We're talking about this tomorrow. Get some rest. I'm glad you're here, man! Glad you're out of there, anyways." Kevin handed him a blanket and prepared the sofa a little, and Neil barely made it out of his pants and Sweatshirt before cuddling into the blanket.

He fell asleep instantly. Neil woke up several times, soaked in sweat, panicking, not knowing where he was. It took a few seconds to get his sense of reality back and he always counted to ten the the seven languages he managed to - which didn't mean he was fluent in most of them!

Like that, he slept for eleven hours straight. He must have left Evermore around ten pm or something, though it felt like a lot later. Those 16-hour-days really screwed up your sense of time.

Anyways, Neil awoke around two pm and rubbed his eyes. God, he was sore all over. Memories crashed over him for what felt like the hundredth time that day and he pressed his eyes shut in response. Knives were one thing. Starvation and sleep deprivation another, but not once in his entire life had he been raped.

Neil sat up really slowly and tried to stretch, but decided not to when he saw the lines on his arms. God, those would take an eternity to heal, having been opened day after day after day.

"Kevin, he's up!" someone exclaimed and Neil turned his head abruptly. Two people were sitting in bean bags, one was leaning against the wall next to them. The standing one shook his head slightly when he looked at Neil and pressed his lips together. He was one of the Minyard twins. In the bean bags were Nicky Hemmick and the other twin, who stared at him and tilted his head.

Neil frowned a little and looked back at them, not sure whether to say something. He decided not to, when Kevin entered the room and came to an abrupt halt. "Whoa… I didn't realise you looked this f*cked up last night… are you okay? Do you need help?"

Neil looked down his body and sighed a little. He wore a tee and boxer briefs, neither of whom did any good work in hiding Riko's most recent damage. "I'm fine. Could you just give me something to clean the cuts properly? I don't want them to be infected or anything."

Kevin nodded and moved for Neil to follow him. Neil had been drugged well yesterday, but he felt all the pain there was in the world right now. He could barely walk. Neil collapsed onto the sofa and spasmed in pain a few times. He'd always taken care of Kevin and Jean after the beatings and he'd even taken care of himself to this point, but this…? This was too much to take.

He didn't look up when someone pressed two pills into his palm and a glass of water into the other one. He just swallowed the pills and leaned back against the sofa. The pain would fade, he was sure of it, but the memories… he didn't think so.

"Kevin, go call Abby. And Wymack. Tell them to be here by… four? Not earlier than an hour from now. You owe me two for this. Nicky, leave, and take Spineless and Fuckhead with you."

Neil looked up and saw one of the Minyards sitting down next to him. He looked after the three men and felt panic well up inside him. "Kevin…” he mumbled and felt something break when he shut the door behind him. Alone with a stranger. No one to watch him. No one to help. Helpless. Nothing to do. Only him and that guy.
The panic subsided when the boy ran a cotton swab soaked in antiseptic liquid along his lower arms. He groaned.

"So, Neil, we're gonna play a game, alright? It's called truth and truth, because I think you have some interesting ones to share. My turn. Are you sure Riko did these? Or did you do that yourself? These look pretty self inflicted, so?"

Neil closed his eyes when the boy put a salve onto his cuts and taped them up tightly. The salve in addition to the painkillers actually did a lot of good against the pain. Neil groaned.

"Who are you actually? Aaron or Andrew? I can't tell you apart since either you or your brother is off their drugs," Neil mumbled and the blond one frowned.

"Is that your question?"

Neil rolled his eyes a little and leaned back.

"I'm not in for any game right now. But sure. That's my question."

"In that case, I'm Andrew. Now you have to answer my question."

"I didn't do this myself. Why would I cut my arms open?"

Andrew shrugged a little like he didn't care and straightened. "What else is hurting? Kevin called the nurse and she's gonna be here soon, but I don't think you want her to see everything, I'm taking care of it. Which other part hurts?"

Neil almost bit his lip again, but stopped himself soon, remembering the pain. "Everything hurts, but you don't have to worry. I'm fine. I can just…"

"You had troubles standing up just now. Legs, ass, back or circulatory problems?" Neil frowned at that. Who'd suggest ass just like that? That's not really…

"All of it? I don't know. Pretty much bruised up all over, so… I don't know." Neil swallowed. What did Andrew want to hear? He tilted his head again and looked at Neil, looking almost bored but slightly interested.

"I'm wasting a turn on this, so be honest, alright? What happened last night? I need to know so I can take care of the injuries properly."

Neil closed his eyes and counted to ten a few times. "No details. Probably a more brutal version of what you know from Kevin. Except for the bones, he didn't break mine. I was tied down and… yeah… what happened was probably what you can imagine happening with a person tied to a bed and two men as well as a bunch bunch of knives and razor blades in the room…" His voice broke when he said it and Neil looked down. What had he said? Why had he?

Andrew's face turned cold when he looked at Neil now and Neil just figured how disgusted the other man must be.

"I suppose you don't want to report to the police or gather DNA in order for the man to be identified?"

Neil looked up at that question and shook his head slightly. That didn't seem to be a disgusted answer…
"Lay down. I'm gonna disinfect the bruises on your legs now."

Neil did lay down and flinched everytime Andrew touched a new part of his skin. God… "Why are you doing this? Where's Kevin?"

Andrew sighed loudly and shrugged. "I'm the only one capable of cleaning up this kind of mess. And Kevin is probably panicking again. Hold still, you're making this even worse than it has to be."

"When is he gonna be back?"

Neil didn't feel all too well with no one but a stranger in sight. Man…

"Probably in an hour or something. Stop asking so many questions. Also, are there open wounds under the shirt?"

Neil shut his eyes close and shook his head. Of course there were. All over his upper body. Riko had cut quite deeply, at times. But he didn't want anyone to see him like that. Jean knew his upper body, knew about the endless times his father had used knives and cigarettes for measures of education. Knew about what exactly Riko did to Neil, alone from the wounds.

Honestly, Neil could bear the scars inflicted by Riko. Those were what connected him to Kevin and Jean. But what his father had done, all those burns, those slices that were way too deep, the messages he'd engraved to the skin of his back. His father had cut those messages into his skin deeply and just reopened them whenever he felt like they'd faded too much or that Neil needed to be reminded of the lesson. Some of them had turned into serious scars. He could still make out "Must not steal from dad!" on his left shoulder blade after he showered. The worst one was on his lower back. "My mother is a whore." He'd cried for days after that. His mother was gone, his father was mad. Neil loved his mother with everything he had. He didn't want to bear that message. Didn't want anyone to know that this how his father had raised him. With knives and burns. Lighters, cigarettes, irons.

"Hey. Are you with me? Don't lose it right now, would you?"

Neil blinked up at Andrew and nodded a little. "I'm sorry. No wounds under the shirt."

Andrew made an annoyed sound. "Sure? Because when Kevin got here after his fucking accident, his whole upper body beard cuts. So, don't make this harder on either of us. If we tell Abby that I took care of it, she'll leave it and won't demand to see it herself. What could he possibly have done to you that he hasn't done to Kevin? Except for rape. That's a new low, even for Riko."

Neil looked at him for a long moment and shook his head. Andrew might have been used to Riko's sick games, but he didn't know his father's. "No need to take care of anything. I'm fine."

Andrew rolled his eyes and shrugged. "Say that one more time and I'm gonna throw up. I'll have to tell Abby that there might be wounds under the shirt."

"Who's Abby?" Neil asked then.

"The team's nurse. She's good people but she won't let you get away with this."

"You could lie for me."

"Wouldn't, even if I knew you better. Live with it. Choice is yours." Andrew got up and took a cup of coffee for himself. "So?"

Neil shook his head and Andrew shrugged. "Whatever. What else happened to you?"
"It's not your turn." Neil didn't know the game they were playing, but he still wanted to play according to the rules.

"Then ask something."

Neil thought about that for a second. Huh... "Riko always told us that you were on those pills because you killed four men. Is that true?"

Andrew scoffed at that. "I didn't kill them. Well... they might have died if they'd been left there, but the ambulance got them. They survived. Now my turn. What else happened?"

Neil swallowed hard. He'd have to tell that story quite often, he supposed. "Starvation and sleep deprivation, for the most part. Over-exercising. He wouldn't let me eat at all some days. Yesterday. The day before..." Neil looked down. He'd caught up on some sleep last night, but now that the pain subsided slowly, he felt his stomach like a ball of iron.

"You're incredibly stupid. You should have said that earlier."

Andrew got up again and came back a few minutes later with three slices of bread with cheese, yam and bacon on them. Neil's stomach growled only looking at them. "Eat, Fucker!" Andrew demanded and Neil did. God, this felt heavenly. The cuts around his lips were older and -thank God - they remained closed.

When he was done eating, Andrew put some band-aids on the worst bruises on Neil's face and Neil had just gotten back into jeans when the door opened and five people chimed in. Kevin was the first to come inside, the cousins behind him, shuffling close to the door. The next person was a small woman who smiled when she came in, but covered her mouth when she saw Neil. The last one to enter the room was Coach Wymack.

"Oh seriously? What is it with fucked up Ravens and this place?" he asked and Neil just stared at him for a second. Old enough to be his father... The woman squatted down in front of him. "Hello, I'm Abby. You're Neil Josten, right? Kevin talks about you quite frequently. So... would you care to tell us what happened?"

Neil frowned at her and looked at Kevin for support. He didn't know what to say.

"Riko happened, just the way Riko happened to Kevin and Jean. I patched up his arms, legs and face. You should go to our room and take a look at his upper body. He wants to do that privately."

Neil stared at Andrew, who looked at Abby. How could he? Abby pressed her lips together and smiled at Neil. "Alright... if that's the case, would you follow me to their bathroom?" She stood up straight and Neil simply looked at Kevin. He didn't trust them. He didn't trust Kevin too much, either, but that wasn't of importance right now.

Kevin got closer and gave Neil a hand, pulling him up carefully. "You can trust her, Nathaniel. She's a good person. She won't tell anyone. Want me to come with you?"

Neil looked down at that and swallowed hard. Then he nodded. He needed Kevin. Kevin knew about the bruises. He hadn't seen all of them first hand, but he knew about them.

They followed Abby to the bathroom and she smiled at him. "Could you take off your shirt for a second? I only want to make sure there are no major injuries, yeah? And... I've patched up Kevin. I've seen a lot, don't worry about me. We're here to make sure you're fine."
"I'm fine." Neil answered and Abby nodded.

"It's not that I don't believe you, Neil, it's just that I'd like to make sure. Alright?"

"You won't talk to anyone about this, right?"

She smiled even brighter at that and shook her head. "Promise. I'm not allowed to and I wouldn't. Never!"

"Alright… you just promised something I have no way of checking until it's too late, right? So can I make a promise on that questionable trust? My back is fine. Don't look at it. He didn't do anything to that. I still don't want you to see it."

Abby seemed to want to interfere, but she looked at Kevin, who shook his head, so she left it at that. "Alright. We can do that. So?"

Neil lifted up his shirt and flinched when he felt some cuts bruise up. Oh God.

Abby swallowed hard and took a deep breath. "What a monster… sit down somewhere, darling, we're gonna clean that up first."

Neil knew that she must react to the scars in some way. You could unmistakably make out flat irons and cigarettes multiple times. His father…

Abby worked in silence for the most part and Neil was glad he didn't have to look at her. He stared at Kevin who only shook his head in disbelief.

"Do you think Riko will ever stop? Do you think he'll stop, now that the members of his precious 'perfect Court' are gone?" Kevin asked lowly and Neil pressed his lips together.

"You know Riko better than I do, Kevin, and the both of us know that he's gonna pick on the next person as soon as he's up."

Abby pressed her lips together at that and sighed heavily. "All patched up, Neil. And you won't grant me one look at your back? Sometimes - and often after situations like that - there are injuries you're unaware of. I'd really like to check."

Neil shook his head and swallowed hard. "I'm fine. Thank you." He pulled his shirt over his head and got up. "What's happening now?" He looked at Kevin.

The taller boy shrugged and ran a hand through his hair. "Now you talk to Coach Wymack. Then Wymack talks to Andrew. Andrew talks to you. Then we'll see what happens. One thing I know for sure is that you're not going back to Evermore."

Neil frowned at that and shook his head slightly. "Why Andrew? What's his role in this? Why does he have a say?"

Kevin sighed and smiled a little. "Andrew is the center of the whole situation, Nathaniel. When I got here, he promised to keep me safe from Riko if I promised to pay NCAA enough money so that they'd let him off his pills a year early. So… you heard what Riko said about Andrew and those four men, right? He took them out on his own. Did you see him? That small guy. And he's capable of that. So… if he's on your side, you might get to stay with us."

Neil pressed his lips together and nodded a little. That did make sense. Kinda. But what had he to offer? Kevin had bought him out of something. What could Neil grant in exchange for safety?
Abby smiled at him and opened the door of the bathroom. "Talk to Coach first, worry later, alright? I'm sure we'll find a way to make this work!"

The three of them left the room and Neil looked around a little. Andrew sat on the couch, Nicky beside him and Aaron on the far end. All of them were on their phones.

"Would you follow me to the kitchen for a minute, Josten? We need to sort some things out, talk some stuff through."

Neil looked at Wymack and pressed his lips together. Old enough to be his father, tall enough to be the man from yesterday… He swallowed hard and followed him slowly. Neil felt numb. Those painkillers must have kicked in all the way now. Thank God…

Neil looked at Kevin through the door until Wymack closed it and again, he felt trapped. Wymack motioned for them to sit down at the table. He took one chair for himself and frowned a little when Neil sat opposite of him instead of next to him, but catching the cautious look on Neil's face, he chose not to say anything.

"Alright, first things first. I know you're a backliner, but should Andrew actually let you stay — which I doubt at this point — you're gonna have to be a striker. We need one desperately and I couldn't find one in time. Think you can do that?"

Neil frowned and looked at the door for a second. Kevin had taught him that position when they were smaller and Neil had taught him how to be a backliner back then. They'd done that until the Master had caught them doing it and forbid it because he feared that it might decrease the power in their original position. He almost flinched at the thought of what had happened that night…

"I'd have to try, sir. I might." Neil grimaced at the last word. 'Might'… Riko hated it. He wanted a 'yes' or a 'no', no 'maybe', no 'I might' and no 'I'll see'. But he wasn't boxed for the answer this time. He looked up after a few seconds and saw Wymack shaking his head.

"Josten, listen. Don't sir me, yeah? And sure as fuck don't fear me. I won't do shit to hurt you, and should I still ever hurt you, you fucking tell me. This isn't what you ran from. This is where you arrived. I know you got away from something horrible, but you're not there anymore. I also know that Kevin was sick with fear for a few months after he came, and I want you to see who he is here and just try to feel as safe as he does, yeah?"

Neil had trouble reading that man. He was swearing and his tone was harsh, but the content of his words… Neil decided to agree. "Yes, sir."

Wymack groaned at that answer and sighed. "You're gonna be a piece of work, Josten. So, you said you might be able to be a striker? We have two at the moment, and we can't really have them play the whole time. You're gonna have to try and do your best for as long as it takes for me to find a proper one — no offence. All that is, if Andrew decides you can stay."

Neil frowned at that but nodded. "May I ask a question?" Neil asked quietly and Wymack sighed again.

"You just did, but today is your lucky day, you may even ask another one," Wymack said and sounded tired.

Neil looked down at his fingers and swallowed hard. "You said you didn't think he'd allow me to stay. What happens then? Where do I go? I don't think I can…" make this on my own. I don't think I can outrun Riko. I don't think I can do what Kevin and Jean did and start with no one I know. Neil
needed Kevin for this. Kevin or Jean. They had to be close. They had to help him through this.

Wymack pressed his lips together at that. "We'll find a way to make something work. Might transfer you to Jean? You're not going back there. Not after what you had to deal with. Not after Kevin told us about what you did for him, every time. Don't worry. I'll talk to Andrew now, yeah?"

Neil nodded and got up. He was glad he'd be able to leave the room. "Yes, sir." Neil opened the door and almost ran into Andrew, who had apparently gotten up to wait for him to be called by the door.

"Don't leave. You're gonna have to give some input and I don't want to have this talk twice," Andrew said and sat down next to Wymack, leaving Neil's original seat for him. Neil frowned and sat down again.

Wymack rolled his eyes a little and looked at Andrew. "So? What's your price? What do you want?"

Andrew looked out of the window and shrugged. "You know the answer to that. I want to be off my pills and I want the fuckers to stay alive. I'm off the pills. Taking him in would endanger the fuckers' lives."

"So did taking in Kevin, Andrew," Wymack argued, but Andrew made an annoyed sound.

"Yeah, but he did something about the first point. The answer is no. Questions?" Andrew looked at Neil and Neil pressed his lips together. Why was he like this? Neil hadn't upset him yet, had he?

"Who exactly do you want to stay alive?"

"None of your business, not of relevance."

"Then I'm making this my turn. So?"

Andrew rolled his eyes. "Gay, Spineless and Fuckhead. So?"

Neil frowned at that. Andrew had used those words to address… whom exactly?

"God, are you retarded? Nicky, Kevin and Aaron. Plus minus one or two people, depending on my mood. What does it change?"

Neil thought for a second and tried to come up with something. Not a lie. Something too true to be denied. "I kept Kevin alive for the past ten years of our lives. Sometimes barely, but I did. And even if that's not worth anything, I can keep him safe from feelings. Memories. I don't know. I can help you keep them safe, of that's your price. Not regarding Riko, but regarding the rest of the world."

Andrew frowned and looked at him now. "Interesting. Not worth shit, though. I can keep them safe. You're a risk. Put them at risk. You wouldn't even be able to cover the damage you're doing!"

Neil looked down and nodded. Andrew was right. Why was he even bargaining? That meant he had some sort of chance, right?

Wymack cleared his throat and looked between the two of them. "Andrew, don't you think you might be able to gain something from Josten? Anything? You wouldn't sit here if you didn't, right?"

Andrew scoffed lowly and shrugged then. "Well, if you ask like this… Kevin said you were the Butcher's son and showed him how to handle knives. Renee doesn't want to teach me. Can you?"

others how to. But could Neil do so too? He didn't want to be that person. He wanted to leave Nathaniel behind. And Nathan. And Riko. "I can try. If that's all it takes."

Andrew shook his head a little and sighed again. "No. You won't try. If I'm taking this risk, you will teach me, period. Also, you're gonna owe me two favours. No questions asked, no denying, no nothing. Two favours and the knives. And you're nice to Renee and Bee. Deal?"

Wymack laughed at that. "Renee and Bee? What about your family? What about the rest of the team?"

Andrew shrugged slightly. "None of your business. Josten? Deal?"

Neil swallowed hard. He could do that. He could actually stay with them? What were two favours in exchange for… freedom? Nothing! Nothing at all! And he'd deal with Renee, she was the other Goalie from the team and he wouldn't make trouble. And Bee… he didn't know who that was, but he'd manage to be nice. "Deal! My God, yes!"

So much tension fell from his shoulders and Neil sighed a little. He'd be allowed to stay? God…

"Great. I'll get the paperwork. You're gonna be signed as a Striker, but we're transferring you back to Backliner as soon as we can, right?" Wymack got up and hesitated at the door. "I'd offer you to crash at my place until you can move into a room with a proper bed, but I'm guessing you'd prefer to stay with Kevin?"

Neil nodded a little and looked down. Not in a million years would he stay with that man. "Yes, sir. If that's possible."

Wymack left the room and him and Abby left the Tower. Andrew scoffed again. "God, that's pathetic. Yes, sir? You should calm the fuck down."

Andrew got up and went to the living room, crashing onto the sofa. Kevin sat down next to him and Neil stood in the doorframe until Kevin motioned for him to sit next to him.

"So?" Kevin asked and looked at Andrew.

"Little Fucker is gonna have to be a Striker, so you should teach him how to do that as soon as he doesn't fall apart at one touch anymore."

Kevin smiled at that and nudged Neil. "Heard that? You're safe."

And even though Neil felt far from safe - about as far as it gets - he chose to ignore his thoughts and just believe Kevin for that moment.

The day passed with nothing but a text from Wymack to Kevin. "Breakfast @ Abby's 2mrw. B there @ 10. Bring the Monsters and Josten."

The boys played video games and provided Neil with painkillers every once in a while. Neil spent the time glued to Kevin, sitting where he sat, eating when he ate. When Nicky had prepared dinner, the five of them sat down at the table and started eating.

"So, Neil, you haven't said a single word since Wymack left, so… I'm Nicky. Hemmick. I'm 23, number 8 on the team, and in case you're getting ideas, I'm sure my boyfriend wouldn't have a problem with the both of us on a short-term basis." Nicky looked cheerful and smiled brightly, but
Neil only frowned at him.

"I'm sorry… what?"

Aaron groaned at that and shook his head. "He's gay and interested. Ignore him, he's like a child when it comes to that. Nicky, would you leave the poor guy alone for at least a day?"

Nicky laughed at that and shrugged a little, eating and smiling. "Whatever. My gay-dar is going off. So? And by the way, he didn't say no, that's almost a yes, right?"

Neil frowned at that and looked between them, then at Kevin. Kevin shook his head and shrugged. "Don't worry. That's how they make conversation. Nicky likes you! I think Aaron's as close as he gets to people, so consider yourself lucky!"

Neil nodded a little and tried to smile. It was hard, but he actually managed to.

"So… was that nod directed at me? Because in that case, we're sleeping in another room. Even if it wasn't directed at me, what's consent in a world like this one, right?"

Kevin laughed and Aaron rolled his eyes with a smile. Neil's smile vanished and he swallowed hard. He's not serious. Those are jokes, not plans. He's kindding. He doesn't want to rape you. Right?

"Nicky? One more statement that goes even remotely into that direction and you can deal with several broken bones and a ripped off penis."

The laughs faded and everyone looked at Andrew. Neil clenched his fork and looked at his plate. He managed to breathe again.

Nicky was the first one to regain his smile. "Easy, Minyard, you can have him. Whatever. Coach said you'd be a striker, right? Can you even change positions anymore? Physically?"

Neil held Andrew's gaze for as long as it took for Andrew to look away before he turned back to Nicky. "I'll have to try. I don't know. We'll see. I'm looking forward to being a backliner again, though."

Nicky laughed at that and nodded. "I get that! Strikers are all about the fame, but us backliners are the backbone of the team, right?" He nudged Aaron for that and smiled at Neil.

"I don't…" Neil started, but Kevin cut him off. "You could be the backbone of the team if you managed to hold up a defense that's to be taken seriously!"

Nicky laughed at that and shrugged. "Well, at least we have a weak defense and offence now, with Neil as a striker, right?"

Kevin smiled at that and shrugged. "Nathaniel learns shit pretty fast, so don't be too sure about that. And you're gonna be in his shadow as soon as he's back in defense, so be happy for as long as that takes, right, Nathaniel?"

Neil bit his lip and shrugged a little. "We'll see. Am I gonna have to switch to a light racquet? I think that would take a long time to adjust to. And strikers train other drills, right? You'd have to walk me through them."

Kevin shrugged a little and smiled. "You can keep the heavy one. I'll play with that one as well. And we can go through the drills, don't worry. It'll take time, but I'm sure you'll do fine!"
"Such a nerd, first thing you think about is drills!" Nicky made fun of him, but Neil only frowned. Stared at Kevin. What?

"You? You'll be on court? Kevin… how? The fracture can't be all the way fine, right? You're… what the hell? You're gonna play as a striker? Each game?" Neil couldn't believe it. He thought Kevin had given Exy up. He shook his head and stared at his… teammate? He'd play alongside Kevin? Same position?

Kevin couldn't hide a grin and shrugged a little. "I trained all year. I can do this. I don't think it's Raven-level-good, but it'll have to do. I'll still be better than you and Seth combined, so that's a plus, probably."

"Seth plays like a sloth, Neil's and Seth's combined power is Neil's power, period. And you shouldn't brag about being better that a guy who didn't even start playing that position yet!" Nicky laughed and Neil just shook his head, smiling.

"I'm glad you're back! I can't believe it! Congratulations!" Neil hugged him as well as he could with them sitting and plates on their laps. Kevin laughed a little and patted his back.

"God, you're embarrassing, Nathaniel. Seriously, calm down. And by the way, that's mainly your success. If you hadn't splinted the fracture right away, there's no way this could have worked! Abby said so, too!"

Neil shrugged at that and smiled slightly. "That went without saying, Kev. It was a given, really!"

Kevin sighed heavily and the room grew silent. The cousins stared at the two former Ravens and didn't say a word.

"It didn't, Nathaniel. And it wasn't. Jean and I would have been lost without you to patch us up. That's the truth. When he got here, you were all he thought about. The both of us. We were so sorry to leave you behind. I was glad about every game and official training session because I could see you were well enough to play. I'm happy you're here. Safe."

Neil swallowed hard and shrugged again. What was there to say?

"No seriously. I'm so sorry you had to go through that on your own. We should have had your back…" Kevin turned back to his food and took a deep breath. Neil just shook his head a little and continued eating. He had felt crappy during that… month? Had it really only been a month without Jean? Couldn't have been a lot longer.

"Shit, that was so gay, I thought you were gonna kiss!" Nicky exclaimed and Kevin laughed again. Not honestly, Neil and him were too serious for that, but he laughed anyways.

Aaron groaned again and shoved against Nicky. "Stop making everything so fucking queer! Seriously, you're scaring him off."

Nicky smirked at that and shrugged. "Well, Aaron, in case it escaped your knowledge, I am gay. And I'm gonna be fucking loud about it. Everyone should know. Neil, by the way, I'm gay."

Aaron pressed his lips together at that and practically threw his plate onto the table. "Nicky, you're disgusting. I'm going to bed. Night. Don't let him fuck you on our sofa, Josten!"

And like that, they were down to four. Neil stared after him as he slammed the door to the bedroom and sighed. "Is he always this… grumpy?"
Nicky laughed at that and shrugged. "He is. He's one of the biggest homophobes there are, but he wouldn't ever seriously hurt the guy WHO TOOK HIM IN, RIGHT, AARON?" He screamed the last part and Kevin chuckled at the muffled "Fuck off, Fag" that followed.

Andrew stared out of the window and didn't seem to be interested in any of that, but he did finish his food. Neil looked at the man for a few seconds. He was small, even smaller than him, and had taken out four grown men years ago? And he was the only barrier between Riko and them? Neil had trouble believing that.

"So, Neil. Why does Kevin call you Nathaniel. Is that a nickname-thing or are you denying us your real name?" Nicky laughed at the question and smiled at him. How was he this cheerful?

"Andrew said that Kevin told you about my father, right? So… you guys know about the whole thing, Moriyamas and everything?" Nicky and Kevin both confirmed that with a nod, so Neil shrugged a little. "My birth-name is Nathaniel, but when my father sold me off to the Moriyamas, they changed it to Neil. Changed my birthday and everything, too. They wanted me out of my father's business and basically made me another person. That is, for the public. They kept calling me Nathaniel in private."

"So what name do you prefer? We can go for that. We can make Nathaniel public, if you'd prefer that."

Neil smiled at that thought and shook his head a little. "Neil is fine. Better. I'd actually like to leave Nathaniel behind…"

Nicky nodded again and smiled even more brightly. "Sure. Great. Neil. So… I guess I'm giving the two of you some time to talk?" He looked at Andrew, who didn't look up. "Andrew? I think we might wanna give them a moment."

Andrew kept eating, not looking up, not showing any sign that he even heard the words. After a minute, Nicky gave up. "Whatever. Good night, guys. See you tomorrow. God, Neil, do you have this disgusting sleeping-rhythm because of those 16-hour-days? That's just sick, right? Whatever. Sleep tight!"

And like that, Nicky vanished into the bedroom as well.

"Is he nervous or does he usually talk as much?" Neil asked Kevin lowly and Kevin laughed a little.

"That's him, takes a while getting used to, but don't worry. He's good people!"

"What about Aaron?"

Kevin shrugged a little. "Aaron's a piece of work, but I guess you get used to him. He's not really sociable or pleasant-natured, but he's not usually too bad to be around."

Neil nodded a little and thought. "What about the others? Allison, Matthew, Danielle and Seth? And Renee?"

"Allison is a rich bitch, Matt is a former drug addict who relies on Dan too much, Dan works way too much for this team, Allison and Seth are on-off, he's taking drugs like water. And Renee is a sweetheart. She's nice, caring and lovely."

Neil stared at Andrew. He hadn't expected the it her boy to even pay attention. Andrew looked out of the window again and seemed to be looking for something.
"So… Dan and Matt, Allison and Seth, Renee and you? Those are a thing? Like, couples?" Neil asked and Kevin nodded while Andrew shook his head.

"We're betting on them. I think they're dating. Aaron does, too. The rest of the team, in fact. Allison is against them, for whatever reason, so is Seth. But the others are pretty sure about them," Kevin answered and Andrew tsk'ed.

"You're annoying, Kevin," Andrew sighed and seemed to link out of the conversation again. Piece of work.

Neil figured that Andrew would stay and he didn't really care about that. He wasn't gonna complain.

"Kev? About Riko, right?"

Kevin looked at him and Neil could see the look on his face. Trapped. Haunted. The way he felt.

"What about him?"

"What's like… the worst thing he did? To you?"

Kevin frowned at that and held up his hand. "I guess it's this. Why? What about you? Do you want to talk about it?"

Neil looked at the scars on Kevin's hand. Did the night haunt him? The night of this 'unfortunate skiing accident'? "Figures… but I don't. Want to talk about it. Just curious. What about Jean? Did he ever say anything about… anything?"

Kevin's frown got deeper and he shrugged. "I don't think so, Nathaniel. Riko took out every negative feeling he had on me. I think for Jean it was mainly anger. I know that he beat him up badly. Fists and knives. That's it? I think. Plus what you guys went through together. So… are you sure you don't want to talk about anything?"

Neil took a deep breath and shrugged it off. "No. I don't. Thanks anyways."

What had he done to Riko to deserve this? Why him and not the others? Why… just why?

"Kevin, go to bed, yeah? Josten, do you smoke?"

Neil and Kevin looked up at the same time and Neil shook his head a little. They weren't allowed to, at Evermore.

"I don't. Why?"

"Andrew, I'm not tired."

"Great. Kevin, bed! Josten, jacket. Follow me."

Kevin actually got up and pressed Neil's shoulder. "I'm here if you need me. If you wanna talk. I'll be there. He's taking you to the parking lot or roof, so don't worry. Just come here if you're uncomfortable."

Neil swallowed and took his jacket, watching Kevin enter the bedroom. "Night, guys. Don't hurt him, Andrew."

"I don't break shattered things, Kevin. You should know that by now!"
I hope you enjoyed the first official chapter! Couldn't keep myself from posting it right away, I'm sorry!!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Andreil on the roof, talking things through.
Breakfast at Abby's
First session with Dobson.

Chapter Notes

Can you believe this? Noooo trigger warning. Yas. I hope you'll like this chapter! Tell me about your opinions on it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I don't break shattered things, Kevin. You should know that by now!"


"What's this about, Andrew?"

Andrew lit a cigarette and looked up at the stars.

"This is about every single thing, Josten. Everything there is."

Andrew inhaled deeply and laid back, laying on his back now, looking up. "Lay down, Josten. You can't see anything that way."

Neil did lean back until he felt the cold stones all the way against his body. He felt a lot more secure this way. Neil looked at Andrew, but he simply blowed smoke directly into his face. Neil coughed a few times until he had regained his breath.

"Don't look at me. Look up. What do you see?"

"Stars? The sky?"

"Wrong. Nothing. And everything. At the same time. It's a pretty simple truth. Nothing to you right now, but pretty much everything there is. Plus, it's traveling back in time. These stars have probably exploded millions of years back. They don't exist anymore. Right?"

Neil turned to look at Andrew again. He hadn't taken him for the 'looking at the stars' kinda guy. Andrew had his eyes closed and seemed pretty relaxed. Neil hadn't seen him like this before.

"So?"

"So that's what you need to understand. I saw you panicking or being close to it twice today. That's
not good. It might not matter with these oblivious people around, it does matter on court. It matters where Riko can see you."

Neil nodded a little and swallowed hard. "And how exactly does the sky change that?"

Andrew didn't look up, his eyes remained closed. "Think of it like you should think of the stars. That man is all you think about, some moments. Those memories seem to be everything, everywhere, omnipresent. But they're in the past. Not far in the past for you, but they're not happening right now. And they're not everything. There's always a whole world for you to see. Feel. Explore. You'll never know an 'everything' but you should always be sure that this man is not - and won't ever be - everything there is."

Neil frowned a little bit. He was pretty sure that he couldn't do that. In those moments, there was nothing else to cling to. It was a moment of blackness, emotions and physical feelings. It felt like everything.

"Don't look at me. Look up. Make memories worth remembering." Andrew blew into his face again and Neil simply looked up again. The moon was almost full, but would need two or three more nights to actually be a full moon. He felt the cold breeze on his face and ever so often, he smelled Andrew's smoke. It was a chilly night and he'd usually want to go back inside, but right now, this was okay.

"Why are you doing this? For me?" Neil asked, voice uncertain. He kept looking up, but he really wanted to know. He didn't understand Andrew.

"I'm not doing anything for anyone. Especially not strangers. This is just so you don't fuck all of us up with any panic attacks or whining about shit you can't change anymore. Now shut up." Andrew's voice was harsh and when Neil looked at him, he stared at the starts in an almost furious way. His cigarette was gone, but he lit another one a few minutes later.

Neil didn't understand what Andrew meant all the way, but this sounded almost like advice from experience. Almost like Andrew had to fight panic at times. But he couldn't imagine that.

Neil couldn't really imagine Andrew doing anything. He had trouble believing that the smaller one had beaten up four grown men on his own, couldn't picture him dealing with issues, couldn't really wrap his head around Andrew helping Kevin or now him… Sure, the thing with Kevin was a bargain that might have felt equal, but his deal with Neil? Knives, favours and being nice to two people? That didn't even begin to cover the inconvenience Neil was.

Neil took the cigarette from Andrew and pulled it close. He liked the smell of burnt tobacco.

"Thought you didn't smoke," Andrew said in a harsh way, but he simply lit yet another cigarette for himself.

"I don't. I just like the smell."

"What a waste. You're a passive smoker. That's pretentious. Stop." Andrew sighed and seemed angry, but he was still staring at the sky.

Neil frowned and blowed against the lit end of the cigarette in order to keep it burning. "How is it pretentious?"

"You don't pay for that stuff. You get the result anyways. You seem to be so healthy because you don't smoke, but you're as addicted as we are. That's pretentious. I can't believe you waste it like that anyways."
Neil shrugged a little and took one single drag from the cigarette. He coughed a little and shook his head, blowing the smoke out again. "It's not pretentious. This is disgusting. The smell is nice anyways."

Neil grimaced a little and was happy when he was finally able to breathe properly again. He hated not being able to breathe properly. Flashbacks of times he had been pinned against the wall of the hallway at his throat made their way into Neil's consciousness. Riko's cold fingers, pressing, making it hard to breathe, making muscles clench and unclench all the time. Making him want to fight, knowing that it'd only make things worse.

'That was really bad, Nathaniel. That performance... ridiculous. One more training like that and you won't make it to the team. You know what that means? Nathaniel, talk to me. What happens if you don't make it to the team?'

Neil made a chocked sound and struggled to breathe. He saw stars.

'Riko, he can't answer. You're choking him. Leave him alone.' Kevin's voice was desperate and Riko was furious. Even more now.

'Kevin. He's capable of speaking, don't you think? Another word and I'll kill him. So? Nathaniel? What happens then?' He pushed more, Neil couldn't keep his eyes open. God...

Neil shot up when he was slapped in the face. "Breathe, Fucker."

Neil coughed and looked up at Andrew. He took a deep breath and pressed his lips together. Andrew was almost kneeling over him, frowning at him and shaking his head.

"Seriously, if you wanted to commit suicide, slit your wrists open or something, but don't just... stop breathing. Who does that?"

Neil took another deep breath. Crap. "I'm sorry. I'm fine."

Andrew slapped him another time for that answer and Neil grimaced. "Ouch..." he mumbled and Andrew laid down next to him again.

"You deserve it. On the one hand because you didn't follow the advice I gave you ten minutes ago. On the other hand because you over-use 'I'm fine' to a ridiculous degree. It's annoying!"

Neil swallowed hard and looked at the stars again. He kept breathing deeply and concentrated on the burning air he inhaled. The way it smelled. He was able to breathe!

"Andrew?"

He didn't answer or even look at him, but Neil kept talking anyways. "How does this help you? Does it even help at all? Because... the memories remain. They don't become less... vivid just because of... this. Right?"

Andrew looked at Neil for a second, before staring back at the stars. "You kinda reached my limit for deep conversations today. Try again another time. Or don't, actually. Just follow the advice, yeah? Now fuck off."

Neil pressed his lips together and looked up again. He thought Andrew had been friendly. He thought they might be friends. Andrew had given advice to him and refused to elaborate. He wanted
to know more about it, about Andrew, about how he dealt with stuff. But he guessed that he'd have to get used to it.

They stayed in silence for at least an hour until Andrew got up and gave Neil a hand, pulling him up as well. Andrew stretched his arms out and let his knuckles crack. He led them back to the Monsters’ room and locked the door behind them.

"I don't suppose you don't have any plans at all? Ever?" Andrew asked them and Neil frowned down at him.

"Plans? For–"

"For tomorrow afternoon. We're leaving at 15:50, we'll be back by 17:10."

"Do I have a say in this?"

"No. As I said, we're leaving ten to four, be ready by then." Andrew didn't look at him when he said that and Neil couldn't let go of that tiny frown.

"Ready for what exactly?" He didn't understand what this was about and Andrew was annoyed already.

"You are exhausting. You're meeting Bee tomorrow. Now go to sleep, you look like shit."

Neil looked after Andrew as he vanished into the bedroom. He sighed a little and changed into sleeping clothes. Neil crashed onto the couch and fell asleep pretty soon. He woke up a few times that night, often panicking, but he came down quite quickly.

He'd slept for three hours without disturbance, when he was woken up by a shifting of weight on the sofa.

Neil ran his hands through his hair and looked up. Nicky was sitting by Neil's legs, sipping a cup of coffee and pointing at one on the table.

"Morning, love. Sorry to disturb, but we're leaving for breakfast in twenty minutes. Kevin wanted to give you ten more minutes to sleep, but I thought you might want a cup of coffee before we leave."

Neil nodded a little and took the mug, sipping carefully. God… he loved coffee. "Thank you. Good morning," Neil answered. He gripped the mug, warming his fingers. God, he was freezing.

"How'd you sleep? Better than last night? You screamed last night, you know? You didn't, tonight. That's positive, right?"

Neil shrugged a little. He hadn't known that. "Fine."

"Heard that you spent the night on the roof with Andrew? Glad you're alive. I wouldn't have guessed that anyone survives that." Nicky laughed and pushed against Neil's arm softly. Neil frowned a little and tried to smile.

"He didn't attempt to push me down."

Nicky sighed dramatically and put his arm around Neil's shoulders. "Neil, buddy. Pal. Mate. You should really learn how to make conversation. Seriously, you almost seem to be a lost case… but whatever. I like them better silent anyways."
Neil chose to ignore those misplaced attempts to flirt and sighed a little. "Who's Bee?" he asked instead of answering anything to Nicky's statements.

"Oh, you have to see her already? Don't worry, she's good people! I mean, Aaron doesn't like her, but she's really nice. You'll like her!"

Neil frowned at that answer. 'Have to'? Did Andrew take everyone to Bee at some point? That didn't sound too promising. Well… he'd deal with her.

"Nicky, leaving in ten, get ready!" Kevin shouted from the bedroom. Neil got up when Nicky did, getting dressed, brushing his teeth and folding his blanket.

Neil had to sit between Aaron and Nicky on the backseat. He didn't mind too much, being able to see Kevin right in front of him. Nicky chatted the whole way to Abby's and Neil was as bad at making conversation as always.

Breakfast was… weird. Neil didn't talk at all. They sat at a round table, Wymack next to Abby next to Aaron, Nicky, Neil, Kevin, Andrew. They talked about the official line-up, their problems with staying a Class I Exy team, their opponents. Aaron, Andrew and Neil remained silent. None of them cared too much. Neil had heard all of that multiple times. The Ravens took that extremely seriously, so Neil knew about the chances of pretty much every team.

The twins and him ate in silence and Neil was so happy to finally be able to eat properly. He lived for these warm, scrambled eggs. God… after weeks of being starved, this was heavenly.

Neil had to be addressed personally three times by Wymack and nudged by Nicky in order to get his attention to the conversation. He had stopped listening at some point. Neil looked up and frowned a little. "Sorry… what?"

Nicky laughed and slapped his back softly, while Wymack shook his head a little. He passed a black folder to Neil.

"This is your contract. I only need the first page back after you signed it and the very last one after you finished your time table for this year, fill that in and give it back signed. The rest is information on the terms of the contract, the classes offered this term and stuff about PSU, everything you need to know. Clear?"

Neil took the folder and nodded. It was clear… wow. That was a piece of freedom, right there in front of him.

"Can I give back the first page already? Right now?" Neil asked and Wymack even smiled a little.

"Sure. Dotted line on the bottom." He handed Neil a pen and seconds later, the Foxes had another member officially. Wow… that was awesome.

Neil handed the pen and paper back to Wymack and Nicky cheered. "Official Fox, eh? Congrats on being one of the fuck-ups!"

Kevin laughed at that and Neil couldn't help smiling. Nicky was right. He was one of them. Becoming a Raven had deprived him of his… family? Of his father. His mother had been gone. Becoming a Fox had brought him back to his brother Kevin. This was a good thing.

Abby cleared the table and cleaned up everything before sitting back down. "So, Neil? I was wondering if you'd let me take a look at the rest of you? I just want to know whether you might want to keep them uncovered in order to heal more quickly? And I'd like to clean them properly, you
Neil pressed his lips together tightly and shook his head a little. "I think it's fine. Thank you, though. But there's no need for that."

Abby kept smiling, but it seemed a little uncertain. "Can I make sure? Neil, please, it'd calm me down quite a bit."

Andrew set his cup of coffee down and looked at Abby from his big eyes. "Abby? Look into my eyes and say that you don't think I'm capable of taking care of those kinds of wounds, would you?" He waited for a few seconds until Abby looked away and nodded a little. Aaron frowned and Nicky looked between Andrew and Aaron in a concerned way. Kevin just sighed. "I thought so, Abby."

Neil didn't know what had just happened, but this was the third or fourth time in the last two days Andrew had helped him out. He'd have to thank him some way.

They stayed silent for the rest of breakfast and Neil kept looking at Andrew. Why was he like this?

"Alright, guys. Last thing we need to talk through is the rooms. Yours is full. Seth and Matt have two free beds. Either one of you clears a bed for Josten, or someone moves into the upperclassmen's room together with him. Volunteers?"

"Or I could move into their room alone? It's right next to yours, right? What's the matter?"

They all turned to look at Neil now, and he felt strange. He hadn't said anything stupid, right?

"I thought perhaps you'd like to stay with Kevin?" Wymack suggested and Neil shrugged a little. He never had much say in which room he'd sleep in. He hadn't realised they were trying to help him here.

"It's fine. That way everything is more normal, right? I'd like going back to normal. I'm fine with this."

Wymack frowned at Kevin, who shrugged. "If Nathaniel is okay with it, then so am I!"

So the topic was settled. He'd live with Seth and Matt. Two drug addicts wouldn't be able to harm him too much. He would simply stay out of their business.

Breakfast ended at twelve o'clock and apparently, it was normal to stick around until lunch was ready. Neil'd have preferred to go back to Fox Tower, but he really wasn't in the position to complain. He did what he had done at literally every social event he attended in the past ten years; stick with Kevin. He was usually talking to Wymack about Exy, which was something Neil enjoyed listening to at all times, but whenever the conversation turned to their teammates or something, Neil stopped listening. Andrew had given him the shortest of introductions to everyone and that would have to do until he'd actually meet them in a few weeks. Days? Neil wasn't even sure. He didn't really care enough to ask, though. All he wanted to do was to sleep.

He couldn't, of course, because around two hours later, there was lunch on the table. They all sat down, ate, chatted. It felt weird to Neil. The Ravens had always eaten in silence. And they had certainly never had breakfast until 12 and start eating lunch around half to three! They never ate this long, either. It was fifteen minutes at most, until they were supposed to leave. No sticking around.

It was three thirty when Andrew stood up without saying a word. He looked at Neil and waited. "You coming?"
Neil frowned a little until he remembered that he was gonna meet Bee now. Alright. "Sure. See you later?" Neil asked into the direction of Kevin.

Kevin frowned at that and shook his head, confused. "Where are you going? Are you okay with this?"

Neil shrugged a little at the second question. "I'm fine, honestly."

"We're seeing Bee, obviously, Kevin! It's Wednesday. Coach? That means you can call of the official meeting. C'mon, we're leaving."

Neil frowned deeply at that answer. Official meeting? And Andrew was seeing her each Wednesday? "Who is Bee exactly?" Neil asked, getting into the passenger seat.

"Good friend of mine. You'll find out soon enough. Remember your promise."

Neil shrugged again. Why wouldn't he be nice to a stranger? His deal with Andrew would simply lead Neil to being a little less reserved from the beginning.

Neil shifted uncomfortably, when they were in front of an official school building. "We're seeing her here?" Neil asked slowly and got out of the car when Andrew did. God... he was nervous, all of a sudden.

"Yes. Shut up. Follow me." Andrew started walking into the building and Neil fiddled with his phone in his pants. He wanted to call Kevin. Neil hated these buildings. What kind of person was that Bee?

There was a woman behind a counter, smiling when they walked in. "Andrew, good to see you! And you're Neil Josten, right? Pleasure to meet you! Miss Dobson will see you right now, you can go inside already!" She was way too enthusiastic about all of this.

"Why does she have an office? And a secretary? Andrew, where are we going?" Neil swallowed hard and sighed heavily when Andrew didn't answer but simply led him into a room. No...

Neil knew the setup of rooms like this one. The desk with a chair, two additional chairs facing each other, a bookshelf with a ton of scientific reports and studies on some shit...

"Bee is a therapist?" he asked, voice low.

"This is your first session with her. You're gonna be nice or you're gonna leave Palmetto. That's the deal. I can stay inside if you don't want to spend the time with a complete stranger, though I don't suppose I'm much of a safe haven for you, so whatever. Hey, Bee!"

A woman entered the room and smiled brightly. She was about their size and a lot thicker, a little chubby, even. "Andrew! Thank you for calling in advance! And hello you! I'm Betsy Dobson. You're the new Fox, I've heard?"

Neil looked at her hand and sighed a little, before shaking it. "Good afternoon. I'm Neil Josten." His voice was low and shivered a little. He hated therapists so much. He didn't really know the reason for that. It was the way Riko had talked to them, probably. As if they were crazy. As if they needed to see someone to talk about why they'd inflicted themselves with wounds he'd been responsible for. Calling them weak when they were breaking. It was the way pretty much everyone around him had always called his mother off for being crazy. Needing to see someone. Because she was weak. Did this make him weak? What would his mother think of him being here? And his father? Neil shivered at the thought.
"Great to meet you, Neil Josten! Do you want me to go for Neil or Josten? A nickname, your full name? Your call!" She smiled genuinely and Neil swallowed hard. 'Don't talk to me at all' was what he wished to say. He didn't want to see this woman.

"Neil is fine", he mumbled instead, because he had promised.

"Alright, Neil, would you care for some hot cocoa? Should I prepare one cup? Or two? Three?" She smiled all the way through her statements and Neil just... how did this woman remain so fucking friendly? How was this more than a play?

He looked at Andrew for a second, before facing her again. "Three, I guess. I don't really care."

Betsy Dobson smiled at that and nodded. "I'll be right back. Milk's warm already, give me a minute, sit down if you want to! Get comfortable!"

She left the room and Andrew shoved against Neil's shoulders a little too rough for it to be a game. "That's not seriously your definition of 'nice', is it? I know it wouldn't be mine, if my worthless life depended on it."

Neil swallowed hard at that and shrugged a little. What exactly was he supposed to be like? "Sorry. I'm trying."

"Try harder, for God's sake! And talk to her, I'm serious. She asks, you answer, or the deal is off."

Neil swallowed even harder at that and nodded a little. Andrew was right. His life did depend on this. He should try a little harder than whatever he was doing now.

Dobson came back with a tray and three mugs seated on it. Then she moved the chair from her desk next to the one for her patients and distributed the mugs, before sitting down in the single chair in front of the boys. Neil and Andrew sat down, Andrew leaning back in the office chair, Neil shifting uncomfortably in his.

"So, Neil, Andrew said you might want to talk about how you got these wounds, is that true?"

Dobson smiled at him and took a sip from her mug.

Neil took a deep breath and stared at the brown liquid in his own mug for a few seconds. "Not really. Do I have to? I don't want to."

Dobson smiled at that and shook her head a little. "Neil, don't worry. It's fine. We don't have to talk about anything! Certainly not things you don't want to share! I just want you to know that I'm always there if this is not a 'no' but a 'not yet', alright? So... what would you rather talk about? How you got here, signed, this late in the holidays?"

Neil looked at Andrew who gave him a death-glare. He should answer this. Of course he should.

"I used to be at Evermore. Edgar-Allan. With the Ravens. Though... that's not entirely true. I mean, I grew up there, but I'd have only started Freshman year this year anyways, so... yeah. Uh... I left because of... circumstances that would not improve any time soon, and because I grew up with Kevin, I came here. Luckily, Mister Wymack needs another player for the season quite desperately, so... here I am."

He tapped his mug and sighed when he was done. He'd left home for good. Fuck....

"And how do you feel about that? Leaving home is always a big step. Are you okay with this?"
How did she know which questions to ask?

"Like crap. But I'd rather not go into detail. Circumstances were bad, I had to leave, now I'm gone. There's no turning back."

"Do you wish there was?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I'm sorry." Neil sighed heavily and took a sip of the cocoa. He felt dizzy.

"Can you tell him about coping-mechanisms? Regarding panic attacks and flashbacks. It's quite urgent," Andrew chimed in and Neil swallowed hard. Was that boy okay? He could not just spill out secrets like this!

Neil didn't look up when Dobson started talking. He didn't want to look at her. Weak. That's what he was. What he always would be.

"Neil, stop me whenever you think it gets too much, yeah? But I'm just gonna be talking now, alright? Coping is important, you need to find out which mechanisms work for you. Some people need to understand that fears are valid, that it's okay to be afraid of certain things, even though they are in the past. For that, you might want to try and picture the younger version of yourself going through the bad situation. Talk to that version, take care of it, be the adult you would have needed. That helps some people..."

Neil didn't listen for the rest of her speech. This did seem to be good advice, right? It wouldn't help him through bad panic attacks or flashbacks, but it did seem to be helpful concerning the start of them.

"Neil, are you with me?" Dobson asked after a while. He was still staring into his mug, lost in his thoughts.

"I am. Sorry. I don't know how to respond," Neil lied. He had no clue what she'd said in the last - he checked the clock over the room's door - forty minutes. What the hell?

"You don't have to. Just be sure to call, should you have any problems or questions. Would you like to come back here some day? We don't need weekly sessions, but I'd like to see you again."

Neil gripped his mug more tightly and shrugged. He didn't want to talk about himself. Spill secrets. He wanted to deal with this on his own.

"How about I just bring him when he feels like it? Wouldn't have a problem with that," Andrew answered and Dobson smiled brightly.

"Grand idea, Andrew! Looking at the time, I fear we're done for today. Is there anything either of you would like to talk about?"

Neil shook his head and finished his cocoa. When had it cooled off all the way?

Andrew shook his head as well and the both of them got up and walked outside, getting into the car.

"That wasn't necessarily nice, you know?" Andrew asked and lit a cigarette, opening the windows, starting to drive.

"I can't talk to therapists. It was more that anyone else has ever gotten."
Neil looked at Andrew, who considered this argument before shrugging. "If you say so. That means that you're gonna have to be extra nice to Renee now, just so you know."

Neil shrugged and sighed. He didn't care. He'd manage to be nice, for once in his life. He'd been raised to respect people, not to be nice to them, but Neil seriously doubted that the difference could be too big.

They arrived back at Fox Tower and went up to their room. Neil sighed and wanted to sit down on the sofa next to Kevin, but Andrew made an annoyed sound.

"Neil, bathroom."

Neil sighed and followed him, closing the door behind them. Andrew worked as silently as Abby had, taking the band aids and patches off, cleaning all the wounds, putting a fresh layer of salve over them and rewrapping them tightly.

"Why do you know how to do this as quickly?" Neil asked lowly. Andrew pretended he hadn't heard Neil and stood up straighter when he was done with Neil's arms, legs and face.

"Why won't you let me handle the ones on your upper body?"

"It's not your turn," Neil started, and Andrew rolled his eyes. "It is, by the way. And you're right, I should make this my turn. So?"

Neil shook his head a little and went for the door. "None of your business."

"I would answer if I were in your position."

Neil turned around and felt fury rise in his gut. "Listen up, alright? I am thankful for you taking care of these wounds the way you do and I'm even more thankful for you letting me stay here, but I'm not being blackmailed or threatened all the way through my stay here. Seriously, we have a deal. Me sharing every secret I have with you or your therapist is not a part of that deal!"

He'd regret being this loud and furious, but he couldn't really care too much at the moment. Neil had enough of not having anything of his own and while he didn't necessarily wanted the past he had, it was his and his alone. He wasn't giving that piece up to just anyone.

"You shouldn't waste your turns then. You can ask just as many questions, just as hurtful ones, as I do. You chose to waste them on my name. So, why won't you let me see your upper body when I've seen Kevin at his worst?"

"Because my scars tell other stories. Now fuck off." Neil had to give him a tiny bit of truth, he knew that. But this was all he was ready to give.

"Because my scars tell other stories. Now fuck off." Neil had to give him a tiny bit of truth, he knew that. But this was all he was ready to give.

"Now, was that as hard as you thought it would be? And what stories could your scars possibly tell? Did daddy touch you too harshly some days? Did mommy? Get over it, seriously. You're a grown man. Those booboos shouldn't make you as aggressive anymore. Maybe you're our new Spineless and Kevin finally gets another nickname?" He sounded like a maniac, saying this. Almost apathetic. Neil swallowed for a second but refused to let any unease show on the outside. He wouldn't give that to Andrew.

"Andrew, I'm serious, fuck off!"

"Or what? What could you do to me, fucker?"
Neil closed his eyes for a second and counted to ten. In English, French, German, Spanish... when he was at Italian, he heard the door open and close behind Andrew, when he was at Japanese, he was ready to leave the room himself. This was tearing him apart.

He went to sit next to Kevin on the sofa. Andrew was nowhere to be seen.

"He's on the roof, in case you're looking for him," Kevin offered, but Neil shook his head.

"I'd prefer not to see him again in... ever?" Kevin laughed at that answer and shrugged.

"He's the reason you're here, and while it might not seem like it all to often, he's good people! He'll take care of you!"

Neil sighed heavily at that and nodded. He didn't really doubt that. He did question the prize he'd have to pay in exchange for that.

"When am I moving out? Or rather, in? With Matt and Seth?"

"Matt and Dan are arriving tomorrow morning, Allison and Renee that afternoon. I don't know about Seth. But you can move into the room tomorrow, I guess. And you'll meet the team tomorrow, which is great. Dan and Matt live for Exy, so you'll have something to talk about."

"So this is the last night we're spending in a room?" Neil made sure and bit his lip. He didn't feel too great about that.

"Yeah, I guess. But you're in the second room down the hall, so don't worry. You can always knock. Or call. Or scream, for that matter. I'll be there, alright?"

Neil nodded and sighed heavily. "How did you manage to do this? On your own?" he asked lowly and leaned back in the sofa, closing his eyes.

"I didn't really manage to do anything at first. I don't know. But I had these people. Andrew and Nicky watched me a lot. Aaron didn't care too much. You'll have Matt, I think you'll like him. Seth is a bastard, but don't worry about him. What you need to understand is that you're not alone anymore. Not in pairs of two, like with the Ravens. We're a team. We have your back!"

Neil thought back at his time with the Ravens. Training was hard. Whenever him or Jean did anything wrong, both of them were punished. That was not really having each others' backs but more of a dependency. Neil didn't want to depend on the Foxes, this bunch of broken and shattered people, but it seemed like he'd have to, to some degree.

Neil didn't know how to feel about that yet, but he guessed he'd have to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, in case you're wondering about the coping mechanism Bee mentioned, feel free to ask in the comments! This is one my former therapist told me to use and it helped me a great deal, so should you want to try it, ask!

Also, please comment any questions of opinions! I hope you liked this chapter!

Also next chapter is gonna be up by Saturday latest! (Who am I kidding? I just finished
it, it's gonna be up after I'm done editing which means tonight/tomorrow)
AND NEIL IS GONNA MEET THE FOXES!!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Neil meets Matt, Dan and Seth.
Featuring friendship and sexism->feminism. Both kinda. As you know, Neil's learning
Also sorry about the ending of this but Neil was actually supposed to meet Renee and Allison in this chapter as well and it turned out to be soooo long so I had to cut it somewhere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kevin and Neil had moved all of his stuff over to the other boys' room. Neil didn't attempt to make it look as if he'd been there for a while. What for? He'd just tell Matt that he'd only arrived the night before. Or go for the truth. This truth wasn't a dangerous one.

Wymack and Abby were there, for whatever reason, and Kevin, Neil, Andrew and Nicky as well. All of the Monsters except for Aaron were in Neil's new room. Why exactly, he didn't understand. Probably to talk to Dan and Matt about the circumstances.

Around nine am they heard loud giggling and steps approach. It sounded so cheerful and carefree… Neil was almost sorry for what they were about to witness.

The lock turned until the person on the other side of it realised it was unlocked, and was opened.

The six feet four tall guy entered the room and frowned, seeing most of the Monsters, the nurse and his coach in the room. He shook his head a little and closed his eyes for a second. "Who is it this time? Seriously… are they fine?"

Coach Wymack laughed a little bitterly at that and pointed at Neil in the corner of the room. Matt looked at him and it only took him a few seconds to recognise him. His frown turned into a smile.

"No way! Neil Josten? Great to see you again!"

Apart from the winter banquet last year, when they had talked for less than ten minutes, Neil had never talked to that guy. That he was this friendly and enthusiastic anyways made him smile a little. He shook Matt's hand when the taller man approached him and looked up at him.

Matt's smile faded when he saw all of the band aids and patches all over Neil's arms and face. "God, you alright? Are you on the team? How do you even intend to play like this? Riko's so sick, seriously."

Neil swallowed at that reaction and shrugged a little. "I'll play the way I walk at the moment. Drugged with every painkiller there is. This is gonna be fine."

Matt nodded a little and gave him a once over again. "And you're staying in this room? Great! And you're signed up with us already? So no going back?"
Neil nodded a little and Matt smiled at that. "That's awesome! When will NCAA announce the official lineup? That's the moment you're safe from them all the way. That means you belong with us, right?"

Neil smiled at that thought and nodded a little. Wymack checked the date and smirked a little himself. "In two days. Do we want to go public right away or wait for what the Ravens have to say?"

Kevin was the first do answer. "We should go first. That way they have to adjust to our story, not the other way around."

Wymack nodded and sighed a little. "Alright, now that Matt knows, we can leave, right? You can handle Seth, can't you?"

Matt laughed at that and nodded. "Sure! We'll deal with him. Right, Neil?" Matt smiled at him and Neil felt weird. This was another kind of friendly than Nicky's flirting or Kevin's reserved presence. This was… more honest?

"And Dan won't be a problem, will she?" Wymack made sure.

Matt frowned at that. "Dan can decide whether or not she'll make this a deal. What do you expect me to do, forbid her an opinion?" He laughed a little and his face lit up even more when Dan entered the room.

"Heard my name, what's… what the hell?"

Her smile vanished when she saw all the people in the room. Instead of being tired of this, the way Matt was, she seemed to be very concerned.

"Who's hurt? New member or someone's friend? Are they alright?" Her eyes searched the room for an unfamiliar face and she relaxed a little when she saw Neil next to Matt, standing up straight, a smile on his face, conscious, covered in band aids. He'd been taken care of, thank God.

Wymack smirked at her reaction and looked at her when she went for Neil, shaking his hand. "Dan Wilds, captain of this bunch of crazy! Pleasure to meet you! We barely got any chance to talk at the banquet."

Neil smiled and nodded a little, shaking her hand. This was weird. They were so very different from the Monsters.

"So, you've recognised Neil Josten, right? He's the latest addition to our team, the only Freshman this year." Wymack explained. Dan's face froze and she lost her smile.

"That's not true, is it? It can't be. We can't play like that!" She seemed almost desperate… what had Neil done wrong?

"I'll play. I can do that. It's not gonna be perfect, but–" Dan cut him off, shaking her head.

"It's not about you or your condition, Neil. I'm sorry but you're a backliner. We can't possibly have four backliners and two strikers! Seth might – and that's a big, capital, hypothetical MIGHT – be able to play a full game. Kevin starts playing again this season. He can't. We'd have been happy for him to play one full half! You said you would try to get two strikers for this season and you show up with a backliner?"

Wymack started laughing at that and shrugged a little. "Easy, Dan! I show up with one striker instead of two. Sorry about that, but things were kinda hard. Neil is switching positions until we have at least
one new striker. I'll try to get one over the term, but you know how hard that is."

Dan frowned hard at that and gave Neil a once over. "Striker? When he trained to be a backliner for all his life? Coach, we're fucked."

"As fucked as we always were. Embrace the challenge, Dan! Abby and I are leaving now. I trust you to take care of the girls and Seth on this matter, right?"

Dan sighed and nodded a little. "You know Seth is gonna be pissed. But we'll talk to him. Bye."

Wymack and Abby left. When they closed the door behind themselves, Dan looked around another time. She seemed a little nervous, for whatever reason. Neil guessed it was about the fact that she was the only female in this room, but he wasn't sure.

"Training starts on Monday, do you think you're ready to run by then?" she asked Neil than. Neil looked down at his arms and imagined the cuts. Most of them should be healed enough in that time. It would have been around a week. But he knew they'd break if he was expected to stretch too much or if he fell down. It'd be painful, but he had strong pills.

"I'll be able to run and train with you guys, I guess. We'll see. I'll just do everything I can do without hurting too much." Neil knew that he'd hurt himself in a realistic game situation. Catching a ball that was thrown at him full force would rip open the deeper wounds. This wouldn't stop him from playing. He needed the training. He needed to prove that he was no failure. No burden. He needed to give this back.

Dan smile brightly at that and nodded. "Great. Awesome! I'm glad you're on the team! When did you arrive at Palmetto?"

Neil thought about that. His sense of time was still wrapped and twisted because of this change from Ravendays to usual days. "Three nights ago. I haven't been here for too long."

Dan frowned at that answer. "So three nights ago is also when you left Edgar-Allan? How are you even standing here?"

Neil almost laughed at that question and shrugged a little. "Sheer force of willpower alone, I guess."

Dan laughed at that and nodded. "Alright. I'm preparing some tea. Or coffee? Does anyone want some?"

She looked at the Monsters a little uncomfortably and tried to smile. So her unease wasn't about them being all male but about this group of friends in particular? Alright... Neil was confused about this girl. That's what she was, after all. A girl. Captain. How weird. Neil had known about this, but he hadn't assumed she'd actually get anything done. Seemed like he was right. The boys didn't listen to her. Wymack seemed to give some thought to her opinion, but he'd made the decision to recruit Neil on his own. So Dan as a captain was only for publicity, after all. Just as Riko had said all along.

Andrew was the first go get up, leaving without a single word. Nicky followed him outside, mumbling something about having to call Erik. Kevin was halfway outside before he turned around. "You good?" he asked, and Neil was more than confused.

"I'm fine."

And like that, they were down to three. None of them had answered Dan's question. What the hell? While Neil didn't really believe in equal rights on Court - females were less muscular and sporty in general, that was a fact to him - he didn't understand this level of disrespect.
"I'd be in for a coffee, babe," Matt mumbled against her temple and kissed it softly. Dan sighed heavily and looked after them.


Neil shrugged a little and swallowed. "Coffee would be awesome. Do you need help?"

"No. Sit down, the both of you!"

She went into the kitchen as if it was her own and Neil and Matt sat down next to each other on the sofa.

"So, Neil. Guess we're roommates now, eh?" Matt smiled at that and took a deep breath. "I'm so glad to be here again! It's some kind of home. I love it."

Neil nodded a little and looked around. "Can you explain what just happened? Is it that you guys don't like each other or is something going on?"

Matt sighed at that question and shrugged. He kept smiling. "Didn't they talk to you about this? I guess you know that the team dynamics are pretty crappy with us. That's because we're two basically separate groups. The Monsters are the ones you stayed with. We're... I don't know. Basically the upperclassmen. I don't know why we don't get along all the way. The Monsters prefer to stay by themselves. That's the main reason. How did they not tell you?"

Neil frowned and shrugged a little. He hadn't realised any of that. "I don't know. They way they talked suggested you all got along fine. Except for Seth and Kevin, apparently. And Allison? I'm not sure. They didn't talk too much about you guys. And they didn't really say anything negative."

Matt laughed at that and shook his head. Dan came in with three mugs and pushed one onto Neil's hand while Matt took the other one she'd clamped between her arm and tummy. "Thanks, babe."

"Thank you," Neil muttered and warmed his fingers on the mug.

Dan smiled brightly at Neil and sat down next to Matt. "No problem, guys! So... what did they say about us?"

Neil thought back to Andrew's words and tried to take the offensive parts out of the statements. "That you are hard working and invested in the sports. That the two of you are a couple and somewhat of a union. I don't know, really. That Allison has a lot of money and used it, too, that Seth takes... drugs? From time to time? And that Renee is an angel, basically."

Dan smiled brightly at that and nodded. "I can't believe they said that. That's nice. Almost. Most of it! I mean... Seth does take drugs. And the rest is rather positive, right?"

She seemed to be incredibly happy about that. Neil was glad he hadn't used Andrew's words but his own. He kinda liked Dan. She seemed to be nice.

"So, Neil, tell us a little about yourself! Anything, really!"

"Babe, how do you not know everything about him? Neil Josten, best backliner at his age, since he was 11. Grew up with Kevin and Riko since he was 10. His birthday's on the 31st of March, he turned 19 a few months ago. He's the fastest Exy player in High Schools, and I guess now he'll be the fastest in College-League-Exy."

Neil smiled at that short biography of himself and nodded a little. Those were in fact 'Neil Josten'
facts. Not all were true for Nathaniel, but that was another story. Dan giggled and messed up Matt's hair. "Thanks for the introduction, fanboy! I thought I might be able to talk to Neil but apparently not. Neil? Is there anything you'd like to add?"

Neil laughed at the question and shrugged. "Is there anything you'd like to know?"

Dan smiled and shrugged a little. "How were your first days? Do you have a girlfriend? Siblings? Where are you from?"

Neil smiled at that and shrugged a little. "Alright, I guess. Not too special. I'm and only child and there's no girlfriend. I'm from Baltimore. What about you guys?" This was weird. Sharing useless information, smiling.

Dan smiled and shrugged, just the way Neil had, mocking him a little. "My stay was amazing! I stayed with my aunt for a few weeks, spend the last one at Matt's. I have a boyfriend, obviously, and I'm from North Dakota! I don't have biological siblings, but a ton of sisters." She smiles at the last point and Neil frowns a little.

"I think Riko mentioned that you're a former prostitute, is that true?"

Dan rolled her eyes at that and sighed. "He keeps telling that to everyone, it seems. How am I the most interesting thing going on in his life, apparently? I was a stripper, don't confuse that! Problem with that?"

Neil frowned and shook his head a little. "How could I have a problem with that? It's a job, right?"

Dan smiled brightly at that and nodded. "Matt, I like him! Can we keep him? He's adorable!"

Matt laughed at that and messed up Dan's short hair. "He's no puppy, Dan! But… would you like to get a puppy? I want a puppy!"

Dan giggled and shrugged. "Sure. As soon as we're out of college! But you still have to tell Neil about yourself!"

Matt sighed and shrugged. "Holidays were fine. I don't know. I prefer being here. I'm from NYC and I honestly prefer the silence here. No siblings."

Neil nodded a little and sipped his coffee. Was he supposed to say anything?

The decision was taken from him when another young man entered the room with one bag over his shoulder and a suitcase in each hand.

"Hey, man. Dan. Who's that?"

Seth brought his stuff to the bedroom and came back, crashing onto the armchair closest to Dan's side of the sofa. Dan smiled brightly and looked at him. "This is Neil Josten. He's our new striker."

Seth's face fell when he heard that. "Isn't he one of the Ravens? Are you serious? Again?"

Matt turned to look at him and shook his head slightly. "Seth, give him a chance, seriously. He's had a hard time."

"He's here, so that's a given! All of us have! Matt, this is gonna be the way it was when Kevin came. Bossing around, being all pretentious and fucking exhausting! And we'll be fucked! Another broken Raven? We're not only there to clean up their messes."

Seth seemed to be outraged and became
pretty loud. Oh boy.

Matt shook his head a little and sighed. "Seth, you don't know him. Give him a chance. And considering that he's transferring from backliner to striker, I think he won't be bossing around too much!"

Seth's face fell even more at that. "Transferring positions? We're fucked. We had one remotely okay season and Wymack decides to fuck us like this? Dan, how can you be okay with this? This is your team he's ruining!"

Dan bit her lip and shook her head a little. "Wouldn't you like to see him try? I'm sure he'll try his best. Coach would never truly fuck us, Seth. If he recruited Neil, he believes in him!"

"Do you believe that? Do you really think so? Because I don't. I think he's a broken piece of Kevin's past and Wymack took him in because he's afraid of losing his precious star athlete. I think we'll do worse than usually. I think we'll be made fun of even more than usually. Even more than because we scoop up the Ravens' crap. Even more than because there are three girls on the team, even more than because one is our freaking captain! This is us planning our own funeral! Last season was alright, this season will be a failure all the way. This is us throwing away the last shot we had! Say hello to captaining a Class II Exy team next year."

Neil swallowed hard and crossed his arms. He felt sick. Failure. That's what he was. Riko had been right. Useless. Worthless. Left by his mother, sold by his father...

Neil closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. What had Dobson said? 'Be the adult you would have needed'. He could do that. He imagined the 9-year-old version of himself, crying because his mom had left, crying because of the messages his father had engraved into his skin, crying because he loved and hated the both of them so intensely. He imagined squatting down next to the child, hugging it, telling it that this was not his fault.

Neither was the fact that Seth was this emotional. Neil might have triggered the outburst, but the reasons laid deeper. Fear, wanting to win, being tired of being a failure. Neil could understand that. He wasn't the reason Seth felt like this, and he shouldn't feel responsible for the anger. He shouldn't let this eat him up.

When he was calm again, Neil sipped his coffee. This moment couldn't have lasted much longer than five seconds, but he felt a lot better. Also, he wasn't panicking, which was a plus.

"Seth. Don't you ever say anything like this again. I'm serious. Suggest that my sex is a weakness, there will be consequences. Suggest that Neil isn't a legitimate member of the Foxes, there will be consequences. Question my position, there will be consequences. We good?" Her tone was dangerously low and she stared into Seth's eyes until the man turned away. There was no doubt that she was serious, no doubt that she wasn't totally capable of doing as she said.

The only other time Neil had ever seen someone afraid of a woman had been when he'd seen Lola approach a man. Only that that man had been tied to a chair and Lola had been carrying knives. She had smiled and whispered threats just loud enough for Neil to hear in the corner of the room, sending goosebumps all over his body even tough they weren't directed at him.

He was impressed by Dan. She earned respect without knives. Without threats. By stating some facts. Neil wondered if this was what his father had meant when he'd said that his mother could freeze any man with a single look. He'd always considered it an exaggeration but right then, he didn't have any trouble believing that Dan could do exactly the same.
Seth nodded and sighed. "Whatever. Do we have anything to eat?"

Matt laughed at that and shrugged. "I literally got here an hour ago! There's no food, of course."

Neil finished his coffee and set down the mug. "Kevin said we were ordering pizza for lunch. We could order thee more?"

Dan looked at Matt, who frowned and shrugged, but it was Seth who talked. "I honestly don't think so. In case it escaped your knowledge, we don't like them. They don't like us. And since you haven't done that yet, apparently, it's time to choose a side!"

Neil frowned and seriously? He was confused. Kevin had said that they were a team. That they'd have his back. He didn't say that they were separated in the middle.

Matt nudged him softly and smiled. "Don't worry, Neil, he's joking," Matt started, but the both of them knew that was a lie. "You can be friends with both of us! Renee and Andrew are friends, after all! Why wouldn't that work for Neil? And he grew up with Kevin, after all. He doesn't have to give that up because he's in our room. Seth, that's ridiculous."

"If he's so close to Kevin, perhaps that should determine the choice for him, just saying," Seth muttered and shrugged.

Dan sighed again and shook her head. "Seth? When I thought of Neil staying with the Monsters for the first days, I was afraid they might be giving him a wrong impression of the team, but whatever show you're pulling off right now is far worse than anything the Monsters could have suggested!"

Neil looked at the two of them. Why were they protecting him like this? He was a burden, right? How were they this nice? Even in front of an old friend of theirs?

Seth rolled his eyes and growled a little. He seemed extremely annoyed. Neil understood that. The feeling of betrayal.

They stayed in silence until there was a knock on the door and Nicky stuck his head in. "Neil? Pizza arrived. We didn't want to disturb by asking what you liked so Kevin ordered a mozzarella pizza for you. You coming?"

Neil looked at Dan and Matt, who smiled at him. "Enjoy! And hurry a little, my car is still full of stuff and I need help unloading it!"

Dan slapped Matt for that and laughed. "Babe, look at him! He's not carrying anything!"

"I'll be back! I'll help!" Neil smiled and got up, then he left with Nicky. Aaron and Kevin were sitting in bean bags and Nicky claimed the armchair, so Neil sat down next to Andrew.

He was glad to be with them again. He couldn't consider them friends yet, he'd only met them this week, after all, but he was really comfortable in this group. He'd gotten used to them, somehow.

It was a weird feeling, but really comforting at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

i really don't want to be that person asking for comments, but here I am, asking for
This is my first atfg-fic and I'm so afraid of screwing it up! Can you please please please comment any questions? Stuff you like or dislike? Because I'm super anxious about it and I need feedback!

Btw thanks to AsfaHan for commenting on every chapter! You're a great help! <3
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Neil meets Renee and Allison and Seth keeps being an asshole. And Upperclassmen vs Monster rivalry kinda but not really.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So? What did they say? About us?" Nicky asked and Neil smiled, shrugging.

"That you didn't like them, apparently. And they they didn't like you either? I don't know. Dan and Matt are really nice! Seth is… not."

Kevin laughed at that answer and nodded. "True! God, Seth is so annoying. Seriously. And he's so bad at Exy. He'll be in your shadow as soon as you know all the drills!"

Nicky sighed heavily and all of them were eating. "Kevin, you're always so rude. Seriously, no wonder we're not friends with them!"

"We're not friends with them because they're pretentious hypocrites!" Aaron disagreed and Nicky laughed again.

"True…"

"Seth also said I should decide what group to belong to. Dan and Matt both disagreed, but… I don't know. He seemed to be serious." Neil shrugged and filled his mouth with pizza. Andrew glared at him for a few seconds before turning all of his attention back to the pineapple on his own. He picked the slices off each slice and ate them, before eating the rest. Weird…

"That's not true, Nathaniel. It's just that we generally don't get along too well. I dislike Seth, Allison dislikes everyone, Dan dislikes and likes the cousins at the same time. Getting along is hard like that. That doesn't mean you can't talk to them! You're staying in one room, after all."

Neil smiled at that answer. He liked how Kevin didn't even consider Neil choosing the other group. If it came down to it, he wouldn't, of course. Kevin was the closest thing he had to a family, these days. He'd choose him over almost anyone.

After a while, all of them were done. Kevin put his bowl back onto the table. He'd only gotten a salad. "All of you are gonna be fat, seriously!"

"At least we're not dying from alcohol poisoning," Aaron shot back and Nicky let out a startled laugh. God… He really liked these people. He didn't know why or what he liked, exactly. They were rude and talked too little or too much or about all the wrong things, but it was really nice anyways. This was different from the single social hours at the Nest. This was comfortable and unforced and careless.

"Are we having dinner together?" Neil asked and Kevin nodded.
"I'll prepare some salad! Feel free to come over as soon as you want to! And should Seth be rude, come over. We'll take care of it. Don't try to fight him in the state you're in!"

Neil almost laughed and nodded. "Great. Sure. I'm helping Matt with his luggage now, yeah?"

Nicky laughed at the question and slapped Neil's shoulder when he passed. "Neil, are you literally asking Kevin for permission? God, is that one of those kinky things? Erik's not into that, unfortunately."

Neil frowned at Nicky for a few seconds before leaving. He didn't even want to react to that kind of flirt attempts anymore.

Neil entered his room again and almost smiled when he saw Dan and Matt in there, on their own. Thank God. He didn't want to face Seth right now. "Where's Seth?" Neil asked, sitting down next to Matt again.

Dan smiled at that and shrugged a little. "Allison arrived and he was in a bad mood. So... the girls' room, I guess."

Neil frowned at that and looked at the door leading to the hallway. "So they're on? At the moment?"

Dan shrugged and shook her head. "Last I checked, no. But I could be wrong. That means a lot of screaming, just so you know. They argue all the time when they're off. Especially when they're making out or having sex. I don't get why they don't pull it together!"

Matt laughed and hugged her more closely. "Not everyone can be as perfect as we are!"

Dan giggles at that and kissed him softly. "Right... you're adorable, babe! So Neil... how was lunch?"

Neil shrugged and smiled a little. "It was fine. Pizza... so alright. Do you still need help carrying up your bags?"

Matt smiled at that question and shook his head. "No. That was more of a way to make sure you come back. I've got most stuff upstairs. By the way, you owe me five, babe!"

Dad groaned, smiling, and handed Matt a bill. Neil frowned and had troubles understanding this. "I bet you'd come back by the time of an hour. Dan said it'd take longer. I won. Thanks for that!"

Neil kept frowning and felt almost insecure. Why had they betted on that?

"It's just that Matt said you seemed to be really nice and I thought you might be a real Monster. Like, legit. You know? I'm glad you came back right away! Spending time with us! No offence, right?"

She smiles brightly at that and Neil just shrugged. Why would he be offended? He'd always spend time with Kevin and his lot. He liked them. But that didn't mean he would only stay in this room for sleeping. He wanted to get to know these people. Wanted to know who exactly he was relying on.

About a second later, a small girl with white dyed hair and pastel coloured strands entered the room. She shook her head a little.

"Next time Seth and Allison are doing unspeakable things in our room, give me a warning in advance, would you? God, I wish I could unsee that!" She dropped the two of her suitcases on the floor and hugged first Dan, then Matt, before turning to Neil.
"Hello! I'm Renee Walker! You must be a new striker, right?" She smiled brightly, offering her hand, freezing when she got a better look at his face. She sighed and looked at Dan. "Neil Josten? Does Jean know about this?"

Dan crossed her arms and looked at her expectantly. "Renee. He's the new member of our team. Treat him like that. Seth's given him a bad time already, so seriously, leave it for today."

Renee pressed her lips together and sighed. "No. You're right. It's fine. I should not be like that. So, Neil? Nice to meet you under... remotely different circumstances than the last time."

Neil shook her hand and nodded a little. God, this was weird. He remembered her coming, hitting him over and over again, threatening him, taking Jean away from him, leaving him alone with Riko.

"Hello Renee. Nice to see you again. Thanks for taking care of Jean," he said the last point lowly, but she understood. She shook her head.

"Thank you for taking care of him, Neil! And sorry for hitting you. I was mad at you without a real reason to be. That wasn't fair. I apologise for that. Jean explained everything to me the following days. I'd like to talk to you about that whole situation one time, yeah? Because I feel like we should talk that through. I was too emotional because I didn't even consider your side of the story. I'd like to change that."

She sat down next to Dan and smiled at him brightly. Neil was confused by all of this honesty. All those truths, shared completely voluntarily. He nodded a little and thought of Andrew. Extra nice to Renee.

"That would be great. Awesome. I'd like that. Tomorrow? Or some day? Whenever you're free!"

Renee smiled extremely brightly at that and nodded. "Yeah! That's a grand idea! Coffee on campus somewhere?"

Neil nodded a little and tried smiling. Coffee with Renee... alright.

"Have you seen Jean lately? Last I heard was that he's playing for the Trojans this season." He hadn't talked to him yet and really wanted to know if he was alright.

Renee smiled at that and swallowed a little. "He's fine. I saw him two weeks ago, he's totally fine now. Like, seriously. All healed up, doing great."

Neil exhaled and felt a heavy burden falling off his shoulders. Thank God. He'd been so worried...

They all looked up when the door was almost ripped open. A tall blonde girl stormed into the room, followed by Seth a few steps behind.

"I said fuck off, Seth. Leave me alone!"

She crashed onto the sofa next to Neil and groaned when Seth slammed the door behind him.

"Al, this is my room. You can't complain about me being here!"

Allison rolled her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair roughly. "Stop talking to me. Seriously, you're disgusting!"

Seth sat down in the spare armchair close to Allison's side of the sofa and shook his head. "Oh, am I? That's not what you said three minutes ago when I—"
"Shut up!" Dan, Allison and Renee demanded at the same time. Allison seemed furious and stared at him for a few seconds, before turning to the others. "Hello, by the way. You're the reason Seth is pissed, right? God, did you have to? Seriously, it's the first day we're here and you're looking for trouble. That's rude."

Neil turned to look at Matt for a second, before facing Allison again. What exactly was he supposed to say? "I guess I am. But I didn't mean to, sorry."

"Urgh, you're annoying. Grow a spine, would you? What happened to your face?"

Neil swallowed a little and touched the band aid on his cheek. Before he said anything, Dan started talking. "Allison, this is Neil Josten. You know him. The one Kevin talked about."

Allison rose an eyebrow and gave him an once-over. "Aren't you a Raven? I don't care about these cult-people, so I don't have any clue as to who you are, but… were you on their lineup last year? What are you doing here? And what happened to your face?"

Neil shrugged a little and tried smiling. "I was supposed to be one. I'm only starting college now, so I didn't play for them officially yet. I'm signed with the Foxes. And… Riko happened. That's why I'm here. Kinda."

Allison pursed her lips a little at that and seemed to evaluate that answer. "Huh…," was the only reaction he got before she turned back to Seth. "I kinda get your anger now, jerk."

"You're such a bitch, Allison. If this is your attempt to apologise, fuck off." Seth was playing some game on his phone and seemed genuinely angry.

"Oh my God, what's wrong with you? We agreed on no insults degrading women, didn't we? And what would I apologise for?" Allison crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him.

Seth didn't look up from his game but shrugged a little. "Whatever, bitch. You might want to apologise for overreacting."

"You might want to apologise for objectifying me and maybe for literally fucking Angelica Johnson, bastard."

Renee raised her eyebrows at that and looked between the two of them. Dan frowned in a concerned way and pressed her lips together. Matt only stared at her in shock. Neil looked away and wished they'd argue elsewhere. It took him a moment to realise that this unease wasn't necessary right now. No one would get hurt because of this argument. Not physically, at least. He was so used to Riko's punishments after every discussion or argument or even only annoyed gesture he'd had with him or made. The prospect of this being nothing but an argument was weird.

Seth looked up from his game now and looked at her with a smirk on his face. "Why does it bother you? We were off. We still are. You broke up, remember?"

Allison's jaw tensed and she scoffed. "And you dealt with it by sleeping with the single ex of yours that looks like a skinnier version of me? You know who told me? Your brother. I looked at my phone one morning and received a text by fucking Jackson, about you fucking that whore!"

Seth turned his phone off at that and laughed a little. "What did we say about insults that degrade women, Al? And as I said, we are off. You were free to do as you pleased, so was I. Not my problem that you're not happy about past decisions."

Allison shook her head a little and sighed. "Fine. We're on again. Happy now? Just know that I'm
gonna rip your throat open the next time you fuck another girl."

"I'm kinda happy with being single at the moment. So no. Not right now, Allison." He took his phone out again and started playing the game from before.

Neil dared to look at Allison again, who pressed her lips together for a few seconds before standing up. "Neil? You coming?"

Neil frowned and looked up at her. She shrugged. "Coming where?"

"Somewhere. I don't care. C'mon. I want to get to know my new teammate."

Neil looked at Matt for… what exactly? The taller guy smiled at him and shrugged, indicating he had nothing to worry about.

"Allison, don't do this. I'm serious." All eyes were on Seth now, who'd put his phone away again.

"Do what? Spend time with guys while I'm single? Last I checked, that was totally fine." Allison smiled at Seth brightly and said it in a way that was way too enthusiastic. Neil didn't like her… she was exactly what he imagined someone with her look to be like.

"Al, no shit, this is childish! Stop." Seth seemed to be angry, even more so when Allison smiled a little brighter.

"One way or another, I'm getting a coffee now, either with my boyfriend or my new teammate." She looked at Seth expectantly and Neil was glad when the other man got up. He wouldn't have wanted to spend time with her.

Seth took her by the wrist and went for the door. Allison winked at the remaining four when he pulled her out and giggled a little.

"Shut up, Allison, I'm serious!" was the last thing they heard before the door closed behind them.

Neil stared after them and shook his head a little. "Are they gonna be like this? All the time?" he asked and Matt laughed, shaking his head.

"No. That's their usual 'off'. The next one or two months will be quieter! No promises for after that, though. Seriously, it's exhausting."

Neil nodded a little. He just hoped they'd keep it together for a while. He didn't want that kind of tension around him at all times.

Dan smiled and snuggled against Matt more closely now. "I'm glad they're a couple again. They're so perfect for each other!"

Matt shrugged and wrapped one arm around her shoulders. "I think she could do better. Honestly, if she wanted to, she could have any rich and well educated guy, make even more money. Seth doesn't care about a lot of Allison but her body."

Renee shook her head a little and smiled. "I think that's wrong. Because he likes so much about her. He doesn't dislike a lot, and some things, he doesn't care about. Most guys you've described would care too much about the stuff he doesn't care about at all, and they'd be annoyed by most other stuff. Her character, sports, all of that. He's what she needs. And she's what he needs. It's gonna be a lot easier once they realize that."
"Renee Walker, relationship analyst and pair therapist, ladies and gentlemen!" Dan announced and they all giggled.

Neil thought back to his lunch with the Monsters. He liked that group of people a lot, and they were polar opposites of this lot, but seriously? He liked these people as well. Not Seth or Allison, for that matter, but the three that were here. They were nice and loud and fierce. Neil wouldn't have thought so in the morning, but right now he could imagine learning to trust them.

Neil didn't mean that he trusted them already - he'd only met them, after all. But when he considered the way Dan had defended him throughout the day, even when she'd been confronted with her own arguments from earlier, he was in fact able to see her capable of doing this in front of the press.

Riko, even. Maybe.

He'd have see about that. And there was always Andrew, of course.

Neil spend the next few hours with the three of them listening to what they had to say about teammates, classmates, other teams, teachers. Alright, honestly, he didn't recall a single word of their conversation, but he liked the background noise.

Neil thought of the upcoming year. New position, city, district, home, team, people, school. This would be a hard year.

After a while, Allison and Seth came back. The both of them smiled a little when they entered the room but Seth rolled his eyes when is gaze crossed Neil's. Alright. Asshole.

The two of them sat down on the armchair Seth had left before, Allison on his lap, facing her teammates. He had his arms wrapped around her waist and his head on her shoulder. They looked almost cute like this. Almost. Neil still didn't like them.

Matt checked his phone and looked around. "Is anyone hungry? I'm starving! Wanna go for Chinese?"

Everyone else agreed and Matt looked at Neil when he didn't answer and smiled. "Are you coming? There's space in the truck. I mean… it's gonna be a little tight because there's also a lot of furniture down there… but we'll make it fit!"

Neil just shrugged. "I'm eating with the others. But thanks."

Seth let out an audible breath and rolled his eyes again. "Guys, how can you even talk around him, knowing he'll just go over and spill every secret to the Monsters?"

Renee tilted her head and smiled at Seth brightly, though… dangerously? "Seth, do we have a problem? Seriously, if you're fine with me spending time with Andrew, how aren't you fine with Neil spending time with Kevin?"

Seth laughed at that and shook his head. Both of them were smiling but there was a lot of tension in the room. "Maybe because what you're doing with Andrew happens out of pity and what he's doing with Kevin is either sick or gay or unfair. You all accept him as a part of the team as if this was normal when this is really screwing up our season. How is everyone fine with it? That's not how things should be! You should be furious!"

Neil suppressed an annoyed groan and just got up. "See you later. Enjoy the meal."

He closed the door behind himself softly. Neil didn't want Seth to know that this made him
emotional. That statements like that touched something inside him. It'd be better this way. Seth knowing that he'd get the reaction he wanted out of Neil would only make it worse.

Neil went into the Monsters' room and sat down in one of the bean bags. Aaron and Nicky were playing video games. They didn't seem to mind him. Andrew was smoking by the window and Kevin seemed to be preparing food in the kitchen.

Neil liked that the only sound in the room came from the TV occasionally. He'd enjoyed the others and the way they chatted, but this was really nice. He also liked how, around an hour later, Kevin just dropped the plate onto everyone's laps and crashed beside Neil.

"You alright?" he asked in a low voice.

Neil shrugged a little and looked at his salad. "I'm fine. I just don't think I can stand Seth inside my room for a single second. Allison bitches a little but I guess she's fine in general, I don't know. But Seth is rude and he's so loud and screams all the time."

Kevin nodded a little and started eating his salad. He didn't talk for a few minutes. Didn't seemed to know what to say or how to phrase it.

After a while, he sighed. "Do you want to talk to Jean about this? I know he has some issues to deal with. It might help you..."

Neil swallowed hard and shook his head a little. Renee had brought Jean up for a different reason, but it hurt all the same.

"I can't see him yet. I don't want to face him." His voice was thin and Neil cleared his throat. God... he wouldn't cry, right? Not again.

"Why? I mean... I get that you came here first after everything that happened. We grew up together. We shared a room for most our lives before we moved into these two-bed-rooms in the Nest. I know we're close and I know we can rely on each other, but... don't you feel that way with Jean, too?"

Neil didn't look at Kevin. He couldn't. He wanted to throw up. "Why isn't he here with the Foxes? When Renee got him, she must have brought him here, right? Why did he go? I don't think you kicked him out, I think the both of you knew that there was too much going on between the two of you to actually start playing again.

I feel that way about him as well. You and I, we grew up together. Riko owned us, we shared his shadow. We shared a level, most days. You intervened when he tried to choke me, or other times he was just too brutal. I did the same for you. The both of you.

And Jean didn't return it. I'm not mad at him, really, how could I? But he turned away a little too often. He was protecting himself, I get that, but we were a team. We depended on each other and him closing his eyes hurt. Hurts. I'd like to work this out before meeting him. I don't want to see him if I'm not 100% happy about it. I was so glad to finally see you again and I think I could feel this way about Jean in a month or two. So until then, no, I don't want to see him."

Neil had probably never talked this much consecutively, but he needed to explain this to Kevin. He didn't want to seem rude or a bad person and he really needed him to understand.

Aaron and Nicky had turned the TV louder after a little into Neil's statements, and he was thankful for that... privacy?

Andrew sat in the armchair closest to them and while he stared out of the window and didn't even pretend to eat his salad, Neil had the feeling he'd heard them anyways. Seriously, he couldn't care too
much. He didn't. He'd shared far worse things with Andrew.

Kevin just nodded and they remained silent. Neil got up after a while and went to the kitchen, getting some water and ice cubes. He needed this. The cold feeling. He felt less numb after drinking it. Better. Right.

Before he could sit back down again, Andrew got up and moved his head in a way that suggested he wanted Neil to follow him. Neil did, and wasn't surprised when he found himself in the bathroom, Andrew taking care of the wounds again.

Andrew didn't say anything and Neil honestly didn't recall him saying a single word that day. When he was done rewring the arms and legs, he just left the room. Andrew didn't put new patches onto Neil's face and Neil dared to look into the mirror.

Riko hadn't used knives on his face too much. He had hit Neil, anyways. His lip was still swollen and you could see that it was whipped, but it looked far better than on his last day at the Nest. You could also see a cut on his right cheekbone that looked horrible but was closed. Healing. The other major injury was a cut over his left eyebrow, but that one looked almost normal by now. It would be a scar, but it was healing.

Neil swallowed one painkiller and went back to the living room.

"Did Abby say that this needed air?" he asked Andrew, who'd claimed the armchair again.

Andrew just shrugged and looked away. Alright? Neil didn't really know why, but he trusted Andrew's ability to make the right decision here.

Neil sat down next to Kevin again and sighed a little. They heard the upperclassmen arrive back from their dinner out and about an hour or something later, there was chattering from the hallway again, probably because of the girls going back to their own room.

Neil checked the time and was surprised to see that it was close to midnight. Had he spent as much time sitting here and staring at the various games the cousins were playing? Weird… his sense of time was still screwed up badly, apparently. He'd take a long time adjusting to 24-hour-days again.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Nicky paused the game and got up to unlock the door. Matt was standing in the doorframe and seemed pretty uncomfortable.

"Hey, uh… is Neil here? Just checking because it's late and he's not in our room."

Neil almost smiled at that. Matt had come to check on him?

Nicky just stepped aside and Matt looked around from his place and smiled when his eyes found Neil.

"Hey, Neil! I was wondering if you'd sleep in our room tonight? Just because Seth is sleeping on the couch in the girls' room. So, no trouble." Matt smiled at him and Neil nodded a little. He'd intended to go back there… kinda. Had he? He'd have probably fallen asleep here, if he was honest.

"Sure. I'm coming." Neil got up looked around for a second. "Night."

Nicky patted his back on his way out and smiled at him. "Night, Neil. See you at lunch latest, right?"
Neil nodded a little and smiled. Kevin wished him a good night as well, the twins remained silent. Had he expected anything else? Kinda…

Neil followed Matt into their room.

"Are you alright? You left so abruptly and I just… I don't know. You good?"

Neil nodded and went to the bedroom with Matt. "Yeah. Fine. I just… didn't want to deal with Seth right then."

Matt laughed at that and nodded, shrugging. "I get that. You started on the wrong foot, I'm sure. Don't worry."

Neil got a shirt and sweatpants and got into the bathroom where he changed for the night. Matt got into bed and so did Neil.

"Night, man. In case something's up, just wake me, yeah?"

Neil almost smiled at that and nodded. He wouldn't ever do that, but he appreciated the offer anyways. "Sure. Thanks. Good night."

The night was horrible. The bad kind of horrible. It took Neil ages to fall asleep and when he did, all he saw was that figure - that man, hidden in shadows - standing over him.

Neil managed to remain silent whenever he woke up. Most of the time. All the time, actually. Except for the one time 'waking up' didn't make the man vanish. The single time he opened his eyes and saw someone stand over him. Neil's whole body flinched and he brought his arms over his upper body in an attempt to protect him from…

"Whoa, man, easy. You alright? Hey…"

Neil took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds before sitting up. "Sorry. I'm fine. Did I wake you? I… sorry." Neil's voice was shivering and there was goosebumps all over his body. Shit…

"You just turned so much in your bed. It creaked. Don't worry… you wanna talk? Or grab a beer? Sure you're fine?"

Neil just closed his eyes for another few seconds and nodded slightly. "I'm fine. Really. No need for talking. You can go back to sleep. I'm gonna… catch some fresh air. I'll be back in a few."

Matt frowned deeply at that and checked his phone. "It's three am. Where do you wanna go? Want me to come?"

Neil shook his head a little. He got up and got his shoes on. "The roof. I'm fine, honestly. Don't wait for me."

Neil practically stormed out of the room but was careful not to slam any doors.

He was relieved to feel the shock of the cold night air. Glad to be able to breathe properly again.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Andrew. The boy was laying where they'd been yesterday, smoking. Neil approached him and laid down next to him.
Andrew looked at him for a second before handing Neil the cigarette he must have started only seconds ago and lighted another one for himself. Then, he closed his eyes again and just smoked in silence.

Neil took a deep breath and some way, the burning smell made him feel even more present than the fresh night air had.

They stayed in silence until Neil finally managed to find his voice.

"Rough night?"

Andrew didn't even look at him. He blew out smoke and took comfort in the smoke around him for the seconds it took for the wind to carry it away.

"Why don't you talk? You talked yesterday. A lot. We had conversations. What happened?"

Andrew kept ignoring him and Neil sighed. He needed a distraction. "I'm taking my turn on this. So?"

"You won't like my next turn."

Neil shrugged and was almost happy to hear his voice again. "I'm sure."

"I don't talk a lot. Thought you were interesting but as it turns out, you're only screwed up and I don't want to waste time on that."

Neil swallowed and looked at the glowing tip of Andrew's cigarette when he took a drag.

"My turn. You said your scars tell other stories than Kevin's. What's the worst?"

"Worst scar or story?" Neil didn't know why he was playing along. Maybe it was being sick of keeping quiet. Maybe it was the need to tell something to someone. Anything. Anyone.

"Is there a difference?" How did Andrew know which question to ask?

"Is that your question?" The wind blew around them and Neil shivered. His arms were wrapped in bandages but he was cold anyways.

Andrew seemed to think about that for a few seconds. "No." He might have realised that Neil's hesitance already implied that there was one. Or maybe he didn't care.

"So worst scar or worst story?" Neil asked again.

"Story."

Neil closed his eyes and thought about this for a second. He could lie. He didn't want to.

"My mother ran away when I was a child. She was a criminal and so was my father, but she wanted out of that life, apparently. And she left me with my father. He told me to hate her. We argued. He said if I didn't admit that she was a bad person, he'd make me remember. I do. Remember."

*My mother is a whore!* Neil closed his eyes and thought back. He shivered and somehow, he felt alive. The pain from then had faded. He was able to breathe through the memories. Was able to feel the temperature dropping. To feel things apart from the literal blade in his back.

Andrew looked at him when Neil opened his eyes and they held each other's gazes.
"We're training tomorrow morning before anyone is up. Six thirty, I'll be waiting."

Neil didn't think he was in the condition to show Andrew how to fight, but he didn't really care. He could handle knives in his sleep.

"Do you want theoretical or practical training?"

"Yes."

Neil frowned at that answer and looked at Andrew in confusion. "Andrew?"

Neil asked many more questions, but that was the last thing Andrew said that night. The only thing he'd said for the whole day, in fact.

But Neil didn't know that. He filled the silence for as long as they stayed on the roof and Andrew didn't tell him to shut up or fuck off tonight. That probably was a good sign.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE: comment! I'm serious, your comments make me smile and keep me writing! I try to improve throughout the chapters and make them more enjoyable for each and every one of you!

SORRY: rain+home alone+self hatred+Anorexia relapses = the ending of the chapter… But I didn't want to change it because it was kinda fitting. Whatevs, right?

PLUS: the actual plot starts now, featuring Neil's Mom, Dad, Lola, the Moriyamas and maaaany more hahaha omg please forgive me
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Andrew learns about knives and shit goes down.
(Update: unrelated! Shit doesn't go down because Andrew can handle knives now.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil had set the alarm clock early the next morning. He got up at six fifteen and actually intended to take a shower until he realised that he wouldn't be able to do this without Andrew or anyone else helping him out of the bandages and helping him back into them later. He'd talk to Andrew about that when they were done.

Andrew waited for Neil in the hallway and they went to the roof together. Neil had some of his knives with him and he felt incredibly bad about it. He hated having to carry them, hated how the feeling was so oddly familiar. Hated how Nathaniel he felt.

They made it to the roof and Neil looked at Andrew from his head to his toes. Andrew had always worn pulllovers and while this had seemed odd to Neil - considering that it was the end of July - he hadn't really thought about it until he saw Andrew in a shorter tee and looked at the black bands on Andrew's arms now, covering them from his wrists to his elbows.

Neil frowned a little but didn't say anything. He got the implication just fine. Andrew must hide things he didn't want to share, right? And Neil understood what exactly Andrew was hiding, a few seconds later, when he pulled knives out of the endings. He showed up with two, but Neil didn't doubt that there were more where those came from.

"Teach me how to use these. Yours won't do me any good."

Neil nodded a little and was glad to put his own ones back into his pockets or the hem of his trousers, then he stretched his hand out. He looked at the knives and swallowed uncomfortably when his brain provided him with a ton of facts about the blades just by looking at them and feeling the weight of the cold metal. He hated how some of those facts were presented in Lola’s voice, some in his father's low whispers, as if he was sharing a precious secret.

Neil took a deep breath and shook his head. This was something else. Not his father, not Lola, this was him on the roof with Andrew...

"What do you want to know? How to throw them or how to use them in a fight? Is the other person moving or restrained? Do you want to know how to kill someone or how to hurt them? Make them suffer or mainly intimidate? Are you talking about one-on-one fighting, one group against another or you against multiple people?" Neil didn't know why he didn't suggest Andrew going after a single person with a group of other people behind him. He didn't take him for that person, he guessed. Neil wasn't entirely sure why, but he took Andrew for more of a fair fighter.

Andrew considered his words for a while and frowned at Neil for a little. "All of that, preferably. I want to be able to handle them in any given situation."
Neil had expected this answer, but he sighed anyways. "Alright. I'm not really in the shape to show you a lot at the moment, but I can tell you a little about what these blades are capable of."

Andrew shrugged and lit a cigarette, looking at Neil almost expectantly.

"Show me all of them. I'll start off with what all of them are can do, then go into detail for the single ones, yeah?"

Andrew shrugged again and shoved three more knives into Neil's hand. Neil wasn't entirely sure where the blond one had hidden those. Wow...

Neil had been taught about knives in great detail, so he didn't have many problems talking about them for hours. He made his way from the head to the toes of a human body, explaining which wounds would take longest to heal, which would be the most painful, how to stretch or shorten a human's suffering before death, how to kill effectively, how to defend yourself without inflicting real damage.

By the time he was done working his way all the way down the human body, it was eight o'clock. And he hadn't even gotten into detail about the shorter or longer blades, the sharper ones, the ones that were smooth-edged or the ones that had small teeth.

Andrew had watched Neil closely whenever he gestured a little more than usual or when he pointed to a particular point on his own body, indicating what it'd do to the victim.

At eight fifteen sharp, Andrew stretched his arms and nodded.

"We're done for today. You might be more interesting than I gave you credit for."

Neil felt more like a Wesninski than he had in years when Andrew grabbed his knives, turned around and went inside again. Neil was used to the way their conversations ended by now, but he worked a little harder on keeping up with Andrew today.

"Hey. I was wondering if you could help me? I really want to shower, and..."

"This would turn out to be a very sexual question by anyone else, but I'm guessing you don't intend that connotation?"

Neil frowned at that and shook his head. "No. I mean... what? Sorry. I... I was wondering if you could help me with the bandages and patches. I'm not good at taking care of these on my own body. I tried to, but I seem to be better with other people."

Andrew held his look for a few seconds, before shrugging. "Get some clothes. I'm not going into that room again anytime soon, so just come over."

Neil exhaled in a relieved way. He was incredibly happy about the chance to shower. He got some clothes and was glad to see that Matt was still asleep. He didn't want to worry the poor guy that much. As much as he had yesterday.

Andrew took the patches and bandages off Neil's arms and legs. He stood there and looked at him expectantly. "Shirt? I know Abby must have put bandages on you. Those have to come off."

Neil shook his head a little. "I'll just... take them off somehow. Thank you."
"And who's gonna clean them up? And rewrap them?"

Neil shrugged and sighed at the same time. "I'll figure it out. I can ask Abby to take a look at it the next time we see her. Until then, my abilities have to be enough."

"Except they don't. You're screwing up your body on purpose, knowing there's another possibility. That's stupid."

Andrew left the room and Neil heard the TV in the living room. He got rid of every badge or patch on his upper body, except for one. That one was bigger and covered a pretty deep cut just below his ribs. The knife had been short, but the force and the fact that you could barely see the blade anymore, hidden inside his flesh, spoke for itself. He'd rather not take that off without Abby close.

He turned on the shower after locking the door. The hot water was amazing. It hurt, burned, made him uncomfortable, made him feel alive. He was hesitant with shower gel, not wanting to get anything into the wounds, but he still felt awesome ten minutes later. Clean, washed up. This was good.

Neil did his best to clean the semi-open wounds on his upper body and managed to cover them, for the most part. He got his fresh clothes on and opened the bathroom door. Andrew helped him out with the rest, cleaning the open wounds on his face, arms and legs. He left the ones on his legs uncovered today, as well as the ones on his face.

"These shouldn't be a problem for much longer."

Andrew left the bathroom and Neil went back to his own room, loading the washing machine with the clothes he'd worn over the course of the last three or four days. Matt had been asleep when he entered the room, but seemed to be woken up by him.

"Morning, man. When'd'cha get back last night?" he mumbled and Neil shrugged.

"After thirty minutes? An hour? I don't know."

"Could you make some coffee while I'm in the bathroom? Thanks man!"

Matt hadn't waited for an answer and Neil honestly wasn't in the mood for arguing. He'd like coffee himself, so he made some, setting both cups down on the table. Matt crashed next to him and took the mug, sipping it slowly.

"Glad you're fine, by the way. You scared me like shit last night," Matt mumbled into his mug and Neil almost smiled. He liked how Matt didn't comment on his visible wounds or anything else, but on his rough night.

"Sorry. Guess I'm a little hard to be around these days."

Matt brushed it off and smiled a little. "Neil, you've been through hell and back, we all get that. Kevin was unbearable for the first days. Wouln't even speak to Coach or Abby for at least a week. You're doing great, honestly. And Neil? Kevin shut all of us out and when he did try to open up, he only did that to the Cousins."

Matt hesitated and smiled a little, shrugging helplessly. "Just... they're pretty isolated. I don't want you to do the same. Or to do what Seth demanded, for that matter. You don't have to choose a group of us to hang out with. I know you'd choose them, given your past with Kevin and everything, but we're there as well. We've got your back!"
This was a weird thing to say. Neil chewed on the inside of his cheek and nodded a little. He barely knew Matt, yet that man was ready to go out of his way for Neil. He liked that but he didn't know how to feel about it. The weird part was that he believed Matt, to some degree, considering how he'd been regarding Seth, regarding Neil's nightmares, regarding the whole situation.


"So, where did you go last night? You said to the roof, right? Alone?"

Neil shrugged a little and shook his head. "I wanted to be alone, I don't know. But Andrew was there and we talked."

Matt raised an eyebrow at that and let out a small laugh. "Andrew talked? Are you sure?"

Neil shrugged a little and played with his fingers around the mug. "A little. Not much. It was mostly me talking, I guess."

Matt nodded and smiled. "Thought so. He's not really the talkative kind of person. Neither is Aaron, right? But Nicky makes up for that, doesn't he?"

Neil watched Matt closely as he said that and frowned. Matt seemed uncomfortable saying this, but pretended not to. Why?

"You don't have to pretend to feel differently about them than you do, you know?" Neil offered and Matt grimaced a little.

"It's just that we don't necessarily get along too well, but I don't want that to affect anything. Do you know what I mean? Don't think I feel bad about you spending time with them!"

Neil nodded and tried to smile. Was Matt trying to lie in order to make Neil feel more comfortable? That was... new. He began to think maybe Matt was someone he'd actually want to be friends with.

There was that word again. Friends. How unwanted it came. How unforced it stayed. Odd.

Neil didn't understand what friendship was supposed to mean all the way. Relying on each other, having each other's backs, that must be an important point. But what else was there to it? The rare words Andrew needed to show him that he understood what Neil was going through? The deep conversations with Kevin? The silence when Aaron and Nicky played video games? The incredible amount of words and truths - most of them superflous or simply unimportant - shared by Nicky and the Upperclassmen?

Neil found he appreciated all of these things. Was that wrong? Right? Weird? He didn't know, but he wasn't sure it even mattered. What mattered was that he felt okay right then and there.

After a while, the door opened and Dan got inside in pyjama shorts and a baggy t-shirt that was probably Matt's. She got coffee for herself and cuddled into one of the armchairs.

"I'm tired. Renee is gone with the Monster and Allison is out for breakfast with Seth," she complained. Matt laughed and shrugged a little.

"Go to bed, then. What's the matter?"

"God, sorry for spending time with the two of you. Seriously, Matt, don't... do that," she mumbled and Neil thought that this was weird. Coming to other people this sleepy, this vulnerable, just
because you liked spending time with them?

Matt laughed a little at that and nodded. "My fault, babe, won't happen again!"

Dan groaned and drank her coffee slowly, before stretching and letting her joints crack. "Neil? Coach called and said I should talk to you about some stuff. Uh... We're livestreaming from the stadium tomorrow when NCAA announces the official lineup and introducing the reasons for your change to the press the second they hear your name. That way we can make sure that our story is out before the Ravens' and they have to adjust their story to ours. Also he doesn't want you out of the Tower unless you're in a group of at least six people in order to protect you. Don't talk to the Moriyamas before the lineup is official."

Neil nodded a little and swallowed hard. "What exactly do you guys know about the Moriyamas?" he asked then. He knew that the Monsters knew about his father's connections to them, but he doubted Kevin had shared that story with the rest of the team.

"Not too much. What we had to know when we took Kevin in. They are dangerous, there's the Exy-branch and the criminal-branch. Kevin got away from the Exy-branch but we might be getting trouble with the criminals because of that. They 'adopted' Kevin but not really. That's it, right?"

Matt nodded a little and Neil sighed. Good. That wasn't too much.

"Do you want us to know anything else?" Dan asked softly and smiled at him. Her voice was gentle and smooth. Neil could tell her a lot, but he didn't want to. Seriously, he wasn't ready for that amount of truths.

"No. Just... why do you allow me to stay? Knowing that I'm dangerous?"

Dan smiled at that and shook her head a little. "Neil, don't say that. You're not dangerous. You're in danger. We help you through this the way we're helping Kevin, yeah?"

Neil swallowed at that. He couldn't imagine them doing this out of goodwill. There must be a ton of different stuff to this, right?

"What can I do in exchange? For all of this?"

Matt nudged his shoulder softly and shook his head. "Neil, nothing. This isn't us actively doing anything. As long as you're safe and learning to open up to someone - whoever that turns out to be - over the course of the next months, that's enough. Alright?"

Neil looked into his mug and sighed. That wasn't enough. Being nice, talking, that stuff would just happen! But what they were doing was precious.

"You might be able to do us a favour. If you really wanted to?" Dan suggested and Neil looked up at that. That sounded like something dangerous when she talked.

"What is it? Sure. Anything, really!" Anything that didn't get in the way of the promises he had made to Andrew so far.

"Alright. There's one thing. You see... we're not really two separate groups. I mean, we're mostly the Upperclassmen and the Monsters, but Renee spends time with Andrew. You... You're not really a part of either group yet, right? You only got here, you're changing between the rooms and people and... could you just keep doing that? I mean... no. That's the wrong way to put it. I want to mend this team, you know? And I think maybe you could help me do that?"
Neil frowned at Dan. She played with her hair and fiddled with the hem of her shirt a little. Why was she as uncomfortable?

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

Dan bit her lip and looked at Matt who just shrugged. Matt wanted her to have this conversation, knowing this was mainly her fight. He'd always back her up and support her, but he wouldn't start having these discussions for her. That wasn't his place.

"Maybe... I don't know. Start by choosing both groups? And... It's a lot to ask of someone who only arrived, I know that. Just try and... get them to come over for dinner one single time. Anything, really. This is gonna take time, I know that, just kinda try to keep it in mind, maybe?"

Neil nodded at that. This would take time. A lot of time. Neil wasn't in the position to ask things of anyone here, yet, but he would try his best to give that little thing back.

"I'll try," Neil promised and Dan smiled brightly.

A few minutes after that, there was a knock on the door and Nicky looked inside again. "Morning. Neil, breakfast?"

Neil nodded a little and got up. "See you guys later?"

Matt smiled at him and nodded. "Great. Don't forget the stuff in my trunk I need your help with!"

Neil smiled and Matt chuckled. He couldn't believe it. They had inside-jokes.

Neil and Nicky went to the Monsters' room. "Are you picking me up for every meal?" he asked with a small smile on his lips.

"For as long as we need to make sure you and Seth aren't fighting and for as long as we have to be afraid they'll absorb you into their group, yes," Nicky answered laughing.

"Breakfast could barely be a word assigned to this. There was coffee and there was oatmeal, period. But he'd been called for this and he liked it.

Andrew was sitting on the counter, his lip was bruised up and he had a scratch over his cheek.

"What happened to you?" Neil asked, frowning, when he finished preparing his own bowl and sat down on one of the chairs next to Kevin and Aaron. Nicky was standing beside Andrew.

"Renee." was the only answer he got, and because no one else questioned that, he remained silent. He didn't think Renee could do anything to anyone, if he was honest. Sure, when she'd taken Jean away, she had been violent, but Neil hadn't defended himself against her. He didn't think she was able to inflict a lot of damage, but if Andrew of all people had bruises on his face, there must be more to her than he had thought originally.

Somehow, the silence was weird today. Not as comfortable as yesterday, but somewhat heavier. Kevin was tense and Neil made it fifteen full minutes before asking what was up.

"The Ravens announce their official lineup later today. Wymack just texted. They're up to something if they do that. We don't know what exactly, yet, but we're assuming it's something to worry about."

"When? Why don't you talk to me about that? Seriously, Kevin, what the hell?" Neil closed his eyes for a few seconds and took a deep breath. 'Calm down, Neil! Don't take this out on him. Not Kevin's
fault! "Sorry. I didn't mean to raise my voice. What's the worst thing they could do?"

Kevin pressed his lips together and shrugged a little, not looking at Neil for that. "The worst case scenario is them announcing you on their lineup. Wymack doesn't think they'd do that, but seriously, why not? They could fake your signature and you'd have no choice but to vanish or go back. Wymack says the worst thing they can do today is talking crap about you, but seriously, he's underestimating them."

Neil swallowed hard. He hadn't thought of that as a possibility. He wasn't stupid enough to consider himself 'safe' here, but he'd felt somewhat 'safer than before'. He'd considered himself 'safer than with Riko'. But apparently, he was wrong. He hadn't escaped yet.

"But he signed our contract! He's a Fox now, they can't actually take him away, right?" Nicky asked and Kevin shrugged.

"They made the decisions for us all of our lives, Nicky. Honestly, I think they're better at signing stuff with 'Day' or 'Josten' than we are. I'm just saying they could make this a stunt, saying that the Foxes did this illegally because Neil was signed with them long before. They could offer them to buy Neil out of his contract with the Ravens - that means demand money- or they could basically do literally anything. Just saying!"

Neil felt panic well up in his chest. They could just claim him. He'd always belong with them, wouldn't he?

"Why would they do that? You left and they didn't say a single word about it," Nicky brought up. Kevin stared at him for a few seconds.

"Nicky, Nathaniel is a star-backliner. I was useless. They won't let him get away. They made me worthless and threw me away. Jean will be safer than Nathaniel, because he's on one of the Big Three. He plays in his position. That happens all the time. Players just change teams. What Nathaniel is doing, transferring to a team that's ranked last and transferring positions, that's unnatural. It's a story full of holes. The press will feed on this, so will the Moriyamas tonight. We'll have to adjust to their story or go public first."

Neil pressed his jaw together tightly and just got up, going for the door.

"Where are you going? You aren't allowed outside at the moment! Nathaniel, I'm serious!" Neil shook his head a little. "Roof," he mumbled and left their room. The last thing he heard before closing the door was a "He snapped later than I thought," that could have been said by either of the twins, but sounded more like Aaron.

The door was opened right after he closed it and Andrew followed him out the second door, up the stairs and onto the roof. Neil wasn't in the mood to argue. It was around 11 am and the sun shone down at them brightly. Andrew followed Neil to the far end of the roof and didn't say a word. He just looked at Neil, who stared down.

"Don't jump, rabbit. Kevin's gonna give me a hell of a time of you die on my watch."

Neil closed his eyes at the sound of that monotonous voice and sighed a little. "Is that my nickname? Rabbit? Does that make Riko a Fox?" He let out a bitter laugh at that thought and opened his eyes again. He liked the warmth, the sun, the light, the view.

"No. Riko's the Hunter at the moment. The Puppet-Hunter on a string. And I guess today we see whether you ran fast enough."
Neil shivered at that and nodded a little. "Did Renee say anything about me?" he asked quietly. Andrew glared at him.

"Yes, Neil, I know that you were nice to her. Your life would be easier if you said the words you mean to say. Deal's on. I'm protecting you."

"What could you possibly do against any of them? Andrew, you're nothing but the false illusion of safety."

"And you're nothing at all, so who loses this round?" Andrew asked. Neil felt like he was punched in the gut. 'Nothing at all. Worthless. Useless. Burden. Just like your mother. Child. Incapable of doing any good.'

Neil's heart was racing and he took two steps back. He wanted to throw up, to scratch open all the cuts on his body. Fell the pain. Feel anything but the empty pit of nothingness opening up inside of him.

"Hey, don't lose your shit right now, would you? Get used to the thought. You're not 'nothing compared to Riko' anymore. You're a Fox. You're nothing compared to anyone. Nothing in yourself. That's the truth you need to accept." Andrew pressed his fingers against Neil's chin and turned his face back to the end of the roof, tilted his head down. "You're a burden. Get over your shit, you're annoying."

Neil frowned a little and looked down. His heart was racing. All those floors between him and the floor... "Yet you followed me up here."

"This is my spot." Andrew's voice was cold and Neil was sure that his face would give away just as little, but he kept looking down. Kept wondering what exactly was keeping him from jumping. Falling. What could possibly be worse than Riko? He didn't seriously consider jumping. He didn't want that way out. He just thought it must be easier than fighting.

"You shared it," he mumbled because it was true. Andrew had brought him here. Had let him share that piece of safety.

"I made sure you wouldn't lose your mind." Neil did look at Andrew then. There was something in his eyes, wasn't there? Something else. Challenge?

"You're talking an awful lot for a person that doesn't talk." Neil didn't know why he was challenging Andrew like this. Dangerous, apathic Andrew, that didn't seem to care about anything at all. Maybe he wanted to know if the other boy was capable of getting angry, emotional, frustrated.

"I said I didn't talk to uninteresting people. I also said that you might be more interesting than I gave you credit for this morning." Andrew's eyes lost the spark. The tiny sign of life, of feelings. Neil was frustrated. He thought he'd get a reaction out of him. Apparently not... but he decided to press on, knowing Andrew was likely to pull away all the way. Or push him down, even. Neil didn't care.

"Does that mean you like me? Because I'm interesting?"

"I hate you. You're a danger to these people. You're trouble." Neil looked up at that and sighed. He'd lost Andrew at some point during this conversation and Neil knew it was all his fault. He couldn't be sorry.

"Why did you let me stay, then?" Neil didn't know why he pressed on. He just wanted to, he supposed. Neil didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one.
Andrew had that look on his face again. The look suggesting that this was the end of not only the current conversation but also any further words on any topic at all.

Neil stayed with Andrew for as long as it took him to finish his cigarette.

Neil intended to just go to the Monsters again because he didn't really feel like facing Seth right now and he just figured that him and Allison should be back by now.

That is, until Matt went out of their room and into his and Andrew's direction.

"There you are! Can you come? You've got visitors! They're in the kitchen, I was just gonna get you."

Neil felt the blood rush out of his face. Visitors?

He looked at Andrew, who simply stared back at him blankly.

"Who's there?" Neil asked and tried to smile at Matt. He was cold, suddenly.

"Your dad got here a couple of minutes ago, with a woman. Really nice. His girlfriend? Lola, I think." Matt seemed so cheerful and didn't even realise that… what exactly? That Neil was almost dying of fear? Shit.

Neil's feet moved slowly and he tried not to shudder. He smiled at Matt, but the taller man just looked past him. "Hey, Andrew, don't you think we should give them alone-time?"

Andrew didn't even acknowledge the question. He stayed right behind him when Neil entered the room and kept his eyes straight ahead.

Matt sighed helplessly. "Want me to get Kevin to get Andrew away? I'll be in Dan's room if you need anything."

Neil shook his head a little. "We're fine, thanks. See you later."

Matt smiled a little and closed the door behind him when he left. Andrew held Neil's look for as long as Neil needed this… then he went into the small kitchen. Lola was sitting on the counter, legs hanging loosely.

Next to her stood Nathan Wesninski.

"Hey, Junior!" Lola exclaimed and Neil caught the knife before he was fully aware that she'd thrown it. This is how she'd taught him to catch knives. She'd confronted him with them whenever he entered a room.

Neil's jaw was tense and he couldn't look into his father's eyes. His heart was beating like hell. What was Andrew about to witness?

"What do you want?" His voice was almost shaking.

Nathan glared at Andrew and shook his head. "We're not talking with this midget in the room, Junior."

"We're not talking without him in the room either, so get over it." He'd regret this. He'd regret these answers, this attitude.

Lola giggled at that and shook her head. "When did you learn to talk back, Junior? Be careful, you
sound like your bitch of a mother."

There were times this would have hurt like hell, but he was over this. He wanted this to be over. Neil stared at his feet.

"Whatever. Look at me when I'm talking to you. You should know better than to be this disrespectful, seriously."

Neil forced his eyes up and met his father's cold stare. His blood turned to ice.

"Alright, Ichirou wants to know what you think you're doing here. I want you to get your ass back to Edgar Allan. We're not discussing this."

"Why do you care? You sold me when I was a child. You're not responsible for me anymore."

"They're making you my problem, Junior. I owed the Moriyamas a couple million dollars. You were worth five at that time. You're my insurance. Now that you're gone, I'm in debt again. So get over there again right now."

Neil played with the knife Lola had thrown. He pressed the tip of it into the tip of his pointer finger until he saw a drop of blood well up. He was alive.

"What if I stay?" he asked lowly. Andrew's presence in the room was comforting. This would be very different without him. He'd be treated worse than at the Nest.

"Then Ichirou will send others to contact you. Me being here is a sign of goodwill, Junior. He's getting his money the hard or easy way. I'm the easy way."

"I don't owe them a lot of money. I could work something out. The main problem is the money you owe them, right?" Neil didn't know where the courage to bring these topics up came from. His heart was pounding like crazy.

"What exactly are you implying?" his father asked, voice deep, stare cold.

"I could work out a deal with them. I'd make the money. I could make it work. You couldn't. Why would I care about you?"

The next things happened way to fast for Neil to process.

His father went for him, raised his hand, and was gonna hit him. Neil would have let him.

Andrew was faster. Neil didn't see what exactly he had done, Andrew must have kicked him a few times. Maybe boxed. All he knew was that his father kneeled on the floor a second later, a knife pressed to his throat by Andrew.

Neil stared at the two of them wide eyed and Lola froze on the counter.

"Neil, you were saying?" Andrew asked and looked at Lola then. "If you move, I'll slit his throat."

Neil needed a second to process this. His father on his knees.

"You can tell them that I'm having this talk with Ichirou personally or no one. Feel free to add that I'm more than happy to pay back my own debt. Not yours."

"Done?" Andrew asked. Neil nodded.
"You're gonna regret this, Junior," Lola spat and Andrew stared at her.

"You don't want to see what happens if you threaten him another time. That's a promise. Alright, you're leaving now. I'll join you to the door of the Fox Tower, then you go for good. If I see you one more time, you're dead. Again, a promise. Look into my police records if you don't believe me. You go first, Lola. Neil, go to our room."

Lola got off the counter slowly and led the way.

"The next time I say 'Let's bring Patrick, just in case' and you say 'no, this is your worthless and disappointing son, what could possibly happen' I'll remind you of this, Lola."

Lola looked down and shook her head a little. "Are you in the position to talk about this? Seriously, a child has you…"

"Another word, Lola, and you're regretting this."

Neil didn't understand how his father could talk this way when there was a blade to his throat. Neither could he understand why Lola let him treat her that way.

Andrew kept one hand on Neil's father's neck and the other one on the blade to his throat.

Neil followed them out of the room slowly, but went to the Monsters' room when they took the stairs. He went for the kitchen and only realised he still clutched Lola's knife in his hand when Nicky took a shocked breath. Neil hadn't even realised that him, Kevin and Aaron were on the couch.

"Neil, what are you doing with that thing?" Nicky asked somewhat alarmed.

"Nothing. Sorry." What on earth was he apologising for again? Neil let the knife clatter into the sink and got ice cubes from the refrigerator, preparing some iced water.

Andrew got back no longer than a minute later, sat down in the chair in front of Neil and looked at him. It was comforting.

Neil sipped the cold water and the coolness woke him again. Brought him back, some way. He took a deep breath and looked into Andrew's eyes. How was Andrew always this calm? How could his eyes seem this distant yet so close?

Chapter End Notes

I just want to thank you guys for commenting! I've said it before and I'm saying it again; you make this story a lot better by making me realise different things. Sentence-structures, interpretations of characters you disapprove of and that kind of stuff. I won't realise that you dislike the way I do stuff if you don't tell me about it! So please keep commenting! Also your comments make the sun shine a little brighter for me!

Sorry for this almost chapter-long note in the end, but there's more:

This chapter would have taken a very different course if it weren't for AsfaHan keeping up with my mess of thoughts half the night! Thank you for talking this stuff over with me and also criticising parts of it! All the love!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

First training, (bonding), a TV team and Neil being himself. (Meaning that he doesn't shut up, like, ever)

Warning: long chapter, little plot (like a lot of plot but not regarding Ryxo Marjomshie)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil spent some time in the kitchen, him and Andrew doing nothing but looking at each other. He didn't know if this was Andrew's way of comforting others or if it was him just being his usual self. Either way, Neil took comfort in this.

"Thank you," Neil offered after awhile. His voice was low and scratchy and he swallowed hard.

Andrew shook his head at that and dismissed Neil's statement with a gesture. "We have a deal."

Andrew had done something Neil had considered impossible for all his live. He'd stood up to Neil's father, had been superior and was still standing. This was the man that challenged Neil's dad and won.

At that, Neil and Andrew left the kitchen together. Kevin looked up from his phone and Neil sat down next to him.

"Wymack decided to wait for whatever they're doing. He says he'd rather adjust to their story than desperately try to set up a livestream now. We're doing that tomorrow."

Neil needed a few moments to understand that. They were letting the Ravens do whatever they wanted to do. They were giving them the opportunity to screw things over for the Foxes, telling anything to the press.

"Hey, Nathaniel, are you okay? You look sick."

Neil shook his head a little and swallowed. His father. Inside his room. He didn't think he'd ever feel safe again. Not with the door unlocked. Though a lock wasn't gonna stop Nathan. "I'm fine. So… tomorrow, right?"

Kevin frowned a little but nodded. "Wymack invited a camera team for ten am. He said he'd wait for the Raven's story before determining how we want you to look like. We might need you to go to Allison to get some makeup over the bruises on your face in order to support our point of the story, but we might need you looking bad."

Neil shrugged again and nodded a little. He didn't care about any of this. Not right now.

"When will you start teaching me new drills?" Neil asked after a while. Exy was easier to think about than any of this.
"As soon as you want to! It's Friday, so training starts in three days, anyways. We can go whenever. Wymack said he'd give the keys to the stadium to you soon so you can literally go there all you like."

Neil thought about that for a short while, before looking at his hands. He'd caught Lola's knife. Nathaniel could still do that. Could Neil still handle a stick?

"What about tonight? When's the Raven-lifestream? What about we don't look at that crap for a few hours and you just walk me though all that stuff?"

Kevin eyed Neil from his head to his toes and sighed heavily. Neil has always had the reputation of playing in whichever shape he might be in. He didn't intend to change that. And while he'd probably fall apart in a regular game situation, he wanted to start training anyways.

"You're gonna regret playing in this shape, Nathaniel," Kevin mumbled and shrugged. Neil didn't care. He just wanted to be able to start thinking again. Exy gave him that possibility. Exy muted life and pain and problems.

"So?" Neil asked slowly. Kevin sighed and shook his head a little.

"I'm gonna be held accountable for breaking you if you hurt yourself, so be responsible, yeah? Their press conference starts at four. We're leaving at three thirty."

Neil smiled a little and nodded. Then he got up. "I'll be here. Are we eating before or after that?"

"You won't play on a full stomach, Nathaniel. Obviously!"

Neil almost laughed at that and nodded again. Then he left the room and went to the girls' where he knocked.

Allison opened the door and raised an eyebrow at him. "The doors aren't locked around here, you know?"

Neil shrugged a little. The smile was still on his lips and he thought of Exy. "I'll keep that in mind. Is Matt still here?"

Allison opened the door all the way and just left again, but Neil thought she was a little less… whatever she was yesterday.

Matt got up and smiled at him.

"Room's free again. My father left. Sorry to keep you waiting."


Neil shrugged a little. "Kevin's taking me to the stadium later. Just looking forward to that."

Matt nodded and ran his fingers through his spiky hair. "Dan and I were making mac and cheese for lunch. I mean, it's nothing special, but it's ready in like five minutes, so… you want some? Or are you eating with the Monsters?"

Neil shrugged a little and checked his phone. It was one thirty. Two hours… that would be enough time to not feel bad on court. "I'd stay, if that's fine by you."

Matt's face lit up at that and he nodded. "Great! Come in!"
Neil did. The girls' room was laid out just like the others, but there were a lot more possibilities to sit. Neil's new room had a three-(or four, if you were comfortable with cuddling)-people-sofa and two armchairs, the Monsters had a two/three-person sofa, two bean bags and an armchair.

This room had two sofas that could seat two or three people, two chairs, three armchairs and one bean bag. Why they needed to be able to have twelve people in this room, Neil didn't understand, but he didn't really care too much.

He ended up on one of the sofas next to Renee, which was kinda weird but alright.

The Upperclassmen talked about the upcoming Exy season but avoided the Ravens like poison. Neil wondered if this was how they usually treated the topic or if they were considering him.

"So… do you want to watch the press conference of the Ravens with us later?" Dan asked after a while and Neil just sighed a little.

"I won't watch it. Kevin's taking me to the stadium and I'll just catch up on their crap later."

Dan nodded at that and bit her lip a little. "We'll talk that through later, yeah? And when you say that you go to the stadium you mean you'll look and not play, right? Because you're not in the shape to play yet! And… I'm telling Wymack that you left with fewer than six people as soon as you're back here, alright?"

Neil smiled at how… what exactly? How caring she was? This felt like something a mother would say. Not his mother, for that matter, but like… usual mothers. Mothers that took their sons with them when they ran away from their abusive, criminal husbands.

"I won't play, don't worry." It wasn't a lie. He had no one to play against. He'd train. That was something else. Not a truth Riko would have let him get away with, but a truth either way.

"Great. And you're sure you don't want to watch it right then?" Dan made sure. Matt nudged her and shook his head a little, knowing that pushing Neil wouldn't do anyone any good.

"I'm sure. We'll react to it tomorrow, I can't change anything about this by letting it eat me up, right?"

Allison tilted her head at that and shot him a considering look. "I thought you were just like Kevin, you know? But you're a lot less… control-freakish. Thank God, I couldn't make it through another month of watching every game of every single person we'll be playing against. That was horrible!"

Neil smiled a little and tried to see the compliment in that. The Ravens were analytical. Everything about Exy was angles and humidity and speed and force. He'd had a hell of a time getting used to that and an even worse time when he was expected to be like them. He couldn't play without passion. Exy was more than mathematics to him.

They chatted for another while and Neil kept quiet for most of it. All of it. But it was fine.

At three fifteen, he excused himself and went to his room. He got into training clothes and packed some stuff for after training.

Then he went to the hallway. Kevin and Andrew got out of the room at three thirty sharp and Neil didn't question Andrew's presence. He had through that this would be him and Kevin alone, but he felt more comfortable with Andrew around. Safer.

The drive to the stadium was short and the Andrew and Kevin showed Neil around. Meaning Andrew led the way extremely fast and Kevin told him about where they were quickly.
They got to the locker room and Neil relaxed instantly when he saw the single-stalled showers. Thank God. His body was a truth he didn't want to share.

Kevin brought Neil some left over gear since his own was obviously not finished yet, and Neil felt more alive than he had in months, when they entered the field. He looked at the orange seats and smiled. This was good.

"Alright. We're running three laps before starting. If you can't make that, there's no point in trying the drills."

Andrew sat on a bench with his phone and texted someone. He wasn't playing today, apparently. Kevin and Neil started running and Neil adjusted his speed to Kevin's. He had swallowed painkillers before leaving the Fox Tower, so he didn't really feel the injuries, and he was faster than Kevin after all.

Kevin showed him the drills he had planned for today and presented each one to Neil the first time. It looked manageable.

Two hours later, Neil's arms were sore. Manageable. It was everything but manageable. He'd spent his whole life learning how to throw the ball exactly into the space where his teammates were running. Moving targets. Players that could easily adjust to mistakes. He'd learned how to shoot the ball for others to catch it. This was a rough wake up.

Honestly, he wasn't too bad, considering that this was one of the first times in his life that he had to play in a way that was precise in exactly the opposite direction of what he'd learned so far. He'd been able to accomplish like… four out of ten times Kevin ran him through the drills.

That was fine for the first time doing it. It was awful considering that he would have to play in that position from now on.

Neil was breathing heavily and his arms and legs hurt. So did his head. Painkillers could only help so much.

"How well does Seth do?" Neil asked after a few minutes of catching his breath.

"He would only train with me two times before we agreed on never stepping on court again if it wasn't necessary for training or a game. First time around, he managed four out of ten. The next time seven. I'm guessing he's between eight and nine now, maybe nine straight."

Neil swallowed hard at that. Kevin had told the cousins that he'd pick all of this up quickly, but Neil doubted that. A lot.

"How often are you free? For this?" Neil asked and Kevin smiled.

"Seven nights a week. No training the night before and after a game. I'll pick you up at ten."

Neil smiled at that answer. This might sound like a lot, but he wanted this. Needed this.

"Alright, Nathaniel, go take a shower. Then we'll be on the way to Fox Tower and see what the Master had to say."

Neil sighed and got up. Kevin was right. He'd have to leave. Andrew, Kevin and Neil got off the field and went to the locker room together. Kevin was the first to get in and Neil ran into him when
he came to an abrupt halt.

Neil understood why, when he walked on and saw Coach Wymack and Abby in there, sitting and looking at them.

Kevin groaned a little and Neil looked down. He guessed this would be ugly.

"Kevin, when I texted you that I didn't want him outside in a small group of people, that wasn't because I'm rude but because the Japanese mafia is out for him! And apart from endangering him this way, you let him play? Like this? Are you out of your mind? Josten, go get into the shower! And let Abby take care of the mess you've created!"

Kevin sighed heavily and just shrugged. "He'll have to start training some day. And Andrew is with us. We couldn't seriously get the whole team to come and watch him play! Who sold us out, anyways?"

Neil guessed that Dan had broken her promise and texted Wymack in advance, but the man rolled his eyes. "Andrew texted Abby. Out of all people on the team, he's the most responsible! Now leave the room, we're meeting when you've changed. Talking about the Ravens."

Coach, Andrew and Kevin left the room and Abby and Neil were in there alone. She just smiled at him and shrugged a little.

"He's not mad. He saw your performance. Four out of ten is remarkable, considering your recent transfer of positions! Could you change out of the shirt and grant me a look at your upper body? Only the front side, promise."

Abby smiled brightly and Neil tensed a little. He wasn't comfortable at all but he knew that she should take a look at some of the cuts, so he shrugged out of his gear and let her take off some patches. He'd ripped some cuts open that had been healing, pretty much closed already. The deeper wound under his ribs was bleeding through the bandage.

Abby sighed when she saw that and shook her head a little. "You're making this harder on your body than it has to be. Do you want me to get Andrew for your arms or are you okay with me taking care of these today?"

Neil thought about that for a little and just stretched his arms out. Andrew had sold them out. He didn't really know what to think of that yet.

Neil got showered when Abby said he was in the shape to do so and let her take care of him afterwards.

"I didn't make these myself," Neil muttered when she put salve onto the cuts on his wrists. Riko had done a good job at making these seem like self harm scars. He didn't know why it was important to him, but he wanted to let her know.

"I believe that. Though it doesn't really matter. They're here now, and they're being taken care of. That's the important part." She smiled at him and nodded a little. "I'll be outside and walk you to David's office, alright?"

It was a weird thing. How Abby was careful with words, how she assured him that she was not crossing his borders, how she believed him. Neil changed when she was out of the room and went to Wymack's office by her side.

The three men sat in the room in a circle and Neil got into the chair between Kevin and Andrew.
Abby got there between Wymack and Kevin and their coach started talking.

"It's not as bad as we expected. I'll spare you the details. They said there were difficulties with you because you weren't able to improve as much as they expected you to. That they had obviously made a mistake by investing into your future. Something about how unreliable you were and how they wished you luck getting far with that attitude in the future."

Neil swallowed hard. He said that almost annoyed and dismissed all of it, but it hurt. Neil took a deep breath. They hadn't claimed him, at least. That was something. Not enough, but something.

"Nathaniel, we expected them to be rude. This is no surprise, right? Don't let this eat you up."

Neil looked at Kevin for a moment before swallowing hard. "They owned me for half my life. They send my father after me to get me back. And now they pretend that I was the one screwing this up. This isn't fair."

"Neither is this, right?" he asked, holding up his left hand. Neil looked at the uneven scar-tissue and nodded. He was right. They weren't fair. They wouldn't change that.

Kevin held his look for a few seconds. "What do you mean by *they sent your father*? Did he message you?"

Wymack joined the conversation at that. "What's the matter? Why your father? Is this something we should know about?"

Neil looked at Andrew for a second. He hadn't told anyone?

"My father… worked for Kengo. Now that he's dead, for Ichirou. He was here today. Andrew took care of it."

Kevin's jaw tensed and he looked away. Was that disappointment or something else?

Wymack threw his hands up and shook his head a little. "Seriously? Fuck… Josten, that's shit we need to know about! What else happened? What did he say? Didn't I explicitly tell you not to talk to the Moriyamas?"

Neil looked down and reminded himself that this wasn't his father. Old enough to be his father. Loud and angry enough to be his father, but *not* his father.

"He got there when I wasn't in the room. He said they wanted me back and they wanted the money. The thing is that I took a little when I ran, but that's nothing compared to what he owes them now that his insurance - I, for that matter - is gone. I think I can work something out. I know he can't. That's it. No trouble. I said I'd talk to Ichirou about this if he really wanted to. Andrew got them to leave."

Andrew seemed slightly disinterested in the conversation and Wymack shook his head a little. "Alright. Since everyone is alive - don't correct me if I'm wrong, please, I can't support your trial if I know about that kind of stuff - we'll just pretend nothing happened. We'll have to make you look as presentable as we can tomorrow, talk to Allison about that, yeah? And do you own any clothes that don't look as if you got them three sizes too big?"

Neil nodded slightly. He'd done a hell lot of photo shootings with Riko, Kevin and Jean. They were the start of the 'Perfect Court' after all. There should be some clothes from those occasions in his suitcase.
"Good. We're done here. Get the hell back. Right away. This is bad enough as it is. And all of you are here at nine. Cameras will be there by nine thirty, NCAA will probably get to our lineup by ten. I want all of you to look presentable."

They drove home in silence after that. It was around six thirty when they got back. The three of them went upstairs and Kevin and Andrew entered their room while Neil went to his own. When he realised that no one was here, he simply put his stuff away and went to the girls' room. Matt's face lit up again when Neil entered the room slowly, after knocking just to warn them about coming inside. They were watching a movie and indicated for him to be quiet, but Renee sat up straight in the couch she was laying in and made a gesture for him to join her. Neil did.

Renee updated him on the characters and the plot he'd missed. Neil couldn't care less.

The movie ended eventually, and the rest of the night was spent talking. Neil didn't get how they had so much to talk about. How could they see each other every day and still find any information to share? Neil guessed all the talking was the reason for them only mentioning irrelevant stuff; they didn't have anything else to share after the last few years together.

Matt and Seth got up a few hours into the night, and Neil joined them. They didn't say anything when Neil changed in the bathroom, they didn't say anything when he swallowed painkillers, they didn't comment on him turning in bed, though it must have kept them up as well.

Neil's thoughts wouldn't let him sleep. The Ravens had thrown him away. Just like that. They'd owned him and now they pretended he was the one that was to blame for this not working out. That wasn't fair.

Seth remained quiet when Neil got up after around an hour of this torture. Matt didn't.

"Roof?" he asked silently and Neil nodded a little.

"Yeah. I'll be quiet when I come back," Neil whispered. Seth scoffed but didn't say anything.

"Want me to stay up?" Neil smiled at that question. How did anyone on this planet deserve Matt as a friend? How did Neil, of all people?

"No, it's fine. Thank you."

Neil left the room and went to the roof. He wasn't surprised to see Andrew laying by the edge again. He simply laid down next to him and smiled when Andrew handed him the cigarette without asking or being asked.

Andrew had his eyes open tonight, and he was watching the clouds fly along the sky.

Neil didn't want to say anything that night. He was okay with looking at the moon, at Andrew, at the tip of the cigarette whenever Andrew took a drag.

"Stop looking at me."

Neil didn't think Andrew would realise he was being watched from time to time. He was wrong, apparently. "Why?"

"I don't want you to," Andrew answered, eyes fixed on the full moon. Neil looked away at that. He didn't understand it, but he didn't want to push. He'd seen how little Andrew liked that just this morning. So he looked at the stars. Felt small. Insignificant.
Neil frowned at the thought. *Insignificant.* That wasn't nothing. That wasn't the void or horror he usually felt. Insignificant meant that there was something to begin with. Something that didn't mean anything.

It might not sound like a lot, but it was a huge step for Neil to consider. He wasn't nothing anymore. Andrew might have said that, but it was wrong. He had been nothing with the Ravens. He had been a very significant nothing. Significant for Riko's career. Nothing compared to him. Now he was one of these small Foxes. No money. No future. Just a person, laying on the roof, staring at the sky. Something oddly insignificant. Someone.

Matt woke him the next morning. "Hey, Neil? You should get ready and go over. Allison has to do your make up or something. Isn't that weird?" He laughed.

Neil blinked a few times before getting up. He went to the bathroom and changed into *presentable* clothes. He wore black skinny jeans, a white tee and a long sleeved plaid shirt that he kept unbuttoned over that.

Neil exited the bathroom feeling strangely *Raven* again. These clothes were from a spring-shooting that would probably be taken off the website. If it was still on there. Neil doubted you'd find much about him anymore.

He went the girls' room with Seth and Matt. Dan and Renee were still in the bedroom or bathroom. Matt sat down in one of the sofas with Seth, Allison sat in a chair in front of one of the armchairs. She turned to look at Neil and whistled. "Wow… you should wear your own size more often, Neil. Seriously, you look good."

Neil shrugged slightly. He'd be incredibly hot in the shirt but they couldn't have anyone see either the bandages or the cuts. He sat down in front of her and she considered his face for a few seconds before starting to put layer after layer of creams, liquids, primers and other stuff on his face. She used stuff that covered the wounds as good as she could without making Neil's face look unnaturally even.

After about fifteen minutes, she smiled. "That looks great. I should become a makeup artist as soon as I'm too old for Exy."

Seth rolled his eyes visibly for the hundredth time that morning.

"So I'm done?" Neil asked and Allison smiled.

"Basically. Do you want me to do something about your hair? Are you in for eyeliner? I've got one exactly the colour of your eyes!"

Neil chuckled at that and shook his head. "What's wrong with my hair? And I'm fine without the eyeliner, thanks."

Allison shrugged. "Whatever. Alright, I'm taking care of this mess now," she mumbled, pointing to her pyjama, messy bun and makeupless face.

Dan got out of the bathroom and Allison went in. Dan smiled when she saw Neil and nodded a little. "Good job, Al! Neil, you look great. This is gonna be great! They'll regret that!"

It took another hour for all of them to be finished, but Dan's breakfast made up for that.
"So, Neil, are you driving with us?" Matt asked after a while, when they all got up. Neil shrugged apologetic and shook his head a little.

"Sorry. I'm driving with the others." He hadn't talked to them about that, obviously, but... he just guessed that they'd drive together. They always had.

Matt nudged him softly and laughed. "Neil, it's fine! Don't apologise, seriously! See you there!"

They left the building and the Monsters were waiting already. Nicky stood by the car and let Neil into the middle seat again.

They arrived at the stadium and got in. Wymack greeted them and led them to the locker room, where someone had put up both a TV and a camera. Two people were huddling around, assigning seats and making everyone look a little more presentable.

Neil ended up sitting pretty centred between Andrew and Renee because they made the smallest ones sit in the middle and the bigger ones rather at the far ends.

"Alright guys, we're going live as soon as they're done announcing our lineup," Wymack yelled and they all straightened a little.

He turned the TV on and they all watched the announcements. Neil smiled a little when they heard that Jean was gonna play for the Trojans. They'd all made it.

The woman reading out the names got to the Foxes. She read out all the names and positions, ending with "And of course, the newest addition, Striker Nathaniel... I'm sorry. I misread that! Striker Neil Josten! My bad!"

Neil felt his blood run cold and he heard Nicky gasp. "What a bitch!"

Seth chuckled and shrugged. "She was probably paid to read that wrong." The Upperclassmen couldn't grasp what she'd just done. They didn't known that this wasn't nothing. That this was showing Neil where he belonged.

"Quiet now, guys! Going live, in three, two..." the cameraman started and became quiet.

All of the Foxes smiled brightly, though it was forced for the most part. For all of them, honestly. A reporter got in front of the camera and started talking.

"Hello Exy fans! This is me reporting from the Foxhole Court. I'm sure all of us just heard the news. Are you as shocked as I am? Neil Josten, not only transferring to another team but to the Foxes? And he changed from Defense to Offence? What about Kevin Day, being on the lineup after that tragic skiing-accident last year? Did anyone expect him back this early? I'm talking to Danielle Wilds, only female captain of a Class I Exy team. What are your thoughts on this?"

Dan smiled brightly at that and ran her hand through her hair. They had all been prepared for this, knowing exactly what kind of answers to give. "We couldn't be happier to have them on the team. I'm serious! Neil had a rough summer because of this transfer and we're all having his back for this. Neil and Kevin are amazing players and we're looking forward to the next seasons with them."

The reporter smiled and nodded at that. "Thank you for that! Bryan Gordon, this is your last season, right? How do you think this is gonna affect everything?"

Seth smiled a little and made a dismissive gesture. "You can call me Seth. I don't really go by Bryan anymore. I think we all know how well Kevin Day could play, right? So we're all glad to have him
on the team. And we're all waiting for his performance after that accident. Neil transferring positions is probably gonna make this a lot more interesting than it would have been otherwise."

The reporter laughed at that and nodded. He didn't seem interested in the opinions of their other teammates… instead, he turned to Kevin. "So, Kevin Day. We all expected you back, didn't we? Not this early or on this team, but we were waiting. May I ask you, why the Foxes? You chose to coach them for the last semester, did that determine the choice?"

Kevin nodded and smiled brightly. Neil knew this smile. The camera-smile. "Honestly, I wasn't sure what to do after I broke my hand. I knew Coach Wymack from years back and he offered this position to me. Seeing how hard working and determined this team was, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. So I registered and went through practice with them and here I am. I couldn't have found a better place to stay!"

After that, the reporter made his way to Neil. "So, Neil Josten. Kevin was here for half a year before. Did that determine your choice to leave the Ravens behind and become a Fox instead? Why transfer positions? How was this summer a bad one?"

"Those are many questions… alright, it's quite easy for the most part. Simple. I grew up with Riko and Kevin. I had all the money and every possibility growing up, I got the training I needed. Playing for the Ravens would feel like cheating. So would playing as a Backliner. I want to know if I can take this on my own, if I can play Exy without being on a rich team and without having trained nothing but that position for my whole life." This was the answer Wymack had provided him with. This was what Neil was supposed to say. The reporter smiled at him and Neil could tell that he'd change the topic if the man got the chance to say anything, so he simply went on. Neil was far from done. He had some things to say.

"Coming here was a given. Kevin is like a brother to me and him moving away was hard. That skiing accident was hard on the whole team. I knew I wanted to play with Kevin. Sure, I grew up with Riko as well, but… Kevin has always been strict yet calm. What you look for in a tutor. Riko is more of an avalanche, you know? All it takes is one wrong step and all the snow breaks loose and buries you." He let that sink in for a second and smiled a little. He'd said it! Neil felt Renee's leg brush against his own. A warning? Wymack's gestures behind the camera were definitely a warning. A definite 'stop'. A 'don't cross this line further'. But Neil still had something to say. He needed to make this very clear.

"What a funny metaphor, isn't it? Avalanche. Kevin got hurt on a skiing trip in winter, right? You asked why I had a rough summer. I was spending time in the mountains. It was all fun and games, skiing. And then there was that enormous avalanche. A real force of nature, honestly. But I'm fine now. So is Kevin. Seems like we'd do better just not skiing anymore."

Neil smiled brightly at the reporter and the man looked at him a little confused. "I'm sorry… was than an implication… sorry, I misunderstood. Alright, Exy fans! This was it from the Foxes today. Stay tuned for more Exy relevant information, see you soon!"

The cameraman switched off the cam and it was dead silent. "That was live. We'll cut the last part out for the general news this report is gonna show up in, yeah? But… many people saw this in the seconds it was streamed." The reporter looked at Wymack apologetically but their coach just shook his head.

"Fine. Can you leave me with the team for a second?"

The TV-people left the room extremely fast and as soon as the door closed, the chatter started.
"Riko is gonna kill all of us because of this! What the hell do you think you're doing?" Aaron asked, voice almost angry.

"Nathaniel, you can't just say that! You… literally! That wasn't even subtle. You full on accused him of being responsible."

"I can't believe you did that," Allison said, but there was a smile on her lips.

"Savage… seriously. Stupid, but that was gold!" Neil wouldn't have guessed that Seth of all people would take his side.

Dan had gotten up and discussed this with Wymack, who seemed furious. Matt's face showed disbelief, but in a somewhat positive way. Renee seemed concerned when he met her eyes, but she didn't say anything.

He turned to the other side and saw Andrew glaring at him. "What?" Neil asked lowly and Andrew shrugged.

"Protecting you is hard when you commit suicide on national TV. That seems impractical." Andrew looked away then, and Neil felt a smile on his lips.

This was gonna be discussed. There were rumours about the Ravens being harsh on their players, but this? This wasn't rubbing salt into the wound. This was twisting a knife drenched in acid.

At least Neil hoped so.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 6 is up!!
I'm so sad about school starting again! I didn't update yesterday???? I updated once/twice EVERY DAY so far??? Sorry!

Again, your comments are amazing! Can we keep doing that? Hahaha

Seriously, I feel like your comments make this whole work improve so much! Like, there are all these little editors on my head while working through the chapters, whispering the stuff you want to see/change and I that's great!

And as always, these days, a massive thank you to AsfaHan for keeping up with my messages (in the middle of the night because what again was Seth's horoscope and how does that affect him?) and my unintelligible thoughts! I hope that the messy first drafts make up for that some way ^-^

ALSO: Columbia is ahead, so stay tuuuuuned
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Columbia. Do you really need more information on that? ;)

Chapter Notes

No spoilers but just assume that the trigger warnings for the Columbia scene in general apply. Like I don't want to give away too much by stating this explicitly, but feel free to contact me should you need additional information. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few weeks were dizzying. Ups and downs, the whole time. Not a single calm day. The backslash on Neil and Kevin transferring to the Foxes was incredible. They were called stupid, traitors, maniacs, crazy. The fans were worse on Kevin than on Neil, because they knew him better. Jean transferring to the Trojans was bad news to the fans, but it wasn't nearly as discussed as the Foxes.

Another aspect was Neil's statement. They had only had around 30,000 people watching live all over America, which was a number they could have dealt with. Sadly, some of them recorded Neil's monologue and it was all over the internet. Some people said it was all nonsense and conspiracies. Others weren't as nice to the Ravens. Accusations were all over the Exy-web and some people were harsh.

Wymack forbid Kevin any statement on this, which seemed to be enough. He made pretty interesting death-threats to Neil, listing many possible ways of death should he ever open his mouth in public again.

Neil spent the time divided between the Upperclassmen and the Monsters, which was weird because after a week, both groups planned him into their activities. Whenever he had to decide, he chose the Monsters. Seth gave him a hard time for it, but the others remained quiet.

The nights were tough. So were the days, if he was honest. He spend the days between his room and the Monsters. They trained at the stadium together, but Wymack forbid the night practices explicitly and for whatever reason, Kevin and Andrew listened, meaning Neil didn't have much of a choice. It made him sick. He needed this.

Neil still couldn't sleep. He spent most nights on the roof, watching the sky and watching Andrew until he was told to look away. Neil didn't mind. He was glad about the hours spent there. They calmed him enough to sleep afterwards. It was somewhat of a safe space and Neil might not want to admit it, but he desperately needed to feel safe.

It was the middle of August, two or three weeks after their mess up of an interview and the official announcement of the lineup, when Neil was sitting in the Monsters' room and Nicky chimed in, smiling brightly.
"Neil? It's the last Friday before school. Do you know what that means?"

Neil frowned up at him and shrugged a little. He liked how loud and chatty Nicky was. Liked how there was barely ever any silence around him.

The thought of school made him a little sick anyways. He'd registered only last week and it felt weird. He'd signed up for Maths, Spanish and English, though he hadn't known that English would include Literature and Speech both. He'd have to live with that now.

"It means we're celebrating! Clubbing! Night out!" Nicky seemed very enthusiastic about this.

Neil looked around the room. Aaron and Andrew were on their phones while Kevin watched Exy games on the TV next to Neil. No one seemed to feel the need to say anything about that. "So?" Neil asked irritated.

"So you should get dressed. It's gonna be a night to remember. For most of us. We'll see about that." Nicky giggled a little and Neil frowned even more. What? "We're leaving at nine. Wear something nice, would you?" he added and Neil sighed. He ended up nodding, for whatever reason.

"Where are we going?" He wanted to know what he was agreeing to. Neil felt incredibly comfortable around these people during the past weeks, but he was always careful whenever they suggested leaving the Tower. That made him hard to be around, but it was just him. They wouldn't change that.


Neil nodded at that and thought for a few seconds. "When are we leaving?"

Nicky checked his phone for the time and shrugged. "Little less than an hour. I still have to get showered. Would you get dressed? Be down by the car at nine, would you?"

Neil shrugged a little and nodded. Nicky vanished into the bathroom and it took another twenty minutes for the others to get up and start getting ready. Neil left the room at that and changed into another of his Raven-photoshoot-outfits. He didn't know if this was gonna be casual or formal, so he settled for something he'd feel close-to-comfortable in. He ended up in a grey, long sleeved tee and black pants. He considered himself in the mirror for a second before choosing a black leather jacket over that.

Neil left the bathroom and intended to just leave, when Matt chuckled on the sofa. "Are you having a date? How did you find a girl that quickly?"

Neil smiled and shook his head a little. "I'm going out with the guys apparently. Whatever, right? What are your plans for today?"

Matt looked pretty good for an usual evening, considering his shirt and pants. He smiled at that and shrugged. "I'm going out with Dan. Nothing in particular, I don't know. Just spending time together! Have fun, Neil."

Neil smiled at that and nodded a little. "Thanks! You too! Bye, Seth!"

He didn't know why he even tried. Seth looked up from the book he was reading, apparently, and shot Neil a glance before reading on.

Neil didn't even care. He left the room and met the Monsters by their car again. Nicky approved of his outfit, cheering when he saw Neil. He could only smile in an embarrassed way and shrug it off.
They got into the car and Andrew started driving.

For whatever reason, these car rides were even more silent than the nights on the roof. Neil didn't know why that was, but he supposed that it was about the abundance of people or about the atmosphere, and he didn't want to address it.

The drive took too long for Neil to be comfortable. It was alright for the first ten or fifteen minutes, but he started getting uneasy after that. Neil wanted to get this over with. He wanted to be back home.

The next twenty minutes were filled with Neil thinking about that single word. How did home occur to him as naturally? When he didn't remember a good thing about his last home. When he didn't consider the place he lived for the past eight years a home?

Neil wasn't okay with this. How the words just stuck inside his head. First friends. Then brother. Now home? How did that happen in only a month?

The other half of the car ride was less silent, considering that Kevin had gotten through with what he wanted and the radio was playing, but apart from a little weak attempts from Nicky, they remained silent.

It seemed like an eternity later that they pulled into the parking lot of a place called "Sweetie's" and sat down. The waitress seemed to know the boys, since she greeted them cheerfully and smirked a little when Nicky ordered the "ice cream special" for all of them.

"Neil, are you gonna spend the whole evening staring at the door of this place looking like you might run outside any given opportunity? Because you sure look the part." Nicky laughed and shoved against Neil's shoulder softly.

Neil tried to relax and… managed to? He guessed. Until the ice cream came and Aaron got up for whatever reason. He came back with some napkins and revealed… something? Neil wasn't sure what exactly Aaron slipped into all of their hands under the table, but he was confident that these were drugs.

He frowned and shook his head a little. "What's that? I don't want it. You can keep it, honestly."

Nicky pouted at that and nudged him again. "Don't be such a bore, babe. Seriously, you'll wanna have fun tonight? Right? So c'mon!"

Neil shook his head again and felt his jaw tense. Relax… "I don't want it. You can have a double shot if you want to."

Nicky laughed at that and shook his head at that. "You don't inject that stuff, Neil! Abby would literally kill us! You swallow it."

Neil straightened his posture a little and was ready to discuss this further, when he felt a touch under the table. He looked at Andrew next to him but he kept eating his ice cream with his right hand, not seeming to see Neil whatsoever. Andrew's fingers under the table opened Neil's fist and took the package from him. Alright? That was unexpected. Neil decided to play along and shrugged again, eating his own ice as well.

A short while later, with Kevin's ice cream totally untouched and everyone else's only halfway eaten, they went away again.

There was a long line in front of Eden's Twilight, but the security guards seemed to know the twins
so they got in as soon as they arrived.

Neil didn't approve of anything so far, but this? The music, the people, the smell? He hated the lack of oxygen, the temperature, hated how the five of them went straight to the bar and how several almost wet bodies touched him on the way.

He had been in clubs when he grew up. There wasn't much of a way around it. It was just usually more exclusive. He went with Riko and Kevin, later with Jean in addition to that. They had always been in sections that weren't as busy and he had always been able to breathe properly so far. This was weird and seemed exhausting. He could barely hear his thoughts over the music.

"Are you having fun yet?" Nicky screamed into Neil's ears and Neil just shrugged. He didn't feel like being here.

They waited by the bar and apparently, the twins knew the bartender as well. "Who's the new one?" he asked and Andrew shrugged.

"Newest fuck up on the team. The usual," Andrew answered and Neil rolled his eyes a little. Why was Andrew like this?

The bartender turned to Neil and considered him for a moment. "What should I get you?" he asked. The man leaned against the bar a little and smiled at them brightly. Neil was quite sure that his teeth must be bleached. They couldn't be this white naturally, right?

Neil shrugged a little. "Something with no alcohol, preferably."

Nicky next to him groaned a little and pushed against him again. "Neil, you bore. Seriously. You whine about drugs. No alcohol. Where did you grow up, Canada?"

Neil shrugged a little and he honestly didn't care. Why would he be bothered by this? He saw that Andrew slipped a small package into the bartender's hand and wondered if this was how Andrew paid for their drinks. Neil didn't know why exactly, but he didn't like the thought of doing drugs.

Nicky and Aaron took Neil to a small table in a corner and they sat down, waiting for Kevin and Andrew to come back with their drinks. Neil's ears were hurting and he seriously doubted that anyone had fun in these places.

Andrew sat down a cup in front of Neil and slid onto the bench next to him. Neil frowned at the cup a little and looked at Andrew questioningly. "What's in there?"

Andrew shrugged. "Mainly soda. A little bit of something else, but you'll live. It's a shot of vodka or something, not too strong."

Neil nodded a little and swallowed. He supposed that was a compromise, and honestly, he didn't care too much. He'd survive a shot of vodka.

Neil had always been the type to watch others get drunk at parties. He hadn't been allowed to drink and he never really felt like it. Growing up in a place like the Nest, you learn to appreciate things like a clear mind and being able to fully control your body. Alcohol made you say things better unsaid.

Neil closed his eyes against the memories welling up. Sixteen. He had been sixteen, and God, had he been stupid. Riko had just turned eighteen and the party was huge. Neil didn't remember the longest parts of it, but he remembered waking up with a black eye. He remembered how Kevin had given him something to cool and hadn't met his eyes for the next few days. Neil knew he had pissed Riko off bad, but he didn't know what exactly he'd said. Training had been a torture for the next month.
Riko got extremely angry at everything Neil said and he just went to being silent after a while. The situation had calmed down quite a lot after that, but he didn't want to go back to that if he was honest.

Neil blinked a few times when Andrew flicked his fingers in front of his face a few times. "You should really consider breathing more often."

Neil did take a deep breath at that and nodded. He sipped his drink, hoping it would calm him. It didn't. It was sweet and salty and hot and cold. Neil knew that he didn't like the taste of alcohol but this was worse than what he remembered. He didn't care, though. The taste brought him back to reality. He emptied the whole cup and grimaced a little, but felt better afterwards. A little.

Nicky whooped at that and smiled. "That's more like it! Seriously! Aaron? Should we get another round?"

The cousins left and Kevin considered Neil for a few moments before smiling. "Having fun?"

Neil still didn't like the music or the people, but their corner was a lot nicer than the mass of people they left.

Neil felt weird after around fifteen minutes. He'd gone through his two cups in the time it took the others to drink four, but he seemed to take this a lot worse than the Monsters. The lights became a little more… annoying? The flickering was sickening and it shone way too bright.

There was a small bit of soda left in Neil's second cup and he drowned it and… grimaced. What exactly was that? He made a face but the taste was too disgusting to keep in his mouth and he didn't know why he didn't spit it back. He swallowed the crap.

Nicky grinned at him and even chuckled a little when Neil made a face. "I think he just realised."

Aaron sighed and shrugged. "About time. That's the second cup, seriously."

Neil pressed his eyes together and shook his head a little. Please not. "What did you put into that?" he asked no one in particular. Nicky shrugged a little.

"To be honest, nothing. Roland mixed the stuff for you."

Neil wasn't sure if it was anxiety or drugs, but it felt like he could feel his blood burning.

"Andrew. My turn. What was in there?"

Andrew shrugged a little and didn't even look at him. "I told him to choose everything that doesn't taste too strong and can be dissolved in drinks. So I don't know."

Neil knew that some of this might be about whatever he'd just taken up, but most of his panic was probably him overreacting.

"Neil, how about some dancing? I feel like our talks are gonna be pretty amazing. Maybe the night. Depends on you and Andrew. He's so possessive for someone so freaking disinterested in things, right?"

Neil didn't know at which point the words started blurring. He wasn't sure when his vision went from usual to super focused. He knew that at some point, Nicky pulled him with him. He remembered thirteen year old Kevin, desperately whining "Riko, don't break him. You're breaking him." He remembered today's Kevin, shrugging as he went off, mumbling something like "Just make
Neil remembered his heartbeat growing faster and faster throughout the night, sometimes in excitement, sometimes in panic. He remembered whispered conversations about… he didn't remember that.

He was lost in his own mind. Riko was always there, Riko responding unusually violent to "Or I could stay home with Jean?" Riko smiling after he had a bad training because "That was your fault, for not backing me up enough, right?" Riko expecting a "Yes" and a "Thank you" and an "I'm fine" after every statements to a degree that Kevin couldn't use some of these anymore and that Neil couldn't live without using them all the time.

A "Yes, Riko" turned into a "Yes, sir" in Neil's mind which turned into a "no" which turned into a flat iron on his chest because "Would you repeat that, Junior? Thought so."

The flat iron on his chest turned into cigarettes on his wrists, into chains holding him down, another body on his changed into… weight. Changed into weight. Changed into the weight of another body on his.

Neil opened his eyes and felt panic well up when he could barely see anything in the dark room. Bed. Body. Hands? His hands, trapped between him and the other guy. His head hurt. He felt sick. What had happened?

His breath went faster and faster and his heart started racing again. Another body on his. He couldn't remember.

"Please…" Neil managed to get out in a shaky voice. It was barely more than a whisper, but the other body made a sound. Snored. Snored?


Neil managed to get his hands free and pushed it off him. He sat up and took a deep breath before looking back. Fully dressed Nicky laid there, sleeping peacefully. Alright… that was good. Right?

Neil pushed himself up and felt sick again. Sick physically. Sick thinking of last night. Sick thinking of going home with these guys who'd drugged him against his will. Who'd done God knows what.

He didn't know how he managed to gather the strength to get up, but he was out of the room a minute later, calling Matt. Neil still felt the panic all the way inside him and he needed to know there was a way out. Some way. His head ached so bad.

"This better not be about my father, I'm serious, someone else can pick him up," Matt mumbled into the phone.

Neil bit his lip and shivered a little. "Matt? I…" He didn't finish the sentence, not knowing what to say.

"Neil? Josten, is that you? What's up? You good? How was the night out?" Matt was a thousand times friendlier now, though he still sounded tired.

"Can you come pick me up?" Neil was silent after that. He closed his eyes. Helpless. Just as helpless as he'd been in the Nest. These guys…

"Neil? Where are you? Where are the Monsters? What happened?"
Neil sighed a little and shrugged. "Columbia, I'm guessing. I don't know. A house. I think I'm gonna be sick. I just want to go home."

Matt sucked in a deep breath. "Oh fuck. I'm still drunk, Neil, I can't... gimme a sec. Seth? Hey. I'm sorry, but could you..." Neil didn't understand the rest of their statements, Matt was probably turning the microphone away.

Neil looked at the hand he didn't use to hold the phone and frowned when he saw himself trembling.

"Neil? Seth is on his way. He knows where you are and he'll call when he's there. Are you okay?"

Neil swallowed and tried to feel his body again.

"I'm fine... I guess, I mean... everything hurts. I feel sick. I don't know where I am and I don't remember most of the night..."

Matt sighed heavily and Neil felt bad for waking him. Bad for Seth being on his way because of him. "Try to drink some water. You're probably dehydrated as hell. What did you take last night? And how much did you drink?"

Neil swallowed at the thought and tried to grasp onto the thoughts that kept slipping, just where he couldn't catch them anymore. He remembered cups. How many? He wasn't sure. "No clue," he mumbled and presses a fist into his stomach.

"Do you want me to stay on the phone until Seth picks you up?"

Neil felt guilty for keeping him up that night. "I'm sorry. No. It's fine. Thank you, Matt!"

"You sure? Send me a text as soon as you're in the car. I'm gonna stay up," Matt mumbled into the phone, and Neil had some trouble believing him. Matt was half asleep already.

"I'll do that. Thanks." They hung up and Neil looked at his phone. 3:12. It was three am and Seth was driving to get him? Neil couldn't believe it.

He went along the hallway very slowly and looked into a few doors until he found the bathroom. Neil turned on the light and flinched heavily when he was blinded by the intensity of it. It took a few moments for him to get used to it.

Neil stared into the small mirror over the sink and couldn't believe how bad he looked. His eyes were bloodshot and the bags under them were an unhealthy shade of purple.

He washed his face in the sink, or attempted to, but bending over made his stomach convulse and Neil was glad the toilet was right next to him already when he felt the acid bite it's way up his throat.

Unfortunately, throwing up didn't make him feel better. He felt even more sick and was dizzier than before. Neil rinsed his mouth out as good as he could and went through the small cupboard. When he actually found a new and still wrapped toothbrush, he cleaned his mouth properly and did feel better.

Neil made his way through the house silently and went down the stairs to the ground floor. He found himself in the kitchen and drank some water very slowly.

It was 03:45 when he received a text by Seth. "There in 10. Be ready."

Neil swallowed hard and felt his fingers shake too much to answer, so he just let it be. He held on to
the counter and stared out of the window until he saw the headlights of a car approach.

Neil had no clue where his shoes or jacket were, but he would definitely not remain here longer than he had to in order to look for that. He kinda hoped that the Monsters would bring them back, but he didn't expect anything from them now.

He left the house slowly and closed the door behind him. His legs were weak and it took a little long, but he was incredibly glad when he crashed into the passenger seat of Matt's truck and looked at Seth.

"This one's for you. I added sugar. Are you gonna throw up?"

Neil held on to the plastic coffee mug Seth held out to him and felt his stomach clench again. The warmth was nice but he wasn't sure if he could keep anything down. "Thank you. I'll try not to. Just threw up twenty minutes ago, so I think I'll be fine."

Seth nodded and started the car. Neil thought it was weird how he didn't comment on that. Then again, Seth had probably been worse than him at times. They drove for a while and Neil stared out of his window. There were moments where he'd shiver uncontrollably for a few seconds, but he felt almost better each time that was over.

"Thank you for coming in the middle of the night," Neil almost whispered and Seth shrugged.

"I understand that no one wants to be alone with the Monsters. I don't get how you get along so well in general, but that's none of my business."

Neil nodded and took a careful sip of coffee. The warmth felt good.

"What did they offer you?" Seth asked after a while. Neil frowned and thought of last night. The stupid soda that was supposed to contain nothing but a shot of vodka.

"They offered a lot of stuff. Something like salt or sugar. I declined. Guess that didn't do me a lot of good."

Seth chuckled at that and shrugged. "Neil, you're sitting here after - what? - five hours? And you're pretty fine I'd say. You'll live."

Neil found that hard to believe. He went from feeling hot to feeling cold and he felt the need to throw up every single second of the car ride.

"How do you stand this? You take that stuff often, right? This doesn't seem worth it." Neil guessed that he was overstepping boundaries, but he didn't care. He needed someone to talk to him.

"Dunno. I guess it's better if you remember being high. And if you take them willingly. No clue. I'm clean at the moment, by the way. So shut up." That was far from a nice answer, but it was honest and almost not insulting.

"Why are you clean? Is this not worth it?" Neil asked, indicating himself, meaning his shape and pretty much everything about himself during that moment.

"Allison," was the only answer he got and Neil knew better than to push. He didn't want to stop talking, though.

"This is your last year, right? What are you majoring in?" Neil asked after a while, looking out of the window.
"I got up at three am to pick you up and raced here like a maniac. I'm not in the mood," Seth snapped and Neil pressed his lips together. Alright… Neil swallowed hard and drank his coffee slowly.

"Sorry," Neil mumbled and set the cup down again. He was gonna throw up if he didn't take this slower.

Seth spared him a single look and shrugged a little. "You're not as Kevin as I considered you to be like."

Neil looked up at that and tried to see either an insult or a compliment in that.

"How is that?"

Seth shrugged and fixed his eyes on the road again.

"Don't know. Kevin always considered himself better than the rest of us because of his stupid training from when he was a child on. He always looked the part, too. You got here as a train-wreck and don't look a lot better so far, but you're not assuming you get stuff. You get stuff and assume someone's gonna take it."

Neil played with his fingers and shrugged a little. That was probably because he was only number four. Kevin was always second best. Second richest. Second-best treated. There weren't too many extremes left for you with three people getting their share first.

"Is that a good or a bad thing?" Neil asked a few minutes later. Seth just shrugged and sighed.

"Still figuring that part out. Can we shut up now? For good?"

Neil nodded a little and looked out of the window. He'd felt crappy all night long, but there was more to it now. He felt betrayed. Exploited. Kevin hadn't done anything to grant him security from… whom exactly? Nicky? The twins? Kevin himself? Neil wasn't sure. He chose to be mad at all of them.

The way back to PSU took a lot longer than it had taken for Seth to arrive in Columbia. They entered the Fox Tower close to 5:30 and Seth actually helped Neil into the elevator and then to their room when his legs would barely carry him anymore.

Matt was sound asleep in his bed and Neil climbed into his quickly. He didn't even attempt to get his clothes off.

"Thank you, Seth. I'm serious. That was incredibly kind of you."

"Keep that in mind tomorrow and let me sleep as long as I want to," Seth grumbled in lieu of a 'Good night' and he nodded a little, making an approving sound.

Neil still felt sick and he wasn't happy or even close to calm at the moment, but he fell asleep in his bed. At home. That was important. That was something. That was significant.

Chapter End Notes

Guys thank you for the comments! You make me so happy by writing these short text or single sentences. Seriously my heart!!! Keep doing that!
Btw:
Me, on the bus, needing to read 20 pages for Philosophy-class this afternoon: editing chapter 7 and porbs posting it

Also listening to Runaway Train omg my heart.

ALSO UPDATE THATS ACTUALLY RELEVANT: I will have exactly a single free afternoon/evening next week, so I guess I'll update once or twice, but seriously, don't kill me.

Also:
AsfaHan. Do I have do say more? God, girl, what would I do without you? The answer is probably: be the most incompetent person in the world?
Thank you for everything.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The weekend after Columbia and the first day of school.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Neil woke up with his head hurting like hell. It took him a moment to place the sound he was hearing and understand this was his phone that ended up under the pillow someway during the night.

He answered without checking who the caller was. Neil didn't even open his eyes. He didn't have to worry about saying anything, since the other person didn't give him a chance anyways.

"Nathaniel, where are you? You can't just run off like that. Seriously, let us pick you up."

Neil massaged the bridge of his nose and had some trouble with gaining his sense of reality. He was in bed at the Fox Tower. Kevin was in Columbia. Last night. Right…

The memories – or lack thereof – came crashing down onto him and he sighed a little. He wasn't in the mood for this.

"Leave me alone, Kevin. I won't have this talk right now," he mumbled and hung up. Neil turned his phone off directly after that. He didn't want to be disturbed further. He wanted to sleep.

He turned around and faced the wall again, protecting him from the light a little. Neil could have fallen asleep right then, but seconds later, Matt's phone below him started ringing about ten times louder than Neil's had, moments before.

"What the hell?" Matt answered and Neil groaned a little. He wanted to sleep but he wanted to know what Matt would tell Kevin. At least he assumed that this was him calling again.

"He's here. What did you do?" Matt was quiet for a few seconds and sighed heavily. "You're crappy friends, just saying. And Seth picked him up. See you later. Just seriously leave Neil alone for the day."

Neil relaxed a little at that and when Matt hung up as well and fell asleep after a while.

He woke up again around ten am and sat up slowly. He went to the bathroom and didn't feel any better than he had yesterday. He took a shower quickly anyways. Neil was quite good at taking care of the remaining wounds by now.

He felt a tiny bit more alive when he left the shower, but his head ached badly and his stomach hurt.

When Neil went to the kitchen, Matt was there already, handing him a glass of water and some painkillers.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?" Matt smiled at him a little when he said this. Neil took the pills and was happy to be able to do something against the pain.
"Like crap, but I'll live. Thank you," Neil mumbled and Matt laughed a little. "This is weird. Seriously, is this the first time you took drugs?" Matt chuckled and Neil sighed a little. "I didn't take them. But yeah, it's the first time I have anything apart from alcohol in my system. And I'd like it to be the last time, for that matter. I don't remember half the night." Neil finished the water very slowly and bit his lip afterwards. How could they do that to him?

"Hey, you sure about that? I don't judge, Neil. They took me to Columbia last year and if I'm honest, they didn't force me to take anything. I was an addict at that time, so it didn't take a lot of persuasion, but I just want you to know that it's totally fine if you did whatever you did last night voluntarily."

Neil looked up at Matt and he smiled at him. Neil couldn't believe this. Couldn't believe that Matt didn't believe him. He tried not to be mad, but this was frustrating. "I can live with my decisions, Matt, and I wouldn't have called you in the middle of the night if I had simply screwed up. I didn't want this. I don't want you to think I did."

Matt lost his smile for a second and frowned at Neil. Then he shook his head a little and started making coffee for the both of them. "Alright. I'm sorry, Neil. I just wanted to let you know that it wouldn't make a difference to me."

Neil sighed and nodded a little. "Sure… and you said they took you there? What happened?"

Matt smiled again and shrugged a little. "I guess my memories of that night are as good as yours. A hell lot of drugs happened. But as I said, I kinda signed up for it. I can't believe they drugged you. That's so rude. Like, I can see them doing that to anyone else. Any clue why they did that to you, of all people? No offence, but that's not really what you do to friends."

Neil bit his lip and scratched his neck a little. The feeling in his gut was sour and there was a bitter taste in his mouth. "No clue. There might be an explanation to it. At least I hope so," he mumbled and took one mug of coffee. They had done that to him willingly. He didn't know what to think of this.

"I wouldn't count on that if I'm honest. Again, I don't mean to be rude, but I don't thing there was any reason for this apart from… no reason at all? I mean they took Dan, Renee and me last year, on different occasions, but that was probably to evaluate us or something. I don't really see how that would be the case for you. I mean, you spend so much time together."

Neil shrugged again and shook his head a little. "I'd rather not think about this. I really hope we can… I don't even know. Talk this through, maybe? Thought I'm not all the way sure if I want that."

Matt sighed a little and nodded. "I get that, Neil. You should probably just keep your distance for today and talk to them as soon as you're ready. Don't rush this, seriously, you might wanna take this slow."

Neil nodded a little and the two of them sat down on the sofa. Matt started telling him about his night, which was a lot more fun than Neil's, apparently.

After about an hour, Dan showed up im her pyjamas, getting some coffee and cuddling into an armchair.

"I was gonna complain about my hangover, but then I saw you. Damn, where were you last night?" She giggled a little and smiled at Neil in a really tired way. Neil bit his lip a little and shrugged.
"Columbia."

Her smile fell and she looked at Matt. "Are you… the Monsters are still gone. How are you here? What happened? Matt, you let him go!" She was angry and Neil honestly didn't understand that. They hadn't done anything.

Even though she addressed the both of them, Neil answered alone. "Seth picked me up. And the usual Columbia-thing happened, apparently. It's fine, though."

Neil saw how her jaw tensed and he could easily make out her white knuckles from her tight grip on the mug. "I'm going to kill them single handedly! Who does that to a friend? Are they retarded? Neil, are you okay? I can call Abby," Dan offered in the end, but her voice was furious. She looked angrier than Neil had seen her so far.

"I'm fine. Honestly, apart from the headache I feel good," he lied. His head hurt, so did his stomach and almost every muscle. Then there was the feeling of betrayal, of course. He felt like crap.

Dan bit her lip and nodded a little. "Alright… but it's not okay. I'll have a talk with them, anyways," she mumbled. Neil shook his head at that and looked into his mug, not wanting to meet her eyes right then.

"I'll take care of this. You don't need to carry this out for me."

He didn't want to look at her. Neil knew that she wouldn't understand, but he didn't want to explain.

Matt changed the topic to upcoming classes, then. Neil had figured out his schedule a few weeks back, but he hadn't talked about the lecturers yet. Apparently, most of his tutors were nice. His maths-lecturer was a little crazy in Matt's opinion, but so were all else Maths-related-people. Dan said his Literature professor was one of her favourite women on earth so Neil guessed he'd made the right choices.

Matt had just started ranting about one of his professors never reading the papers you gave them properly, when Seth left the bedroom. He didn't greet them at all, just looked at Dan and raised his eyebrows.

"Allison?" he asked. His voice was scratchy and he looked tired. Neil would never understand the relationship between him and Allison, but he thought that Seth had shared a little bit of honesty last night and Neil felt like he got them slightly better now.

Dan smiled at Seth and nodded. "In our room. She should be out of the shower by now!"

Seth shrugged at that answer and rubbed his eyes for a few moments before going for the door and… there was a short knock a second before Seth opened it.

Nicky stood there with a jacket and a pair of shoes and it didn't even take Neil a second to see that those were his.

"Hey… that was fast. I was wondering if you could get Neil? I have some of his stuff from…"

"I was just leaving, so how about we leave this on the floor and you fuck off?"

Nicky looked at Seth and then tried to catch a glimpse at the room behind him, but Seth blocked his view and took Neil's stuff from Nicky. He dropped it onto the floor next to the door and exited the room, giving Nicky no way of seeing Neil at all.
Nicky could have entered the room, considering how it wasn't ever locked, but he decided not to. Neil got up and put his stuff away before sitting down next to Matt again. He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes for a little. How did Seth become more likeable than Nicky? Something was screwed up.

"Neil?" Dan asked silently. She looked so worried, it made him sick.

"I'm fine. Can we not talk about this?" Neil hated how he could hear his own voice shivering. Hated how he was this broken and how the whole world could see it.

The rest of the day was gone in the glimpse of a moment. Matt and Dan treated him very careful and considerate, the others didn't really, although he caught Renee frowning a little often for it to be Neil's imagination.

He made it through lunch with them until he couldn't stand it anymore. Neil barely said a word, but that wasn't unusual. He wasn't talkative in general. He still hated this whole situation.

Neil didn't know what it was in particular, but he didn't want them to look after him. He knew that Matt was trying to be nice and helpful, and so was Dan, but Neil couldn't stand it. It was as if they were waiting for him to explode. Neil didn't understand how they had made it through the first weeks after he came, when he had been hurt so badly, and had managed not to say anything, but were like this now.

He helped cleaning the table before grabbing shoes.


"I'm fine, Matt, you don't have to act this way, seriously. Roof, okay?" he asked and Matt's shoulders relaxed.

"Sorry. Alright, go ahead," he mumbled and swallowed. Neil left before he could feel bad about being the way he was. He couldn't afford that at the moment.

The roof was nice around this time of the day. It was a little to four, so the sun was high up in the sky. Neil felt the warmth prickling on his arms and he was a lot calmer.

As much as he liked the Upperclassmen, he disliked being around loud people for long periods of time, and they were a bunch of loud people.

Neil sat down at the edge of the roof and looked down. He wasn't afraid of heights as much as he respected them as a potential danger, but he had gotten used to this view over the past weeks.

He didn't know for how long he sat there exactly, but the sun was a lot closer to the distant rooftops when he heard the heavy door behind him open. Neil didn't look at him when Andrew sat down next to him. He took the cigarette the other man offered him, but he dropped it down the building.

"Just don't," Neil said and got up. He was glad Andrew didn't follow him, although he really hadn't expected him to.

Neil stood in the hallway in front of his room and felt a little lost. He didn't want to socialise. He wanted to be alone somewhere. Neil looked down himself and considered the sweatpants, trainers and tee he wore. Would work for running.

He didn't know if he meant to go there or if his feet carried him on their own, but a little later, he found himself in front of the stadium panting heavily.
Around two weeks ago Neil had received the pin code and keys by Wymack, and he treasured the key like a promise he feared would break too soon. That was probably why he had it on him at all times. Neil let himself into the stadium and went to get equipment. It was weird, being here all alone, but he liked it. Liked how this seemed to be so familiar but so calm.

He put everything into place for the drills Kevin had shown him at their first single-training and some of the team practices. He wasn't sure if he did them correctly, but he managed to score five out of ten times by now.

Neil knew somewhere in the back of his mind that he was working way too hard, but he couldn't care. He felt the improvement in every aching muscle.

To be honest, he wasn't entirely sure if it was his imagination of the practice, but two hours later, Neil managed seven out of ten. He collapsed onto the ground and just breathed heavily for a few minutes. Seven! That was almost alright. He'd gone from far from it to almost there. That felt amazing!

It took him longer than it should have, to get up and put everything away, lock the stadium again and everything. Neil didn't bother taking a shower, since he'd be running back anyways.

His legs were sore already, but he didn't care too much. His muscles would ache a lot tomorrow, but it had been worth it. He felt so much better than before.

Neil ran back to the Fox Tower in the dark. He hadn't realised that the sun had vanished behind the horizon when he was at the stadium and the cold hadn't bothered him until now. But right then, when he was totally exhausted from training? His lungs were burning and running in the cold wind while being practiced soaked in sweat didn't really help him be more comfortable.

Seeing the Fox Tower get nearer and nearer while he ran gave Neil a nice feeling anyways. He climbed the stairs – why would he take the elevator? He was at the end anyways, those few floors wouldn't change anything about that. Neil entered his room with the shirt clinging to his skin and had intended to go straight to the bathroom, but didn't get very far.


Neil chuckled at the way Matt behaved. He felt great. Training did that, sometimes, when he was emotionally exhausted before.

"Training. I'm fine, don't worry," Neil answered. The others looked at him as if he was a maniac, but Neil didn't care. He showered quickly and got into fresh clothes. The evening was quiet, since it was only Matt, Dan, Renee and him watching a movie. He was still aware of the glances they shot him way too often, but at least he didn't have to deal with all of the talking from before. They shared two pizzas and Neil felt good.

Seven out of ten. He'd show Riko what he had accomplished in so little time. He'd show Kevin that he didn't need him. He'd show the Foxes that taking him in was no mistake.

Sunday passed just the way Saturday had. Neil had been on the roof for a little, studying some information on his classes, what they expected him to do. He left when Andrew came to join him. Neil didn't want to face them yet.

There was a knock on the door when it was about time for lunch, but no one bothered answering and
Neil supposed Nicky didn't want to push. Maybe knowing that there would be consequences.

Neil left an hour after lunch, ran to the stadium, and pushed his body to limits he didn't know existed. He stared with six out of ten again. One time close to the end, he managed eight, but Neil was a steady seven today. He went back to the Fox Tower again, running, then showering, then crashing onto the sofa with Matt and Seth. The girls were in their room, apparently, preparing everything for the first day of school tomorrow. The boys didn't really have to prepare anything. They each had a folder with a pen attached to it on their desks, so that was enough.

Honestly, sitting between Seth and Matt was a weird feeling. Not only because Neil felt like a dwarf between them, but also because he had let both of them in, some way. They knew so much about him, his nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks, yet they had chosen to take him in, to take care of him.

Monday was a harsh wake up. The holidays had been nice, though the abundance of morning-practice and afternoon-training with the team had been exhausting. This? This was hell.

Neil started the day with pre-class-practice. He walked down the stairs of the Fox Tower with the Upperclassmen. The Monsters were in their car, but Nicky waited beside it, as if he was waiting for Neil to take the middle seat as usual. It hurt a little, ignoring them. His friends, that were actually waiting for him. Still, Neil wasn't ready to brush over Columbia as if nothing happened.

Practice itself was different from before. On the one hand, Neil hadn't ever been this exhausted. Training all by himself had been hard and he felt his muscles ache with almost every move. On the other hand, this was the first time Neil was reserved to play with certain members on the team; passes didn't seem to work between him and the Monsters anymore. Kevin screamed at him a lot, for not catching passes, for not passing, not scoring.

Honestly, he wasn't doing as bad of a job. Neil had improved quite a lot in the past weeks, growing more and more confident in his new position. But Kevin pointing out flaws in the way he held the racquet just like that, the way he treated everyone on the team, after this weekend? It just didn't make Neil want to improve.

Kevin was enraged by the end of this session, but Neil didn't even look at him. He chose to ignore everything Kevin said. Neil didn't want to pick fights on court, but he didn't want to interact with him at the moment.

Training ended and classes started. Neil had always liked Maths as a subject, so it was fun, honestly. A girl next to him smiled when she sat down and checked the front of the room. Their lecturer was nowhere to be seen yet.

"Hey, Neil Josten, right? I'm Marissa, one of the Vixens," she introduced herself. Neil smiled at her a little. He didn't want to be rude, but he didn't exactly feel like socialising and being recognised was weird. Then again, the four tattooed to his cheekbone didn't really leave a lot of room for interpretation.

"Hey. Nice to meet you," he said, but looked to the front of the room when the lecturer entered it.

"We're all looking forward to seeing you perform! Honestly, the whole team is convinced that you'll to great, and all of us are totally freaking because of the game on Friday," Marissa continued, though Neil wasn't looking at her anymore.
Neil thought pretty much everything about this was strange. He had tried to make it clear that he wasn't in the mood for talking, but she talked on. What she said was quite odd as well. The way she referred to herself and her team as 'us', the way she seemed to feel about Neil's transfer, the way she seemed to be so genuinely exited. Those were some 'firsts' for Neil.

"Thank you. We're all pretty nervous as well, I guess," he mumbled and looked at the lecturer who just started talking. Neil did his best to take notes, but honestly? His thoughts were with the Monsters, training, drills and the game this Friday. Neil wanted to succeed so badly but he doubted he would.

"So… the Vixens are planning to throw a party on Friday, since it's the first game of the season. You'll be there, won't you? I'll be there," Marissa interrupted his thoughts again. Neil shrugged a little. He'd have to do a hell lot of training but he feared that he wouldn't be able to improve as much without Kevin tutoring him.

"Neil, I'm sorry, is everything alright?" she asked then. Neil actually looked up at that and tried smiling again.

"I think I'll be there. Sorry, lost in thoughts," he answered, before concentrating on the lesson a little. His head was all over Exy.

By the end of the period, Marissa had given up trying to talk to him and Neil was pretty glad. He needed to go through the drills mentally.

Neil went to the Fox Tower with only little more knowledge on Mathematics, but he didn't care too much. Both Matt and Seth were still in class, so Neil spent the time on the roof.

He'd learned to love the view during his times with Andrew up here. Neil missed the nights with him, the cigarettes, the turns they took in finding out more about each other, the hurtful truths and the harmless stories he had kept them both busy with.

Then again, Neil didn't want to go back there without an apology. Or, if not that, maybe an explanation. He needed something in order to feel comfortable around these guys again.

An hour later, he went back to his room and tidied up the kitchen a little, just to have something to do. It wasn't long until the Upperclassmen started entering the room one after another, and Renee and Dan brought pizza with them.

They complained about classmates and teachers, asked Neil everything about his first day and cheered when he mentioned Marissa briefly. Apparently, talking to a girl was a big thing.

"So there is a party?" Neil made sure and they nodded.

"Yeah, we would have asked you to come earlier, it's just that…" Dan stopped and bit her lip a little. Allison finished the sentence for her. "The Monsters are in Columbia after games. We thought you'd be gone, but now that horse is out of the barn, I guess."

Neil nodded a little and tried to shush the feeling welling up inside him. "Right. So all of you are going?"

They nodded and Matt nudged Neil softly. "And you're coming with us. This is gonna be fun!"

They changed the topic and Neil was glad not to be in the center of attention anymore.

A little later, the girls left and they all changed into more comfortable stuff for training. Neil was used
to those morning-and-afternoon practices, but the routine in addition to college was harder to keep up with.

He rode to the stadium in Matt's truck again, and gladly, the others left him alone a little. He didn't want to talk. Neil didn't feel like socialising. He yearned for the silence in the Monsters' room whenever they were playing video games. He needed to be around people without the constant chatter. He wanted to choose between those two groups again!

The locker room was silent, but not in the way he wanted it to be. This was uncomfortable and full of tension.

"No matter what happened between us, I want to see you perform better, Nathaniel," Kevin said on the way out. Neil ignored him. He didn't want that right then.

Training went a little like morning-practice. Kevin shouted at all of them, most of them obeyed.

"Nathaniel, that's not the right angle, you know that! What are you doing?" Kevin asked in a furious way. Neil tilted the racquet into the wrong direction a little more. He didn't care.

Kevin walked towards him across the field. "Nathaniel, I'm serious, you're gonna screw up the first game like this," he went on and Neil just turned away.

Dan appeared beside him and smiled a little forced. "Neil, I get that you're upset, I do, but could you try and not mess up training? We really need this before the game," she mumbled and nudged him softly. Neil pressed his lips together.

"I don't want to work with them at the moment," he answered and she bit her lip.

"Our team dynamics are pretty screwed the way they are, we can't really afford anything like this at the moment," she tried again and Neil looked into her eyes now.

"Why don't you tell them? Because I honestly don't think that this is my fault."

Neil could see the thoughts running behind her eyes. He knew that he was being unfair. Their friendship shouldn't be a reason for her to allow this kind of behaviour. She should be screaming at him the way Kevin was, for messing this up.

"So, Nathaniel, can we go on playing?" Kevin asked and Dan nudged Neil's shoulder softly.

"Do your best, Neil. Make us proud," she smiled and ran back to her position.

"Alright, new drill, we stay in the two teams we have and pass four times, from dealer to…"

Neil stopped listening. He didn't care. He didn't want to care. Exy was one of the single things that had kept him alive during the time at the Nest but the Monsters had turned it into something sour.

"Nathaniel, what the fuck?!" Kevin screamed at him when the ball passed centimetres beside his hip.

Neil watched the ball as it hit the floor a few feet behind him and smiled a little when it came to a halt. He scooped it up and passed it to Matt in a way that was horrific considering the technique but so that the ball still arrived.

Kevin was boiling with rage around ten minutes later, and Neil knew that the others were partly annoyed by Neil's attitude, but mostly irritated by the level of Kevin's insults.

"Oh my fucking God, Nathaniel, you're gonna screw all of us over by being this useless on court.
You won't improve like this. Riko is gonna laugh at you! When will you do what I tell you to do?"

Neil actually looked up at that and shrugged at little. "How about as soon as you start using my name?" he offered and Kevin stared into his eyes from the other side of the field before answering loud enough for all of the Foxes to hear him.

"Alright. So, would you start playing now, Four?"

Chapter End Notes

ONE:
This week has been a mess for me! Sorry for this single update! I don't know if you're gonna get another one this week, I'm super busy! I'll do my best!

TWO:
AsfaHan; THANK YOU (forever, always, as often as possible!) for pretty much everything! The answers, the questions, the timelines, the reading, the songs, everything!

THREE:
You guys! I can't with you! Those comments! Love them! I'm always hyped to see that there's a new one! I love answering questions and discussing ideas! I love seeing what you like and what you want me to improve! PLEASE KEEP DOING THAT IT MAKES MY DAY A HUNDRED TIMES BETTER!!!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

KEVIN CALLED NEIL FOUR A SECOND AGO WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS CHAPTER WILL BE ABOUT?

That's as much of a summary I am willing to give ;)

Chapter Notes

I just pasted the chapter into the side and realised where chapter 8 left off omg. I'm so sorry! Such a bad person!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It echoed in his head a few times after Kevin said it. *Four.*

The court was dead silent. All of them were looking between him and Kevin and Neil himself? Neil wanted to vomit and to punch the living crap out of Kevin and to scream and to fight and to run.

His racquet shivered in Neil's hand and his whole body tensed.

"No, I promised myself to never play on the same team as Riko again, so this is obviously the wrong place for me." His voice shivered and he flung his racquet into Kevin's direction. The man was to far away to be hurt by this, even if it managed to hit him. Neil didn't care. He left.

It seemed like all of them had waited for him to move. Dan said something about being unfair, Matt looked conflicted between comforting Neil and hitting Kevin. Seth didn't have that problem, he said something, received and insulting answer and shoved against Kevin. The cousins remained in their spots until Seth and Kevin were full on fighting. Neil closed the door behind him, shutting them all out. Allison was on her way to break up the fight while Andrew was threatening Seth, Renee was halfway across the fielt, apparently coming for Neil.

Neil didn't want to know anything about this. He was still shivering with… what exactly?

"Josten, where are you going?" Wymack asked when Neil just dropped his gear to the ground. He didn't care, Kevin could tidy up Neil's mess for once in his life.

"Away," Neil answered and opened the next door. He just wanted to get out of there.

"Need a drive?" Wymack offered and Neil shook his head. Wymack's voice was a lot less barking and friendlier than he'd ever believed it could be, but he wasn't in the mood.

"No, I'm fine. I won't be training with Kevin anytime soon," he said, opening the door. Neil didn't wait for the rest of Wymack's *We really can't afford this, there's a game on Friday*-speech, he simply ran through the hallways until he was outside. Neil didn't run to the Fox Tower this time. He ran farther and farther, until his legs were wobbly, until his breath threatened to give up on him, before
Kevin would kill him for exhausting his body like this, but Neil didn't care. Kevin. Bastard. Neil had always thought that they had been on the same side, both tyrannised by Riko, both fucking sick of him. And now Kevin treated him as if he was someone better. As if he was Riko. Neil wanted to punch something, someone, anyone. Kevin. But he didn't want to do it with people watching. He wanted to let everything out, to fight dirty, to show him what he had done.

Neil arrived back at the Fox Tower with the sun almost touching the horizon. It must have been around seven pm.

He was drenched in sweat when he entered their room. Neil should honestly change something about busting through the door like this all the time.

The Upperclassmen looked at him and pretty much all of them seemed to want to say something. Allison did. "Why don't we talk after the shower you're gonna take right now? You smell disgusting!"

A bit of the tension evaporated and Neil nodded. He showered for longer than he needed to, just because he didn't want to face them yet.

After thirty minutes, he sat down next to Matt on the sofa.

"How are you? And don't even think of giving us the 'I'm fine'-nonsense! That joke is getting old," Dan started and Neil smiled a little.

"But I am. I'm also angry and exhausted and frustrated, but I'm fine."

They sighed a little and looked at him as if he was a child.

"What happened when I was gone?" He asked after a few seconds.

"Allison and Dan broke up the fight and we trained on. Just… the Monsters went pretty 'Neil Josten' on Kevin. They barely talked to him, wouldn't meet his eyes. Andrew probably almost broke Kevin's shins by all the balls he aimed at them," Matt updated him, and Neil frowned. The Monsters had no right to be on his side after Columbia. They shouldn't pretend to do this for him.

"Why did Andrew aim balls at Kevin?" he asked after a little time. Allison shrugged and rolled her eyes.

"He does that sometimes, when someone pisses him off. It's usually Aaron or me or the team as a whole. He never hurt Kevin before."

Neil bit his lip at that and nodded. He didn't know what to make of this, but he felt a little better.

"Did you run the whole time? How are you alive? Your legs must be burning," Matt smiled after a while.

Neil chuckled a little and shrugged. "They feel a little exhausted, but it's mostly fine. I actually like running!"

Matt smiled brightly at that and nodded. "I'd like it too, if I were the fastest player in Class I Exy! That's your official title now, by the way. NCAA even wrote it on their website!" Matt exclaimed and Neil laughed a little more. He was quite sure that Matt knew more about Neil's career than he did.
"By the way, Coach wants you to spend your free time at the stadium. He says you don't have to attend practice tomorrow if you're there every spare second," Dan told him a little later. Neil raised an eyebrow. Wymack let him ditch practice? It didn't really matter, since Neil had told him he wouldn't train with Kevin. Wymack had said no, Neil wouldn't have attended practice anyways. It was weird to Neil that Wymack actually allowed this. That his wishes weren't brushed over.

"I can do that. Thank you," he said and his chest felt a little heavy. Why did he feel guilty? He'd been so ready to just disobey Wymack, had been ready to face the storm that would be the consequence, and now? This was weird.

"What are you doing? Neil, I'm sure he didn't mean tonight! Tomorrow after class will be fine, seriously," Dan said alarmed when Neil put on his shoes again.

Neil shrugged a little. "I'll only be gone for… an hour or two, maybe. I missed a lot of training today. I'll just catch up, yeah?"

Matt bit his lip and looked at him for a long moment. "Do you need a drive? You can have the truck. Neil, one of these days you'll fall apart from all the running, your muscles can't do this for too long!"

Neil actually considered that for a second. His muscles were burning with every movement anyways, and he couldn't afford to be hurt on Friday.

"I'll take it slow, promise," he said. Neil wanted to go there alone.

They sighed heavily and nodded collectively.

Neil left for the stadium after that. He didn't run this time, knowing he shouldn't take his body apart that way. Matt was right in that respect!

He entered the stadium and smiled when he set the first step onto the court after changing into his gear. Whatever Kevin had broken inside him by making that stupid comment was starting to mend. Neil knew that this was a little crazy, but Exy did this to him.

Neil prepared several drills and started going through them one at a time. His legs hurt incredibly much and the fact that he'd been running half the day didn't really help. He felt great anyways.

"This is a lot better, Nathaniel, but you should try using a little less force. That way you'll be even more precise."

Neil flinched heavily at the voice behind him. He hadn't realised anyone was there. And of course, it was Kevin.

As soon as he recovered from the shock, Neil tensed. His whole body flexed and his fist trembled around the Exy racquet.

"Leave me alone, Kevin, or I swear I'll hurt you," he pressed out while his jaw clenched.

"I came to say that I'm sorry. For everything. I thought we might be able to talk?" Kevin's voice was a little thinner than usually and Neil stared at the ground. He didn't want this.

"I told you to leave. Are you deaf or as bad as Riko at even considering demands?"

Kevin's shoulders fell a little at that and he bit his lip. "I'm sorry! I just—I don't know. Nathaniel?"

Neil dropped his racquet and turned around now, looking at Kevin and shoving against his
shoulders. Kevin didn't even raise his arms, didn't fight back, he just looked down at Neil.

"Don't call me that! Leave! I don't want to hear a single word! Seriously, whatever happened in Columbia had me thinking I was wrong about coming here, but what to you did today? I guess I simply walked to another Riko. So please, please, go away."

Neil turned away again, picking up his racquet. He took a rattling breath and tried to concentrate. He hated Kevin for taking this moment of peace away from him. Hated that he made him scream and that this made him so angry he thought he was gonna throw up.

"Columbia was wrong, alright? I shouldn't have let them do it, I should have said something against it, should have warned you. It just didn't seem to be a big deal until you ran away. That's when I understood what we had done wrong," Kevin started, but Neil had gone back to ignoring the taller boy already. He was still mad and hearing this didn't make it better. Kevin's realisation came too late to mean anything.

Neil did some drills and he was pretty aware of Kevin so close behind him, following every step.

"And today was screwed up. I know I messed up. Honestly, I was so mad at you for ignoring the advice I gave and everything. I want all of us to succeed and the thought of you throwing away all that potential made me furious, but what I said was unfair."

Neil finished the drill with seven out of ten successful tries and set up another one. He didn't want to hear it. He wanted him to go.

"Come on! I am so glad you came here when you did. We went through so much together and I can't even tell you how relieved I am now that you're safe. I don't want you to think I'm another…" Kevin sighed and swallowed a little before talking on. He had troubles saying Riko's name even over half a year after leaving him. "Another Riko and I know I screwed up today. Please, Neil, talk to me."

He froze at that and didn't trust his ears. "Say that again," he demanded, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

"I'm working on this, Neil. I promise. We'll make this work, yeah?"

Neil turned around now and Kevin made a step into his direction. They looked at each other and Neil didn't know what to think. He hoped Kevin was serious. Hoped that this meant something.

Kevin came closer again, opening his arms. Offering a hug.

He shook his head a little and pressed his lips together while raising his racquet into Kevin's general direction. "Don't waste this, I'm serious. Don't ever do that again."

Kevin didn't push, but he swallowed a little when Neil dropped his racquet and pulled him closer when Neil leaned in and wrapped his arms around Kevin.

"I promise," Kevin assured him again, and they stayed like this for a few seconds before letting go of each other.

"How about we go home now and do the other drills tomorrow?" Kevin asked when Neil picked up his racquet again. Neil nodded at that and Kevin waited outside while he changed in the locker room.

Neil felt strangely relaxed when he locked the stadium behind them and stepped out onto the parking lot with Kevin.
He saw Andrew's car standing there but the goalkeeper was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm driving. Get into the car, your muscles must be close to committing suicide at this point!"

Neil faked a smile. He didn't think this was funny, but he wanted to work on this with Kevin. He got into the car and Kevin started driving.

"Why didn't you say anything about Columbia? You should have warned me," Neil said after a while. His anger had subsided but the confusion was still there.

"They did that to almost every member of the team last year, before I came. So… I don't know. I didn't think you'd have to be forced to do anything and honestly, it didn't seem to be wrong until we realised you were gone." Kevin didn't even shoot him glances while saying this, he stared at the road with an empty expression.

"What happened? I don't remember too much."

Kevin sighed at that and shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. Andrew was with you pretty much all the time, Nicky was there as well. You might wanna talk to them?"

Neil nodded a little and swallowed. Kevin was right. He'd ask them about this.

Kevin pulled into the parking lot and got out of the car. They walked up the stairs together and he considered Neil for a few seconds.

"So, we're good?" he asked lowly. Neil nodded a little and sighed.

"We will be, at least. If we work this through," Neil answered and Kevin patted his shoulder shortly.

"Great. That's good. So… what do you think about dinner?"

Neil shrugged a little helplessly. "Matt ordered a pizza for me, I think they're waiting. But lunch tomorrow?"

Kevin smiled a little and nodded. "Sure. Enjoy!" He entered his own room and Neil went to theirs.

Slices of pizza were distributed between the five of them, with an additional plate waiting, probably for Neil. He sat down next to Matt on the sofa, Dan on the other side, Renee in one of the armchairs, Allison and Seth in the other one as usual.

"You look less dead than usually. Everything fine?" Matt asked and handed him the remaining plate.

Neil smiled a little and nodded. "I'm fine. It's great, don't worry."

They ate while watching a movie Allison had chosen – all by herself, but nobody protested.

The girls left an hour into the night, and when he'd finished cleaning the table and plates with the guys, Neil went for the door again.

"Neil?" Seth asked, irritated. He was still confused by the comfort Neil found on the roof.

"The usual. I'll be back soon but you don't have to wait for me," Neil explained while walking out.

"Have fun," Matt yelled after him from the kitchen. Neil laughed a little at that. He was a lot calmer now that Kevin and him weren't arguing anymore.
Neil climbed the stairs and for what felt like the first time in forever — though it had only been last Friday — he didn't turn back around when he saw Andrew laying there.

"Hey," he almost whispered, sitting down next to where Andrew laid, and taking the cigarette from the blond boy's lips. Andrew didn't comment on any of this, he kept his eyes closed and lit another cigarette as if nothing had happened.

Neil watched his cigarette for a few minutes, until it burned down to the filter. He enjoyed the smell, to some degree. Liked, how familiar this felt. But it wasn't the way it used to be. Columbia was still heavy on his chest.

"Can you explain why you did what you did in Columbia?" Neil asked after a while. He thought perhaps if he understood this, he'd be able to deal with it.

"Last I checked, we didn't talk anymore. Why the sudden change of mind?" Andrew didn't look at him when asking this, but Neil knew he had the other boy's attention and for right then, that was enough.

"Kevin and I are good again. I was hoping to get over this by understanding what happened. I don't really want to be mad at anyone, but then again, I'm mad at you guys and I'd like to change that," he answered. The best way to get truths from Andrew was providing him with truths in the first place, Neil had learned that by now.

"It was about two sides of trust," Andrew said. He opened his eyes, then, and watched some clouds slide over the sky slowly.

"Could you explain that?" Neil asked carefully. He knew that too many questions made Andrew shut down completely, but he didn't understand one last bit of what Andrew said right then.

"I wanted to know whether we could still trust Kevin to be on our side all the way. That's the first side. Trusting. The second side is being trusted. Wanted to see how much you'd let us in," Andrew said in a monotonous voice and Neil sighed.

"You are aware that I don't trust you anymore after that night, aren't you?" Neil asked and Andrew shrugged.

"Talk to Nicky, that might change some things. Even if it doesn't, that's your decision. Then again, I don't believe you. You trust me with your life, I proved that I can take care of it. You trust me, even if you don't want to," Andrew answered in a clear and steady voice, as if he was stating facts rather than making assumptions.

Neil thought about that for a little. He was right, after all. He still trusted Andrew with his life, with his safety. He didn't trust him as a friend anymore, but he relied on him too much on a professional basis for it to be anything but trust.

"What exactly happened that night?" Neil asked then. He really wanted those answers. He needed to fill that night's horror and clues with real information in order to feel better.

"You lost my interest in the conversation, so would you either say something relevant or shut up?"

Neil frowned at that question and felt uncomfortable again. Seriously, Andrew was so hard to read sometimes.

"Is all of this a game to you? Because I trusted you guys and I can't really blame the others, but you know how I feel about some situations and I woke up in a bed with a man sleeping on top of me
after being drugged against my will and I just kind of expected you to…"

"I don't care. Deal with it and plant a tree to replace the oxygen you waste with all those insignificant words."

Neil swallowed at that and leaned back until he was laying there himself, looking at the stars. He had tried to explain his reactions and ideas to Andrew and the other one just shut him out.

"That wasn't fair," he whispered after a while.

Neil heard Andrew sigh beside him. "Fairness is a social construct and an illusion. If you want to discuss these feelings, go see Bee again. I told you how to cope with those situations a while back, don't whine about not following the advice you received."

He wondered if this was Andrew being rude or his normal self. Neil had moments when he felt like he knew Andrew's messed up way of interacting with others, and then there were these moments when he couldn't read him at all.

Andrew got up a little too early for Neil.

"One more cigarette?" he asked lowly. Neil didn't want to go back inside yet. He wanted to calm that storm of unrest Andrew had triggered to start inside him.

Andrew made an annoyed sound, but he lit two more cigarettes anyways. "It's still pretentious and a waste of my money," he said while handing one cigarette to Neil.

Neil shrugged a little. He was quite happy about the seven additional minutes of watching the sky. Neither of them said anything after that, and honestly, that was alright. He took deep breaths and the acrid smell in addition to the cold night's air did great things to calm him down.

They went downstairs after both of them had finished their cigarettes and Neil entered his own room, changed into sleeping clothes and went to bed silently so he wouldn't wake Matt or Seth.

This hadn't been what he had hoped for, but it was probably semi-alright for a talk with Andrew in general. They'd have to work this out further, but the first attempt had gone into the right direction.

Neil was woken by Matt the next morning. He should really cut back on those nights on the roof, they cost him many precious hours of sleep.

Then again, nightmares kept him up during the nights he didn't spend on the roof. And while his talks with Andrew were either hurtful or non-existent, the company calmed him enough to sleep a lot better at night.

"Neil, practice starts in twenty minutes, we're leaving," Matt announced.

Neil groaned a little and got up.

"I'll be quick, just a second," he mumbled and Matt frowned at him.

"Coach said you don't have to attend team practice today, he won't be mad if you stay behind," Matt reminded him when Neil went into the bathroom.

Right, he hadn't told them about him and Kevin being friendly again.
"I want to be there. Give me five minutes!" he said before locking the door behind him and getting ready.

The others looked confused when Neil climbed into the truck.

"I didn't think you'd come, honestly. Kevin was a piece of shit yesterday," Allison greeted him and Neil shrugged a little.

"He was emotional," Neil answered and smiled a little.

"And it's not like he's much less of a piece of shit in general", Seth added and they laughed. Neil thought it was funny how everyone was annoyed with Kevin's obsession with Exy but how all of them valued his opinion on their game anyways.

They went into the stadium and Wymack raised an eyebrow when he saw Neil with them. "Unexpected. Want me to make two teams so you don't have to play together?"

Neil bit his lip at the offer and shook his head slightly. "It's fine, thanks. We're good."

The Monsters arrived a minute later, and Kevin messed up Neil's hair when he walked past him, chuckling a little when he saw the look on his face.

They were far from fine, and Neil knew that this was at least fifty percent playing pretend, but he was okay with this. With Kevin treating him the way you're supposed to treat your brother.

The Upperclassmen were beyond confused and all of them seemed ready to say something, but no one did.

Aaron looked between them one time and raised an eyebrow. "When exactly did this happen?"

Kevin shrugged. "I might not be the assistant coach anymore, but that doesn't mean I won't make all of you run additional laps if we don't start practice in three minutes."

"Three? Day, we have to change into other clothes, how do you expect us to…" Allison started, but Kevin answered "Two minutes fifty five, get moving."

Training went a lot better than yesterday, which was mainly because Neil didn't mess up every single move in order to annoy Kevin. The others might not understand what had happened between him and Kevin, but they approved anyways.

It wasn't perfect because Kevin and Seth didn't ever waste an opportunity to fight, but Neil could see the team making progress anyways. He found himself a lot more comfortable in his position by now. Neil might be a bad Striker, but he was great at Exy in general, so his play was alright by then. He wouldn't drag the Foxes down too much on Friday.

Nicky caught up with Neil after training, when he went for Matt's truck with the Upperclassmen. "Hey, uh, Neil? So… like… I was wondering if you wanted to talk? In general? Because…"

The others went into the truck and gave the two of them a little privacy like that.

Neil looked up at Nicky and frowned at the taller guy. Nicky seemed so insecure and that was probably the first time Neil saw him without a brightly shining smile on his lips.

"Sure. That would be great. When?" Neil didn't feel too good about the boys at the moment, but he didn't want to stay mad. He wanted them back as friends and if that meant he had to take a few steps
into their direction, he was fine with that.

Nicky's face lit up a little at that. "Lunch? Or after lunch? How long are your lessons today? We could go get some coffee somewhere or… I don't know, do something fun? We should really talk about what happened and honestly, I'm sorry and…”

Neil nodded slightly at Nicky's words. He liked how cheerful the other boy got in front of him and he was glad that Nicky seemed to actually feel bad about what happened. This was a good point to start with.

"My class ends around noon, I'll be there for lunch. And we can talk anywhere, I don't really care. See you then?"

Nicky nodded and smiled, fiddling with his fingers. "Great. Have fun. See you then!" Nicky turned around and went for Andrew's car while Neil entered the truck.

"All good?" Dan asked while looking a little concerned. Neil nodded and smiled very slightly. Actually solving conflicts for the first time in his life was quite relaxing. He made a mental note of this.

Literature was fun. Neil had always liked reading as an escape from reality and analysing text, reading messages into words, interpreting what was presented, those were things he was good at.

The professor was a middle aged woman dressed in at least four layers of clothing. She talked about attendance being fifteen percent of their final grade, which made most students groan. Neil didn't have a problem with that. Professor Miller went on by distributing reading lists, saying that they had to read at least twenty of those books in the first term and Neil made a mental note on looking up the summaries of them. He wouldn't have the time to read a book a week!

Seth and Allison were making out in the boys' room when Neil went there in order to drop his stuff, so he decided to leave before both of them would kill him.

The other Upperclassmen were still in class or something, considering that the girls' room was locked, which only happened when they were all occupied.

Neil took a deep breath before looking at the Monsters' room. He wasn't entirely sure if he wanted to spend time with them casually, if he was ready for this, but he didn't feel like being alone and he wanted to go back to normal with them, so…

He opened the door to their room and found the twins inside. Aaron was reading a book that looked too scientific to be a fun read and Andrew was on the other side of the room, texting someone or playing on his phone while eating a chocolate bar.

"Shut up, I'm learning. Kevin's in class, Nicky's in the room, keep your mouth shut or leave," Aaron greeted him while highlighting a sentence in his book and writing something down next to it.

Neil bit his lip at that and nodded a little. He wondered how Aaron had stuff to learn this early in the semester, but that was probably the way it was for Sophomores.

He went through the room slowly, entering the bedroom. Neil felt like being around a little positivity and with all the Upperclassmen gone, that left exactly one person for him to talk to.

Nicky was sitting on his bed with his legs crossed while looking at the screen of his laptop that was placed on his pillow. He looked up when he heard Neil and honestly, Neil had never seen the other one so happy.
"Am I… sorry, you're talking, right?" Neil muttered and wanted to leave again. He'd manage to stay on his own for a little. Or stay silent with the twins.

"Who's that?" the man Nicky was skyping with asked in German. Neil had picked up several languages at High School because apart from Exy, it was something he was best at. Neil could understand the man pretty well as soon as he figured which language he was using.

"The new one I told you about. Neil Josten, remember? Hey Neil, do you want to say hi to my future husband?" He skipped back to English for the last bit and Neil was a little uncomfortable. He'd come to work stuff over with Nicky, now he was just pretending nothing happened? Then again, he was calling his boyfriend, and Neil didn't want to start drama just then.

Neil moved closer to Nicky slowly and waved at the screen. "Hey," he mumbled and looked at Nicky uncertainly.

"God, he's prettier than you said before! Are there only hot guys on your team?"

Nicky chuckled at that and Neil swallowed a little. He didn't want him to know that he understood them, for some reason.

"I'll be outside, yeah? Just… talk to you later," Neil mumbled and turned around. Nicky shook his head a little.

"You can stay! Erik has to leave for school anyways. We were just catching up a little," he said in English, before turning back to the screen and going back to German.

"I love you… and we'll talk about Christmas further. My mother really wants you to come!"

"It's August, Erik, we have months left! Love you, too! Now go and learn stuff!"

"Say hi to the twins! Love you more!" Erik answered and the screen went black.

Nicky smiled at his laptop for a few seconds before closing it. Neil could see the longing in his whole posture. He didn't want to make him sad or more reserved by starting this conversation.

"Isn't he cute?" Nicky asked and sighed happily.

Neil shrugged a little at that before sitting down next to Nicky. "You look happy together," he answered and Nicky nodded.

"We are! But that's probably not what you wanna talk about, right?"

Neil shrugged a little helplessly and shook his head. "We don't have to have this talk right now. But I do have many questions if I'm honest."

Nicky smiled a little and nodded. "Go ahead. Wanna stay here? Because I do!" He laid down on the bed, stretching his arms and legs out a little, while still leaving a little space for Neil to sit on.

Since Neil didn't mind the bedroom, he just nodded a little and took a deep breath.

"So, Columbia, right? I don't remember too much of the night. What happened? Also, I'm having weird memories I can't quite place and I'm not sure if some things happened or didn't and… could you just walk me through the night?" he asked silently. Neil didn't know why exactly, but he felt the need to offer some truths before demanding them, and those were hard truths.

Nicky bit his lip and looked at Neil for a little. "I'm sorry for what we did, by the way. Just… I want
Neil nodded and offered Nicky a weak smile. He really wanted to fill the blanks.

"Alright, it started at Sweetie's, ice cream, drugs. You didn't want to take yours, so we were like… I don't know. We wanted to know who you are, so Andrew asked Roland to put pretty much everything he had available in there. We were all drunk somewhere close to that point. So… do you remember this? Or nothing at all?" Nicky asked.

Neil had closed his eyes to picture the situations in his head. He remembered this. The drugs and drinks. "That's about the point where it starts blurring. Did we dance? You said something about dancing, right?"

Nicky sighed a little. "I wanted to, but Andrew was so possessive for some reason. As always, right? But after a while he was gone, getting new drinks or something. We danced and… alright, honestly, I don't remember too well either! Just…" Nicky stopped in a defensive way and took a deep breath. Neil fiddled with his fingers a little and braced himself for the next part. He wanted to know.

"It's not too bad, honestly. Alright, so I kissed you, yeah? Sorry about that, but you were so dependent and drunk and could barely stand on your own anymore, and I just… couldn't not do it. You should have seen the look on your face, the way you held on to my arms, it was… wait. Not the point. Uh… right," Nicky mumbled and laughed a little forced.

Neil swallowed at that part. He had hoped that this was no memory. That this was a side effect of the drugs, some hallucination. He just didn't think Nicky would do that to him. Didn't want it to be true. Neil felt exploited but collected himself and nodded. He felt like leaving, but he wanted to fill the gaps first.

"What happened next?" Neil barely recognised his own voice. What he heard was a scratchier and more apathetic version of what it was like usually.

"I don't know, if I'm honest. You kinda froze and started mumbling stuff. I didn't understand it, honestly. Guess you mistook me for someone else or something, you were drunk after all. And so I hugged you, thinking you'd calm down, but you were honestly close to breaking down. Andrew almost broke my neck pulling me away. Don't know why. If I didn't know better I'd think he had the hots for you." Nicky chuckled at that and Neil bit his lip hard.

How could anyone be this cheerful after admitting that he had exploited a situation in that way? He didn't understand Nicky at all, sometimes. Didn't understand how he managed being like this!

Neil took a deep breath and nodded. He'd read a quote once, that said "To understand everything is to forgive everything". He would never learn to forgive Riko, because he didn't even attempt to understand him. He didn't want to. But he understood what Jean had done, do some degree, and Neil was learning to forgive him as well. He would be able to forgive Nicky for this some day. He didn't understand it yet, wasn't even sure if he could, if he wanted to, but he was ready to let him in a little. Not happy about it, but ready.

"Go on," he demanded after calming down a little.

"Alright, that's honestly pretty much the end of the night. Andrew talked to you, you kinda broke down, I think. He practically carried you to the car and we drove home. No clue who drove, all of us were so drunk. Glad we made it out there alive! And I had the biggest bed, so we had you sleep there with me. You were pretty much gone mentally for a little but babbled about life in general. Only about school and Exy at first, but after a while you started mumbling, darker topics this time.
Riko, your father. Nothing in particular, just names, places. And… then I woke up without you beside me. That's the story of the night."

Neil scratched the bandages on his wrists a little when he heard this part of the story. He didn't feel anything. He wanted to be mad. Furious. Sad. Betrayed. But he felt strangely estranged from the situation. Talking about his father should have made him anxious, but he didn't care too much. Not at all.

Though… was that true? He didn't feel nothing. There was an underlying hurt under his skin. Hurt, creeping in, filling the void.

"Neil?"

He took a shaking breath and shook his head while getting up. "I'll be running."

Nicky looked a little hurt at that, and sat up slowly. "Hey, I get that you're still mad, but I'm genuinely sorry! But… are you alright?"

"I'm fine. And I'm leaving." He forced his fingers to stay away from the badges. What had Andrew said? The situation he was in was never everything. There was always more. More to feel, more to explore. This wasn't important. There was something else.

Why did this hurt so badly? He had expected that kind of answer, after all.

But he had hoped to be wrong.

Nicky swallowed loudly and bit his lip. "Neil, why can't we talk about this further?"

Neil shrugged at that and opened the door. "I don't want to, and that should be enough of a reason not to do it, right?"

Nicky opened his mouth to say something in response, but Neil shut the door behind him.

"Could you try being even louder and disturb me further? Thank you," Aaron bitched at him. Andrew shot Neil an interested look.

"I'll be running," Neil answered the question Andrew didn't ask, and for some reason, Aaron responded.

"You won't. You're muscles are sore already and if you're over-exercising even more, you won't play on Friday. Have fun being killed by at least four teammates and Wymack."

Neil sighed at that. Aaron was right, but he didn't want to stay. He needed to go out.

"We're getting lunch", Andrew said, after a few seconds.

"Nobody asked. Seriously, shush!" Aaron answered. Andrew didn't even shrug, he just got his keys and went to the door. It took Neil a second that 'we' meant him and Andrew in this case.

"I want to be alone, if I'm honest," Neil said quietly, but Andrew left the door open on his way out. Neil followed him slowly, rolling his eyes at Aaron's 'Thank God'.

He climbed into the passenger seat and scratched the bandages on his wrists again. Neil was uncomfortable.

"What's your pulse?" Andrew asked, after starting the engine. Neil was glad to be able to leave the
Fox Tower, the rooms, just for a little while. He frowned at Andrew's question and measured a minute on his phone while counting the small beats he felt on his fingertips when he pressed them into his jawbone.

"Sixty five per minute. Why?"

Andrew didn't ever look at him while talking, which wasn't too unusual these days. "Do that instead of scratching. They won't heal if you reopen them."

Neil bit his lip and looked down at his lower arms. They were carefully wrapped in a bandage, mostly renewed by Abby, these days. Andrew was right. Stress just kind of made them itch and Neil couldn't help scratching.

"Why are you helping me with all of this?" Neil asked. Andrew made an annoyed sound.

"You can't seem to keep my interest into our conversations, these days."

Neil sighed at that and looked out of the window.

"My turn, why are we leaving?" Andrew asked then.

Neil frowned at that. "You said so. I didn't—" – "Cut the crap, Josten, and answer the question."

Neil's fingers found their way to the bandages again, but he dropped them, fiddling with the hem of his shirt instead.

"Nicky told me about Columbia. I didn't want to stay," he almost whispered. Andrew still didn't look at him, but Neil knew he had his attention. He didn't know what to do with it.

"My turn. What happened after the kiss?"

"There was sexual assault and there was non-consensual touching involved. No kiss. You just wasted a turn."

Neil knew Andrew was playing. Wasn't he? And for once, he was okay with it. This was calming, in a way.

"My turn. Why didn't you hit Kevin?"

Neil knew better than to ask. He knew that this was about yesterday, about Four. He didn't want to play. He wanted answers.

"There was not enough left to be this mad at him," he answered truthfully. He was glad that Andrew understood him without asking a single further question. Neil didn't want to discuss this, he wanted to know more about Columbia. "So… what exactly happened after the… assault?"

Neil didn't like the word, but he really wanted to get answers from Andrew. He didn't want to talk to Nicky, wasn't ready for that, yet. He still needed to know.


Neil bit his lip a little and nodded. He stared out of the window the whole way. Honestly, he was glad Andrew said this in an apathetic way. He couldn't have dealt with details or emotions.

"Thank you," Neil mumbled and swallowed hard. He wasn't aware of Andrew looking at him for a
second, before turning his attention back to the street.

"Shut up. You're paying for the food," Andrew announced, while pulling into a Drive-In and ordering meals for five people. Neil didn't have access to the money he'd been provided with as a Raven, but he still had the money he stole from Riko in that last night at the Nest, and he'd work something out in a month or two, when nothing of that was left.

They drove back in complete silence, but Andrew lit two cigarettes, which was their main form of communication anyways.

Neil closed his eyes when he inhaled the smell. He was so much calmer now. Far from happy or even remotely okay, but calmer.

Chapter End Notes

1. Thank you SO MUCH for the comments on the last chapter! I had such a fun time reading them!

I don't post stories all to often so just reading your reactions is thrilling every single time! Any thoughts on this chapter? I'm looking forward to hearing about them!

2. Again, sorry about the lack of updates but everything is so stressful and busy at the moment! But I'm home for the day and it's raining, so that means writing time :) (Though I kind of doubt anyone bothers to check if I updated, right? Idk)

3. I learned that a "pipe dream" in the context of the book was something positive. Didn't know that. Thought Andrew was insulting Neil. I misunderstood the whole scene and I finally understand why everyone in this fandom is so obsessed with it hahaha. God, I'm so stupid! Tri-lingual over here

4. You probably guessed it already. AsfaHan. The demon at daytime, taking every Andreil-moment I'm trying to include apart, the angel at night, discussing ideas, promts, theories, life in general. You're amazing! Also thanks for telling me what a pipe dream is.

5. I love all of you. Just wanted to let you know!❤
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Argument with Nicky
A visitor ;) ;) ;) (could I be any more obvious?)
Gameday!!! Though not the game.

Chapter Notes

I'm pissed because I just pressed 'post' and the site crashed. Bitch?? I formatted it! I finished the notes. Urgh!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's week was more stressful than he cared to admit. He only had one lesson a day, except for Friday, and he was helplessly overtaxed on Thursday already.

He was having dinner with the Monsters for what felt like the first time in forever, though it had only been a week. Neil got used to them again slowly. He didn't want to rush back into the way they were before, but he was okay with them at practice and he felt more comfortable around them again. He didn't spend more than an hour a day at their room and he didn't ride to the stadium with them, but every step forward was a success, these days.

"How was your day?" Nicky asked, while sitting down next to Neil on the sofa with two plates and sandwiches, handing one of them to him.

Neil tensed. This was still a touchy subject. He hadn't taken up the conversation with him yet, and Neil wasn't entirely sure he wanted to. He did want the answers, but not in Nicky's cheerful way that always seemed amused. He wanted a genuine apology and until he got it, there'd be this weird kind of tension.

He took a deep breath and shrugged a little. "Fine. Literature-class, so nothing too interesting. Yours?"

Nicky sighed at that answer and shrugged a little. "Stop being like this! Tomorrow is Gameday! We wanna be there as a team, right?"

Neil swallowed a little and looked at his sandwich. He wasn't hungry anymore. Him and Nicky hadn't talked a lot, meaning that Neil's answer got shorter and shorter while Nicky attempted to start conversations more and more often.

"Don't push," Kevin said lowly and Neil nibbled his sandwich. He didn't want others to talk about him but he didn't really want to talk either.

"Kevin, don't. I'm talking to Neil. It's almost been a week now. We talked about it, but you keep treating me as if I did something wrong. Seriously, can't we just be friends again? I only kissed you,
Neil set the sandwich down and looked up at Nicky while feeling the Monsters' eyes on him. He didn't want all that attention.

"As if? I treat you as if you did something wrong? You said you were sorry and I believed you, but you don't even understand the problem!" Nicky had been a little accusing, but he'd tried to be his cheerful self. Neil wasn't as considerate. He was angry.

"Because there's no problem. I didn't drug you. I didn't force you to do anything. Neil, you could have said no. I'd have stopped."

Neil pressed his teeth together with force and tried not to let this in. This was messed up on so many levels. The point wasn't who drugged him. The point was that he had been drugged. Not in the shape to do something about a situation he was clearly not comfortable with. And he doubted that a no would have changed anything. It certainly hadn't changed anything the last time he'd tried it.

"I don't want to have this talk right now," Neil said and got up. He wanted to get out of there. He felt hot and a little dizzy and he honestly didn't want to face this at the moment.

"Neil, what is your problem? I seriously just want us to be friends again."

He put down his plate and went to the door. "I want you to feel bad about what happened, because I feel bad about it. I don't even want to be friends with you if you don't get that."

Neil went outside and closed the door behind him. He took a deep breath and bit his lip a little before going into his room. The Upperclassmen were out together somewhere and Neil had been looking forward to a regular evening with the Monsters, just the way he had spend most evenings with them. But seriously, Nicky made him mad.

He sat down on the sofa and took the reading lists he got by his Spanish and Literature teacher. Neil didn't want to live his own life right then, so he got out his phone and went into the internet, downloading some of the books.

Neil felt like he was being productive when he got out a notebook and started reading the first novel, taking notes ever so often. The anger didn't vanish, but he was distracted enough not to notice it most of the time.

Around fifty pages into the novel, there was a knock on the door. Neil frowned a little. The Upperclassmen wouldn't knock, so this should be one of the Monsters. He didn't answer, knowing that Nicky would get the hint and leave, and that Kevin and Andrew would just come in if they pleased.

He sighed a little when the person knocked another time. Who was that?

"Abram, I saw you walking into this room, open the door."

Neil looked up at the name. Abram. Half a second later, he flinched heavily.

His father had played that game after his mother had left them. Called him Abram, then beat him when he reacted to it. This was him just expecting the hit that didn't happen.

He got up slowly and went to the door. "What do you want?" he asked, opening it slightly. He looked down at the woman he hadn't inherited much from, except for the height.
Mary Hatford's lips twitched a little at that, but she shook her head. "I won't discuss this in the hallway. When did you start resembling your father this much?"

Neil bit his lip when he heard the sound of her voice. Her accent. He hadn't heard that melodious British way of talking in too long.

He stepped to the side and took a deep breath. There were so many feelings crashing into him, some at once, some creeping in slowly. He didn't want her to think that he was like his father. He… why did he even care for her opinion?

She looked around the room and made a disapproving sound before turning back around. Neil closed the door behind them and felt small, suddenly.

"So?" he asked. He didn't trust his voice any further than that.

Mary crossed her arms and shook her head a little. "Don't do this. Whatever you're doing. Stop. We did raise you to look your parents in the eyes, didn't we?"

Neil hadn't realised that he was looking down. He raised his head and faced his mother again. Neil remembered this. The patient look that was still demanding. The way you knew she'd grant you the time you needed but would be furious at any further wasted second.

"Why are you here?"

Mary nodded at that and ran a hand through her hair. "That's more like it. I'd like to catch up. Do you want to pack your stuff already or talk over a cup of tea?"

Neil bit his lip and went to the kitchen with her by his side. "Why would I pack my stuff?" he asked while preparing two cups of tea. This was intimidating but still… he didn't know what the second feeling was. Something less negative.

He handed her a cup of green tea and she actually smiled. "You put a spoonful of maple syrup in there. You remembered. Anyways, we're leaving tonight. That's why I need you to pack your stuff. The plane leaves as soon as we're ready."

Neil stood a few feet away from her and looked into his mug. He had made her favourite tea without realising it. That was some information he just saved through the years, for no reason at all.

The next part of her statement made him feel sick. "Where? And why? What are you doing here? I don't…," he stopped mid-sentence, breathing again. This was harder than it should be.

"England, because this isn't safe. We have to leave before the first game. The Moriyamas will do everything they can to make you pay for what you did. The avalanche. Great metaphor, Abram," she ended and Neil suppressed a flinch. He didn't do a good job at it. Abram… "What was that? Goodness, did your father break you or did the Moriyamas do that?"

Neil shook his head and took another step back, gripping his mug. "Both, but I don't think that's the point, is it? You left. Years ago, you left. You could have been dead. You vanished. And now you show up as if nothing happened and expect me to come?"

She took a step into his direction and he felt trapped when he sensed the wall behind him. "I couldn't take you. The deal with the Moriyamas was halfway through and taking you meant they'd be on my heels. You didn't have running experience and you were a child, you would have gotten the both of us killed."
There was no accusation in her voice, only plain facts, no room for interpretation. But... "So you left your only son with the abusive man you ran from? Knowing he was being sold? Don't call yourself a mother, I think you don't know what it means."

He saw her jaw tense a little at that and man, he was happy about it. Happy about this single tiny reaction he got. "That's the reason I'm here now. You don't understand it, but I didn't have a choice. What you did, run from the Ravens, join another team, tempt Riko, all that harmed your father, but it could catch up with you. We'll fake your death, if it comes to that. Or we'll say you were too high on drugs and go to a clinic. I don't know yet, something to get you out of the focus of the press. You'll be safe in England, we'll take care of it!"

Neil only shook his head. He didn't get it. Didn't want it. "What are you talking about? Who are we?"

Mary sighed a little and took a sip of her tea. "My family. Criminals, but not your father's level of criminals. We'll care of you."

"Why tonight?" He couldn't do this. Didn't want it.

Mary sighed again, more deeply this time, and reached out to him. Neil didn't back away. His mother had never touched him in a harmful way without a reason to do so. He didn't fear her.

"Because this, Abram," she said, running a hand through his brown curls and over his cheek very softly, "is known too well already. We won't be able to disguise you all the way after this game. After the medial attention you'll get because this is your first game after you left the Ravens, a changing of your hair colour won't make them mistake you for someone else. We can still make this work, but not much longer. We can't let Neil Josten become a truth."

Neil swallowed hard and looked into her face. Her hand was on his cheek, touching the tattoo lightly. He was tempted to say yes. To be safe. To have a family. Away from this. Away from Riko for good. He'd be with his mother, his uncle, and a ton of relatives he didn't know yet.

He looked at his mother and saw what armed men saw when they looked at her, took orders from her, were obedient. He looked beyond the blonde curls, the blue eyes, the almost-smile, and saw a fighter.

A knock on the door changed this. "Neil? Hey, I... sorry, yeah. I'll just..."

Nicky entered the room and Neil could see him through the opened door of the kitchen. Mary turned around and Nicky made a surprised noise. "Who... Neil?"

Neil shook his head a little. He didn't want to deal with Nicky. But he had a thought. "Can you tell Andrew that my mother is here? And give us a moment?"

Nicky practically ran out of the room and Mary looked back at Neil. "You should go packing."

Neil frowned. Her posture had changed when they heard the knock. She was playing over it, but Neil knew he'd seen it! Seen, that she wasn't a fighter all the way.

"You never stopped running, did you?"

She looked back up at him and seemed surprised. "What do you mean? I'm leading the Hatford-family with Stuart. I'm no sidekick anymore."

Neil shook his head. "The door opened and you flinched. You crossed an ocean outrunning Nathan,
and now you're back. You're uneasy because you're still afraid. You're still running. Not safe."

"We will be safe in England. That's a promise."

The door opened again, and Andrew entered the room. He had a knife in one hand and a chocolate bar in the other one. Andrew sat down on the couch when he realised that everything was well and played with the switchblade audibly.

"Who's that? Day's bodyguard?"

Neil was glad Andrew was there. Just... physically present.

"That's not the point right now. The point is that you left me behind because you were afraid you'd fail, and it didn't work. You're too careful to feel safe. You're choosing flight over fight all over again."

Mary frowned at that a little before shaking her head. "Abram, I'm choosing safety. Mine and yours. The Moriyamas will do terrible things to you if you don't come. You made them seem like child abusers, they won't let this slide."

Neil flinched at the name again, but shook his head. "You're lying. You're choosing your safety. Then the Hatfords' and then mine. You proved that already, no need to say anything. Just... I'm ready to make myself my first priority. You're not. So I'm staying."

Mary raised an eyebrow at that and shook her head a little. "I'm not weak, I'm a leader. And you could be a Hatford! Let us make you one! You can't choose this team over family."

Neil almost scoffed, but he knew that would result in a slap, so he suppressed it. "Being a leader does not make you strong. I don't want to be a Hatford, I'm okay with being a Josten, whoever that might be. And... I'm choosing the brother who helped me through the darkest times of my life over a mother who didn't only choose to look away but decided to run without her only child. I'm choosing to not give myself up for once in my life. I'm choosing to fight."

Mary looked at him blankly for a few moments before shaking her head. "You can't protect yourself. You can't watch your back. You're not safe."

Neil looked at Andrew on the sofa, clearly listening while eating and playing with the knife, and almost smiled. "I'm not safe with you, either. And I think that Andrew's protection is better than what you could offer. He stopped Nathan and Lola. You never did that."

Mary's lips were a thin line. "I came here because I wanted to apologise. This is me making up for those mistakes."

She didn't beg, her voice was stern, but Neil could feel something move inside him.

"It's too late for this to change anything, but... thank you, anyways. I just won't leave."

Neil didn't expect this. He didn't expect her to hug him. He wrapped his arms around his mother and felt really calm when she pulled him close. "You're risking too much. We'll try, should you change your mind. We'll make it work! Just make sure to call me or Stuart! We'll have your back."

Neil knew that this wasn't Mary Hatford speaking, but the mother of a broken child.

"Just so you know, this is what you should have done ten years ago," Neil whispered and pushed her away softly. He still handed his phone to her. "You could give me Uncle Stuart's and your number.
Just in case."

He didn't want it, but he knew it would make her feel better. Sometimes you don't have to say the things you mean. In certain moments, it's important to say the things the other person needs to hear.

Mary nodded and typed in names and numbers, saved them and handed the phone back to Neil.

"You have an hour to think about it. Though, honestly, just call whenever you think of it. I'll pick up."

She ran her fingers through his hair again and smiled a little. Neil felt a little weird. This was nice. Warm. This was what she had done after taking care of him after the worst times with his father, slowly caressing his hair until he fell asleep. This was what she did in those rare moments Mary Hatford allowed herself to be a mother.

"I will. I'm glad you're alive."

Mary almost laughed at that, but didn't quite manage to. "I am, too. Goodbye, Abram! We will… we'll see each other again, right?"

Neil didn't know what to do with this. With the tough woman so insecure. So very hurtable.

"I guess so. At least I'm getting a goodbye this time," he mumbled. He hadn't meant to sound as bitter, but Mary wrapped her arms around him another time and pressed a kiss onto his cheek.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, before turning around. "Take care of him or you won't live to regret it," she told Andrew on the way out. Andrew tsk-ed and didn't bother looking up.

"I'm not taking orders by whoever the fuck you are," he answered, and just… just like that…

Just like that his mother left Neil's life again. He hoped, for good. He assumed, for at least another five or ten years. He worried… well… let's just say his worries were closer to the truth that he dared to fear.

He needed a minute to collect his thoughts. His Mary Hatford was alive. She was a criminal. She wanted him with her. She was a fearful warrior. She was… his mother.

Neil sat down next to Andrew after a while, and just leaned back.

"Thank you."

"I am sitting here and eating. Stop wasting words like this."

Neil bit his lip a little and nodded. "Sure. Sorry. Is this what mothers are supposed to be like?"

Andrew looked at him for a few seconds and shrugged, then. "I don't have a mother, so I wouldn't be the best person to answer that."

"Are you saying that because she's dead or because she's a bad mother?"

Andrew opened and closed the switchblade by tilting his wrist over and over again, never bored of the familiar snapping sound it made. "You don't actually think my life is happy enough for me to be able to decide, do you?"

Neil swallowed hard and looked at Andrew emphatically. The more time he spent with the Foxes, the more normal his family seemed to be.
He wanted to offer condolences or something, but Andrew didn't seem to be too moved and Neil didn't want to end their conversation in a bad way by talking anyways.

"Knives tomorrow after morning-practice," Andrew told him while continuing to play with the blade.

Neil nodded a little and tried to relax. He wanted to find some comfort in this situation, but he had trouble doing so.

His father and Lola had entered this room just like that. As if it was nothing. The room hadn't felt the same ever since. Now his mother had come. His past was catching up with him in this room, but for once, Neil felt almost calm again. Not all the way, because they had entered the room without him doing much about it. But all of them had left.

And there was Andrew. Somehow, Neil couldn't shake him. Neil's wreck of a past, Neil's shattered bit of present, Neil's uncertain piece of future. The way Andrew made not-reacting to this seem like the biggest thing in the world made Neil feel better about this whole situation.

Neil didn't know how long they sat there, the only sound being the occasional opening or closing of the blade, but the door opened abruptly and the girls walked in, giggling and smiling, followed by Matt and Seth.

The Upperclassmen almost froze when they saw them on the sofa next to each other, not touching, not even looking or talking, but physically present next to each other.

"Hey, Andrew," Renee greeted and smiled brightly.

Andrew looked at her and nodded in a greeting way, before getting up wordlessly and looking ready to shove anyone out of the way if they dared to say anything, but fortunately, they made room for him.

Matt smirked childishly bright, looking at Seth. Seth's face was annoyed and he sighed, handing a few dollar bills to the talker boy.

Before Neil could ask what that had been about, Renee sat down next to him, and Dan took the seat beside her right away.

"How was your evening?" Renee asked and Neil just shrugged.

"Fine. Yours?"

Allison sighed heavily at the question and crashed into one of the armchairs. "Terrible. The movie advertised with Liam Hemsworth on the cast, right? He appeared for two minutes straight. Isn't that unfair?"

Dan giggled at that and shook her head. "It was great! The food was amazing. You had dinner, didn't you? You said something about it, so we didn't bring anything."

Neil thought about the sandwich he'd left at the Monsters' room and cursed himself a little. Dan was right, and he was hungry now. "I ate with the others, thanks anyways!"

The girls didn't stay for too long, considering that it was late and they all had practice and classes tomorrow.

The night was a quiet one and Neil slept a lot better than he had in a long time.
"It's Gameday! Wake up, practice starts in like a second!"

Neil rubbed his eyes and heard Seth make very disapproving sounds. He got up slowly and stretched a little before getting ready. They drove to the stadium together and met Wymack, the Monsters and Abby in front of the locker rooms.

"Alright, you know what I expect of you guys tonight and I really don't want to repeat myself. There's some news, anyways. Kathy Ferdinand called this morning, asking whether you guys would be willing to give an interview on the first game this season and everything."

Allison looked at her manicured nails and sighed a little. "And by you guys you mean Neil and Kevin, I'm guessing. Do we have to attend?"

Wymack shrugged a little. "You're free to run a marathon instead, if that makes you feel better. And she said she'd focus on the team, though I doubt that. Josten, if you pull off another stunt like the last time a camera team was present, you can walk home on your own. And now get started, the game tonight is the start of the season! So better start moving!"

They all changed and went to the court together. Neil felt weird. Appearing on TV? And he had seen what Kathy was capable of. Making devils seem to be angels, making the nicest players on Court be considered rude and incapable by the whole Exy community. He sighed a little, not sure what to think of this.

Training went over pretty fast. Neil didn't really feel exited for the game yet. He feared it. This new position, the team, the fans. He hoped he was ready.

The thing was, Neil knew that this was not a usual game. It wasn't like the high school games he'd played so far. It was no regular college game. This was the all-eyes-on-them kind of game. Riko would be watching.

Neil felt weird for pretty much every second he spent on the field and during the ride back home. Weird as in bad, if he was honest – weird as in anxious.

"Excited yet?" Allison asked, smiling. Neil bit his lip a little and shrugged. He fiddled with his fingers.

"I'm gonna drag you down, right?" Neil asked.

Seth scoffed at that a little. "We already hit rock bottom as soon as Wymack showed up with a Backliner transferring positions, Neil. Get used to the thought of being a failure."

Dan pushed against him and shook her head. "Seth, don't make today less special."

"Stating facts, over here. Get over it."

Neil sighed a little and nodded. Seth was probably right.

"You'll do your best. No one expects you to be perfect, you improved so much, you'll do great in another month!" Dan assured him and Neil shrugged.

"Does that change anything?"

Dan smiled brightly and nudged him softly. "Everything!"
She looked so confident and the look in her eye radiated determination. Neil couldn't help but feel bad about screwing up the game for her today, but she looked so happy and secure about this whole situation that it made up for his own negative mood in a way. And he thought if she was able to believe in him and forgive him for today, perhaps he could do so, too.

They went up to their room and the Upperclassmen collected their stuff in order to make it to their first class. Neil wasn't stressed yet, since he'd only have classes in around two hours.

He went to the roof in comfortable clothes and almost smiled when he saw Andrew there already, sitting with all those knives in front of him.

They had gotten over the theoretical points of Neil's knowledge after around a week and a little while back, Neil had been physically able to show Andrew a few moves.

"I want to start talking about throwing them today," Neil greeted him and Andrew got up, looking at him impatiently.

Neil told him how to hold the hilt and how much force to use, how much to spin the knife, when he'd probably want to cut back on the spinning.

He walked Andrew through stuff like balance and posture as well, but he was quite good at that naturally.

"I can get targets for the next time, so you can actually throw them. Anything else I can show you today?"

Andrew checked his phone and shrugged. They had spent an hour on the roof.

"Is it my turn or yours?" Neil asked then, hoping they'd be able to talk about yesterday a little.

"Yours," Andrew answered while pushing the knives back into his bands.

"How did your mother die?" Neil asked silently and heard Andrew scoff a little.

"Car accident," he answered coldly and Neil frowned.

"The way Kevin broke his hand in a skiing accident?" he asked lowly and Andrew shrugged.

"Why does your mother call you Abram?"

Neil sighed a little and shrugged. Andrew had brushed him off and he got the sense that he wasn't gonna get many answers out of him today.

"Because that's my name," he answered and left the roof with Andrew. Neil was almost disappointed that Andrew let him go without following, but then again, he didn't want the silent-treatment. He didn't want to be shut out like this.

He entered the Monsters' room and sat down on the sofa next to Kevin.

"Neil, you don't have to answer, alright? But Nicky said your mother was there yesterday. Is that a problem? Just because you kind of never really talked about her and I don't want it to affect the game tonight."

Neil would have been annoyed by this conversation if it weren't for the last part. He didn't want to talk about his past, he didn't want Kevin to worry about his life, he wanted to think about Exy!
"She was there, but that doesn't matter. It doesn't affect my game today, promise!"

Kevin smiled at that and nodded. "Great. Wanna talk ab… alright. Whatever."

He must have seen the face Neil made at his question, so he changed the topic. Andrew entered the room ten minutes later, sitting down in one armchair.

Aaron was typing something into his phone while Nicky huddled around, packing a bag for classes, apparently.

"By the way, we're still going to Columbia after the game, right?" Nicky asked, then.

Aaron shrugged, Andrew nodded, and Kevin smiled while saying "Sure."

Neil tensed a little and swallowed. He didn't want to even think about them going there again.

"Neil, you're coming, right?" Kevin asked then and looked at him. Neil shrugged a little and shook his head.

"I don't think so. I don't really want to," he said and sighed.

Kevin frowned a little and exchanged a look with Nicky.

"But don't you think we should do something after your first game?" Nicky asked carefully.

Neil bit his lip and fiddled with his fingers. "Not in Columbia. There's a party here, though. The other Foxes and the Vixens are gonna be there. We could go there," he suggested slowly. He knew that the Monsters didn't like spending time with the Upperclassmen or other people in general.

Aaron looked up pretty abruptly at that and looked directly at Neil for the first time in… ever?

Nicky frowned a little and looked at Andrew. "I mean, we don't exactly spend too much time with them, but…"

"I think we should spend the evening with Neil after his first game," Kevin interrupted him and smiled a little. Neil knew that this was still mostly about the argument they had in the beginning of the week but he was okay with it.

Nicky shrugged at that and nodded a little. "Sure. Totally. Aaron?"

Aaron looked down at his phone and smiled for a second before turning it off again and looking at Nicky mildly annoyed. "Couldn't care less."

They all looked at Andrew then, waiting for him to approve of their plan.

"We're always in Columbia after games," he said, obviously in disapproval.

"That's because those were the only nights you were able to drink because of the stupid drugs. You're clean, we can go next week," Aaron argued and Andrew shrugged a little after considering this for a few seconds.

Nicky smiled brightly at that. "Great! So we'll do that! I'm leaving now, see you later," he said, smiling, while leaving for some class. The rest of their time was spend silent, Kevin occasionally reading out fact about Breckenridge, their first opponent.

Neil left for classes then, pretty much running in order to get to the Spanish lecture on time. It went
by without many incidents, though Neil tried to concentrate on the class. He couldn't think of much more than the game.

Maybe excitement started mixing its way into Neil's fear at last.

He exited the classroom and… where did all the orange come from? He hadn't realised it before, but the school was drenched into the colour even more than usual. Most students wore at least a PSU shirt, some of them even in Exy merchandise. It was weird to him.

Neil wanted to go straight to his maths class, when there was a hand on his shoulder, pulling him to a sudden halt. He turned around frowning and wasn't any less confused when he saw Renee there.

"Hey… what's up?" he asked lowly.

"Wymack doesn't want you walking around here alone on our first gameday after all that publicly, so I'm walking with you," she explained and smiled softly at him.

Neil didn't get this, he'd walked around freely for the whole week. This wouldn't be much different, right? But he nodded anyways.

"Alright. Sure. Thank you," he mumbled and walked out of the building with Renee.

"Are you looking forward to the game?" she asked, smiling brightly at him.

Neil shrugged a little. "I've been asked around five times today and the answer is 'I don't know'. I hope it'll turn out well, but I don't think I'm a good Striker yet."

What exactly was it with Renee, that made you give her a lot more than she asked for?

"Don't worry, Neil. No one expects you to. We all saw how much you improved so far! This will be the best you can give at the moment, and that's always gonna be enough!"

Neil made a face at that and shrugged a little. "We'll see, yeah? Thanks for bringing me here, by the way."

Renee smiled a little more and nudged his shoulder softly. "No problem. You'll do great tonight. By the way, orange suits you, and the whole world will see that tonight!"

He bit his lip at that and nodded a little before entering the other room. She was so nice and Neil really didn't know why. Didn't know how he deserved this.

"Neil! Great to see you! Are you excited? Because I am! All of us are! We can't wait for the game!"

Neil blinked at the girl next to him and recognised Marissa. He didn't really feel like having this kind of conversation at the moment if he was honest.

"Hey… sure. Very excited," he answered in a low voice. Marissa seemed offended by this answer, but Neil couldn't care less. He didn't want to constantly answer the same question. He was okay with talking about the game, but not constantly about his feelings on this.

"So… the party, yeah? You're coming, right? Tonight? It's gonna be fantastic!"

Neil sighed a little and wondered if she was a cheerleader because she was always this positive, or if being forced to smile through game after game just gave you the strength to be happy 24/7.

"I think I'll be there. Shouldn't we concentrate on the class?"
Marissa sighed and turned her attention to the lecturer again. Maths didn't interest him all too much at that moment, but it was alright. Numbers always gave him the possibility to zone out of his life completely.

After this class, Seth picked him up and went to his Speech class with Neil. The only thing he said was how he would be late because of this, but Neil knew Seth well enough by now to know that him actually being there was a big step in itself.

Speech was interesting, thought a little too theoretical. Neil went home on his own after that, and for once, sitting in his room by himself was comforting. He took the minutes Matt needed to get here after his first class to collect his thoughts. He was far from being on the level he used to be on, because of the changed position, but he knew deep down that he had improved a lot. More than he would have thought was possible, though less than he hoped it would be. But Riko would see him, and he'd be impressed. And furious.

When Matt did enter the room, he smiled at Neil. "Gameday! It's gonna be amazing!"

He put his stuff down in the bedroom and went past the couch to the kitchen, messing up Neil's hair on the way. "You'll do great. I know it."

Neil had flinched a little when he felt the hand on his head, but he almost smiled when he realised that this wasn't anger or a bad temper, but simple friendship.

Matt crashed into the sofa next to him with three sandwiches, putting one onto the table for Seth, one into Neil's hand and started eating the last one. He told Neil about his day and 'gameday' and 'excited' made up almost half of the monologue. Somehow, Neil didn't have a problem with that kind of talking when Matt did it. It annoyed him with almost everyone else.

Seth entered the room a little later, sitting down next to Neil, dropping his stuff onto the table and eating what was on it. The three of them spend a little time talking — though Matt did most of that — and turned on the TV then, to fill the silence. Matt moved into one armchair and they were able to stretch out a little, enjoying the short hour they had before Dan entered the room and told them to get moving.

Quite honestly? Neil was excited now. Riding to the stadium with the Upperclassmen, all of them were a little anxious.

The Foxes used to be a pretty crappy team, if you were honest. They were constantly close to getting the Class II status, and the cousins had pretty much saved the last season for them. With Kevin and Neil on their lineup, this might be the first season of them being genuinely good. If it weren't for his new position. If it weren't for Kevin's broken hand.

But it was exciting anyways. His very first college Exy game. They arrived on the parking lot at the same time as the Monsters and all the Vixens' cars were there as well.

Whether they knew it or not, the Foxes entered the stadium as one group. Neil was in the middle between Kevin and Matt, while the Upperclassmen and Monsters stayed close to them on either side.

For the first time in his stay, they felt like a team.
UPDATED NOTES

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If no one comments on the Mary-part, I'm gonna cry. That's important, guys, tell me how you feel about it!!!!

*******
Thank you for reading! All of the 1.7 K people reading this! Thank you to Chocolate_Hell_Cookies_Freedom2481999 and thatfandomlife153 for commenting!

Your comments make my days and just reading your opinions helps me assign a person to the number of hits and that's one of my favourite feelings at the moment, thank you for that!

AsfaHan. I had a novel about you in the notes before the site crashed and I'm annoyed that it's gone, so this is not as full of love as it's supposed to be! But thank you for keeping up with my first drafts and 'edited' versions (sorry about how unedited today's chapter was) and thank you for gossiping about those stupid Raven-cheersquads! Thank you in general and thank you for everything in particular!
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

THE GAME

And the party

Not too much drama in this one

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil felt excitement and fear in every cell of his body when the ten of them changed into their gear. He couldn't get the smile off his face. This was happening!

They met in front of Wymack's office as a group, and he handed out sheets with the Jackal's lineup.

"Gorilla?" Seth groaned and Kevin sighed heavily, agreeing with Seth without actually saying something.

"What?" Neil asked, and Matt shrugged a little.

"You'll recognise him. He's a beast. And he'll crush your bones if you get between him and the wall, so avoid that, maybe."

Neil sighed a little and nodded. Some of his excitement was taken away by that, but it crashed back into him when they lined up by the entrance to the court. He heard the fans screaming. Heard the voice of the commentator announcing their line up. Heard the screaming when Kevin's name was read out.

"If you feel anything at all in that hand, you get out of there, understood?" Wymack asked and Kevin nodded. They knew this was a lie. Knew that Kevin would do anything and everything to play tonight, but they let it slide. "Alright, Foxes, make them feel sorry about entering this court in the first place!"

The Foxes' first six players entered the stadium, Kevin first, then Seth, then Dan, taking their positions on the offensive line, Dan in the middle to shake hands with the other captain. The audience went crazy when Kevin entered the court for the first time in eight months. They were ready to see him in action again.

Matt fist bumped Neil before entering the court. "See you in there!"

Aaron, Andrew and Matt went inside and one of the referees closed the door behind them. Neil could barely keep himself from knocking against the plexiglass and cheering now and the game hasn't even started.

The Jackals entered the court then, and Nicky stood beside Neil. "That's Gorilla, by the way."

Neil didn't have to follow Nicky's finger to make out the mass of a body. Wow… if someone could
make Matt look like a skinny child, you should probably not underestimate them. Neil was kind of glad that he didn't have to face him first.

A referee flipped a coin and signalled first serve for the Jackals.

The players started moving, Gorilla blocked Seth from running for the ball, which resulted in the first audible argument of the game. That was thirty seconds into the game!

The Jackal dealer passed the ball to a striker, who started running, slamming into Matt with full force. Matt barely flinched but used the opportunity to get the ball and pass it to Andrew, the goal being his only clear shot. Andrew had no trouble catching the ball and throwing it back to Dan.

Neil had grown up with Riko not wasting a single opportunity to make rude remarks about any team but the Ravens, and he'd been especially hard on the Foxes and Wymack. Seeing them perform now, with so much ambition, so much enthusiasm, so much expertise was a totally new thing to Neil. He'd seen them during training, arguing, fighting, being children, and always low-key blamed it on their unprofessionalism. It was the only thing keeping him from feeling too guilty about his transfer in positions.

But this? This was new. This was a team, depending and relying on the others, knowing they had your back. This was a lot better than he'd have expected. He felt slightly bad for the performance he'd make, but the rush of the game was incredible.

"Fifty bucks on Seth and Kevin starting to fight in the first fifteen minutes," Nicky started.

"That's obvious. Twenty on Seth starting the fight," Allison shot back.

Nicky considered this for a moment before nodding. "Deal!"

"Could you at least try to be optimistic about the first game?" Renee asked with a sigh and Allison shrugged.

Neil couldn't believe them! How could they be talking when the game was on?

"Neil? By the way…," Nicky started then, and Neil looked away from the game for a second. He sighed quietly and bit his lip, looking up.

"Hm?" He didn't want to talk about anything right now. Nothing but Exy.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry, yeah? Honestly. Because I talked to Kevin about it and he said I should let you take your time but I don't want this to be between us. I like you and Andrew told me that I screwed up yesterday and… if Andrew says anything but death threats, that's probably something worth considering. So I'm sorry." Nicky bit his lip when he was finished and looked Neil into the eyes.

Neil didn't want to have this talk right now, but the look in Nicky's eyes seemed so genuine… "Do you regret it? Honestly?" he asked lowly and when Nicky nodded, Neil did so too. "Alright," he whispered and Nicky looked at him in a questioning way.

"Are we good?" he asked with too much hope in the eyes for Neil to be okay with it.

"We'll work on it. After the game, right?"

Nicky smiled again at that, and Neil was glad to be able to turn back around again. Seth struggled with Gorilla, but Matt had the ball and passed it to Kevin who ran for the goal and pretended to take
a shot, turning back around and passing the ball to Dan in the last second before slamming into his backliner. That was a Raven-manoeuvre and Neil felt weird about seeing it on a different court.

Dan passed the ball into Seth's general direction and Seth ran like his life depended on it. He managed to outrun Gorilla for a few feet and catch the ball in the air. Most defensive players were still focused on Kevin, so the goal lit up seconds later, when Seth scored. The fans went crazy, Allison screamed, all of them yelled. 1-0 after ten minutes! That was good! That was amazing!

The Vixens were still cheering loudly when the game went on. The strikers didn't waste a second before attacking the defense. Aaron and Matt put up a fair fight and Dan came to help, but the inevitable thing happened. They broke past the defense and trapped Andrew in the goal, catching each ball that he deflected and shooting again. It wasn't even two minutes later that the Foxes' goal lit up in red as well.

It was hard on the substitute players, seeing their opponents attack their teammates this mercilessly and not being able to do anything about it but scream and pound against the walls. They did that, at least, but the Jackal-striker managed to outrun Aaron and score another time. 2-1 twenty five minutes into the game? That was just unfair!

The Vixens did their best to cheer on them and make the fans support the Foxes and this early in the game, no one had trouble following their "Let's go, Foxes, let's go!" They were optimistic.

The players didn't let their motivation fade away themselves, playing as if nothing had happened, and when Kevin got the ball another five minutes later, he scored. The masses went crazy, Fox- and Jackal-fans alike, cheering on their hero. Kevin Day was back.

Neil felt a lot better instantly, and he realised that maybe he was a little too emotional about this. A one-point-gap was no reason to feel pessimistic about the whole game!

He wondered if the 5-2 score ten minutes later was a reason to worry because he definitely felt uneasy now.

Andrew had the ball and passed it to Matt who looked around and saw that Kevin was his only free shot. Just that the ball didn't arrive. His backliner slammed into Kevin and delayed him by several seconds. Enough time for Seth to run for it, when Gorilla wasn't paying attention to him but the ball and his teammate-striker running for it. Seth was there first and with the help of two body-checks, he scored again.

The Foxes' fans went crazy — though 5-3 was nothing worth celebrating in his opinion — but Neil could see the anger radiating off Kevin across the field. He ran towards Seth and spit words at him Neil couldn't understand. He guessed it was about Seth basically stealing the ball, but he didn't know for sure. Seth shoved against Kevin hard and Kevin shoved back, and soon, they were hitting each other.

"Man, he didn't have to start being a good person today, did he?" Allison asked annoyed and handed 20 dollars to Nicky.

The referees did their best to break up the fight, but a loud sound went off, signalling the end of the first half.

They met in front of the locker room then, water being passed around. Everyone but Renee and Neil had played that night, though Allison and Nicky had been mainly there to sub for the others when they needed a break. The second half would be their time to shine.
Kevin shoved against Seth again when they arrived. "What was that?" he asked furiously.

Seth just shrugged a little. "Ball was there, you weren't. What's your problem?"

Kevin shoved against Seth another time and growled. "The problem is that this was my ball! I'd have scored!"

"Touch me another time and you'll regret it, Day!" Seth shot back and Andrew appeared at Kevin's side instantly.

"Your self-destructive tendency must be severe if you consider touching him," he said calmly and Seth actually took a step back.

"Andrew, easy," Renee mumbled and Wymack clapped a few times.

"Enough of this! You guys are being children! I want the defense to do everything they can! Renee, close the goal. Every shot in means Neil and Kevin will have to go beyond themselves even further. Defensive lineup is clear, right? Strikers are Neil and Kevin, though Seth will play for the last quarter, we don't want you to destroy that hand or yours, Day!"

Neil froze. He had known that already, of course, but he'd… he wouldn't, right? But he was supposed to! Riko would watch him. His father would be furious. His mother would see the game, he guessed. All of them would be aware of Neil Josten becoming a truth.

He took a deep breath and nodded. He could do that. Play one half. He'd always played full games so far. He'd manage this! They went on going over tactics again, but Neil zoned out. He'd heard this many times before. Neil collected himself internally. He was capable of this!

Neil felt the corner of his mouth twitch and Nicky looked at him, smirking. "Wanna slit a throat with that smile, Neil? Definitely suits you better than that frown you keep on the pretty face of yours!"

"All clear?" Wymack barked and the Foxes nodded. They lined up and waited for the commentator to read out their names again. Neil took comfort in the way the fans cheered when they heard his name. They believed in him. He could do that, too.

"Don't make me regret becoming friends with you, Backliner," Seth called before Neil entered the court. He almost laughed and felt some of the tension fall of.

They entered the court with their new lineup. Allison as their dealer, Kevin and Neil as strikers, Matt and Nicky as backliners and Renee in the goal.

Kevin smiled at him brightly and Matt whooped when Neil stood a few yards away from him. This was gonna happen!

A sound blared through the speakers and the game started again. Allison and the opponent-dealer fought for the ball and Allison managed to get it, passing it to Nicky. Neil lost sight of the ball for a second but realised where it was when he saw Kevin catch it.

Gorilla laughed dismissively. "They told me to be careful because you were fast. Turns out you don't even move!"

Neil looked up at that and smiled brightly, hoping Gorilla could see the threat that was hidden in his lips. "Wait for it," he said. Neil felt the adrenaline rush and looked for the ball. Allison had it again. Walked the ten steps before rebounding the ball against the wall and running further.
"Neil, move," she screamed and Gorilla laughed.

"He would if he could," he yelled back at Allison, but Neil couldn't care less. He spun around and ran as if his life depended on it. In a way, this was his life.

He was yards away from Gorilla and caught the ball Allison passed. He took a split second to look around and found two clear shots; Kevin and the goal.

Neil heard blood rushing in his ears when he passed the ball to Kevin. No one had expected him to do that, so Kevin only had to face one defensive player. He body-checked that one harshly and though the goalie jumped for the ball, he didn't manage to catch it.

The moment the goal lit up red was the second Neil was able to hear his surroundings again. The Vixens' screams faded into the cheering of the fans and the Foxes checked sticks with Kevin. The striker smiled at Neil with determination and neither of them could hide their happiness. They were on court together on a real game! And finally, for the first time in three years, they could rely on each other again blindly.

The game went on and Neil managed to outrun Gorilla quite often. Matt passed him a ball a few minutes later, but Gorilla slammed into him so hard that Neil missed it. Fortunately, Allison was there right away, keeping it in the Foxes' possession.

Neil got up from where he stumbled to the ground and was ready to play, when he realised that Gorilla had left his side and slammed himself against Allison, who was stuck between him and the wall. She shrieked and Neil knew that she must be hurting badly. That guy was a monster!

When he backed off a little and caught the ball, passing it to the other backliner, Allison stared at him furiously for a few seconds, but ran after the ball right away. Neil was impressed by the way she brushed it off. He'd have thought that someone like Allison would whine and take a break, but she barely acknowledged what had just happened.

Neil ran as well, but the two of them were too late to change anything about the striker aiming at their goal. Renee jumped and barely missed the ball by inches.

6-4, and they had thirty five minutes left. Neil believed in them! They could manage to do this! Renee passed the ball to Nicky, who took a step before throwing it to Kevin, but it didn't arrive. His backliner caught it first and with Matt too far away blocking one striker and Allison halfway across the field in order to support Kevin on the way to the goal she expected, it didn't take long for the Jackals to score again.

Renee looked heartbroken because of those two scores this early in the game, but no one held it against her. She was doing her best!

She had the ball and passed it to Matt, who was finally back. Matt didn't think twice before throwing it towards Neil with so much force Neil almost stumbled when catching it, but this didn't matter. Gorilla was still gone and Neil ran. When the number of steps he was allowed to take was full, he passed the ball to Allison, who passed right back. With half the Jackals concentrated on Kevin, Neil had a clear shot and for once, he used it.

The goal lit up and Neil turned to look at Kevin. He'd done that! He had scored! But before he could find him, Gorilla slammed against him and knocked the air out of his lungs. Neil cursed and held his rib cage.

Two referees were at their side right away. "The body check happened more than three seconds after
the ball was thrown, making it against the rules. Seems like someone has to leave the field," the announcer said through the speakers, and Gorilla was forced to leave. Thank God.

"That was amazing!" Allison called when she took her position, and Matt walked up to Neil and ruffled his hair before hugging him for a second.

"You good? Congrats!" he said and smiled brightly before walking back to the defensive line fast in order to be able to do his job properly again.

Neil looked at Kevin now, who smiled at him and nodded in appreciation. Neil had done it!

The Foxes' defense was incredibly exhausted, and Matt was substituted with Aaron twenty minutes into the second half, considering that he'd played for pretty much all the game so far. This didn't keep the Jackals from breaking past them again. None of them had played during the first half and they were enthusiastic about all of this.

The score went from 7-5 to 8-5 in less than ten minutes.

Neil received the ball another time. He outran his backliner who was a lot less offensive than Gorilla had been, aimed, and… missed. The goalkeeper passed the ball to a backliner but Kevin slammed against him hard when he started running, taking the ball and scoring right away.

Three times so far… Kevin was a legend.

Kevin smirked at Neil for a second before turning around again. 8-6, and there were 20 minutes left in the half. The ball went across the court, from one end to the other. Aaron passed the ball to Neil, then and Neil desperately wanted to score. He knew he couldn't, though. The goal was too crowded and Neil's left was blocked.

"Passive Three-Seventeen, Neil," Kevin yelled and Neil looked up at him. That was a backliner-striker pair-drill they had practiced at the Nest together.

Neil didn't let himself worry about the backliner at his left. He rebounded the ball against the wall hard, running and scooping it up before running to the middle of the field where he passed Kevin, dropping the ball in front of him. When Neil was on the right side of the court, he passed the ball to him again. Pretty much all defensive players were on Neil now, expecting the pass to Kevin to be the bluff, not knowing that Kevin would actually be the one to score. Neil slammed hard against one backliner while passing the ball back to Kevin. He ran and scored for the fourth time during that game.

8-7 was great, considering that they only had around fifteen minutes left.

"Day, get off there," Wymack screamed and took some joy from the moment. But Kevin clenched his left wrist with his hand for a second before running off. Seth and Neil took their positions again.

"Can you prepare a goal for me the way you do for Kevin?" Seth asked and Neil offered him a fierce grin. As a backliner, he'd been bound to the home-half of the court, not really able yo leave the goal behind because he had to protect it. Now he could go all the way. He might not be good at scoring yet, but he sure as hell was great at preparing good shots for others.

"I could," he answered, and Seth shot him a smirk.

The defense did everything they could. Renee deflected three balls and Seth scooped the ball up when it was close. "Pass-play?" he asked Neil, who stayed pretty close. Neil shook his head a little.
"Stay at the 25 yard line, I'll work out the rest," Neil promised and ran away. Less than ten minutes. Two goals. They could! They really, really could!

They passed a lot, taking Allison with them, forming a triangle. The Jackals' defense was outnumbered, considering that their offensive dealer was on court and didn't know how to handle this kind of situation. Seth and Allison were both pretty much on the 25 yard line, and Neil yelled "Allison, c'mon," before throwing the ball against the wall on Seth's side so hard it rebounded into his direction. The trick was old. Allison thought she was gonna get the ball, so her whole posture contributed to the game and the defense attacked her. Seth had an almost clear shot and of course he scored.

Allison's face lit up when she saw that and the crowd cheered. They'd gone from 5-3 to 8-8. This was a success in itself!

There were three minutes left and the Foxes were buzzing. They had made this happen!

The offence of the Jackals was angrier than before and they pushed hard. They didn't want to leave this stadium as losers. They didn't care about the rules too much anymore, slamming against any Fox in their way.

Renee deflected one ball, then another one, throwing it to Aaron. He caught it and… two Jackals were on him, the dealer body checking him so hard that the both of them fell down together, and the striker scooping up the ball and slamming it to the goal. Renee didn't catch that one. Nicky's shoulders fell and Neil swallowed hard when the loud sound through the speakers announced the end of the game. They had all been prepared for additional time. They'd been prepared to win!

All of their teammates went on court to high five the Jackals and thank them for the game, but none of the Foxes seemed even remotely okay with it. The only thing that made Neil feel slightly better was the black eye Gorilla had. He guessed that this was Seth's answer to Allison being treated the way she had been. When they were done, they all vanished into the showers, after Wymack barked at them to get into his office when they were done.

Neil's muscles were sore and he was drenched in sweat. If this had been worth it, at least… but they didn't even win the game. He got into a shower stall and sighed, holding his face into the hot stream. No need to feel down, he told himself. He'd scored! He'd prepared goals! He'd been helpful! Right?

He changed into normal clothes in the shower because his upper body was still a secret he wanted to keep. No one deserved to know about them.

When he got to Wymack's office with the Monsters, he saw most of them smiling slightly. Not the twins, Kevin or Seth, but Nicky, and the rest of the Upperclassmen. All of the sat down and Wymack crossed his arms while Abby huddled around, taking care of everyone for a little while whispering encouraging words. She checked Neil for a little and pursed her lips. "Tell me what your ribs look and feel like tomorrow, yeah? Some of those checks looked harsh," she mumbled before going on. Neil was relieved by the way she didn't make this a big thing in front of the others, by the way she let him have his privacy.

"Does anyone have anything to say?" Wymack asked and crossed his arms, while leaning against the wall.

"We lost. Can we leave?" Kevin answered and seemed annoyed.

"Kevin, shut up for once in your life. You guys were amazing! Andrew, Renee, you blocked so many goals tonight, it's more than anyone would have expected. The defense was awesome! We lost"
14-6 last year, now you held the defense so great! And Allison, respect, what you endured with Gorilla was just sick. And offence in general, eight goals is incredible! Neil, for the first time, this was unbelievable!" Dan smiled at all of them and even Aaron's face showed something close to happiness. Everyone smiled a little, safe for Kevin and Andrew again.

"Don't have anything to add. Training starts on Monday again. Don't eat yourself up, today wasn't bad, so get the hell out of here now," Wymack said and it was as much of an appreciation as they'd get.

The Monsters went to Andrew's car while the Upperclassmen walked towards Matt's truck. Neil thought about this for a second, but he really wanted to be with Kevin after his first game.

"See you guys later," he called. The others smiled and nodded. Matt looked a little confused but let it slide.

Neil went to the Monsters and his presence didn't get any reaction but a bright smile by Nicky. They let him sit in the middle again and Andrew drove back to the Fox Tower.

"That was amazing for your first game, Neil! Seriously, you scored and you're so fast, it's remarkable," Nicky said in an enthusiastic way. Aaron made an annoyed sound.

"You might wanna join the cheerleaders instead of the Exy team," he sighed and Nicky smirked a little.

"I don't think Kevin could keep up his \textit{I'm heterosexual}-shit if he saw me in a uniform, but nice plan for when he's gone!" Nicky answered and laughed a little.

Aaron rolled his eyes but Neil knew that he wasn't being rude. Then again, maybe a little rude, but everyone knew that the twins liked Nicky more than they cared to admit.

"Neil? First thoughts after the first game?" Nicky asked then and Neil shrugged a little.

"One goal isn't exactly anything to be proud of, but I'll live," he answered lowly and Kevin turned to face him for a second.

"I'm gonna say this one time and one time only. You prepared three goals tonight. You did well, and if you manage to score two times the next game, everyone will see how much you improved, though all of us know that already," Kevin almost snapped at him before turning back around. Neil knew what this took of Kevin, this praise, and he couldn't help but smile.

They arrived at the Fox Tower a little later, and Neil felt the exhaustion creeping in. He'd ache all over tomorrow!

"When does the party with the others start?" Kevin asked.

"In ten minutes, approximately. So we'll go there in thirty?" Nicky answered after checking his phone. The others muttered in agreement, though Andrew just went upstairs already.

"Why are we leaving late?" Neil asked on the way upstairs.

"Because the greatest people are always late, Neil, we're worth waiting for," Nicky answered matter of factly.

Neil frowned a little and nodded, though he didn't necessarily understand them.
"I'll come over as soon as the others are gone," Neil said and Nicky nodded a little before entering his room. The Upperclassmen smiled when he came in. Allison was brushing her hair and the girls all wore stuff making Neil feel underdressed. Matt and Seth looked like him though, sitting on the sofa in loose shorts and tees. Neil took the seat beside Matt and looked around a little. They seemed enthusiastic about this.

Dan wore jeans shorts and a really nice top. She sat down between Seth and Matt and smiled at Neil. "Tonight is gonna be really nice! Are you ready?" she asked and everything about her was so warm.

"I'm spending some time with the others before coming, if that's okay with you," he answered and expected a simple 'yes'. Dan's smile fell a little at that and she nodded.

"Sure. But you're coming, right? You're not going to Columbia with them, are you?" she asked and Neil frowned.

"I'm coming, of course. I wouldn't go anywhere with them at this point, if I'm honest," he answered and Dan nodded, but Neil could see her swallow.

"C'mon, don't act surprised! We knew he'd dump us for them as soon as Kevin and him made up again," Allison sighed and Matt shook his head a little.

"Al, leave him be. We told him he didn't have to choose. You're coming later, right? So what's your problem, guys?"

Neil looked up at Matt who seemed genuinely upset. "I'll be there, promise," he said and was glad to see Matt smiling back.

"See? Told you so," Matt smiled and ruffled Neil's hair again. Neil didn't know why he always did that, but he actually kinda liked it. It felt somewhat nice.

They left the room together and Neil went to the Monsters again, closing the door behind him. They all sat there and fast food was distributed among them.

"When did you get that?" Neil asked while sitting down in a bean bag next to Nicky. Kevin handed him a plate with a burger and fries that looked suspiciously like McDonalds' food.

"Yesterday. Didn't bother to heat it up, is that okay?" Nicky answered and Neil almost smiled.

"It's great, I'm starving," Neil said and Nicky laughed.

"We might wanna try to eat real food after those games. There are studies that show how many toxins there are in one pound of…"

"Kevin, I'll shove this down your throat of you don't shut up," Andrew interrupted and Nicky laughed out loud. They ate in silence and Neil felt nice. This was calming, in a way. All of them were exhausted and physically done, it was silent and they ate crap together. He'd missed this. They were far from fine, but Neil was okay with whatever they had at this point.

"When are we leaving?" Neil asked after a while and Kevin shrugged

"In a little. But I want all of you to change into something more presentable. Neil, you too!" Nicky exclaimed and laughed then. "I want all of us to stand out."
Aaron groaned at that but went to the bedroom anyways, obviously following orders.

Neil was a little concerned when he went back to his room after eating up and changed into jeans and a grey tee. He smiled when he saw Nicky in a fancy shirt, while Andrew hadn't bothered to change out of his black jeans and long-sleeve. This was so 'them'. Aaron and Kevin looked pretty normal as well, but Nicky didn't bother saying anything about it.

They walked down the stairs to the first floor where the rooms intended for group studying were. Neil could hear music and chatter from behind one door and they entered that room. He could make out the Foxes and around fifteen additional girls and…

"I regret coming," Nicky mumbled with a laugh clearly audible in his voice.

Matt looked up from the group of people he was in and smiled at Neil, but his face showed disbelief a second later. He nudged Dan next to him softly and she turned around, freezing when she saw the Monsters. Allison looked up as well, and she smiled a little before handing fifty bucks to Seth wordlessly. Had they bet on whether or not he'd come? Had Seth taken his side?

The first one to talk to them was not one of the Foxes though, but a Vixen with blonde curls and the brightest smile on her lips. She came with two other girls and probably meant to look at all of them, but only had eyes for Aaron.

"You did amazing today! Seriously, you were awesome!" she started with basically no voice at all. Her throat must hurt, considering the way her voice scratched and broke all the time. Then she seemed a little insecure and took a step back, looking at all of them now. "You as in plural you! All of you! Great play… I…"

She stopped and looked at one of her friends for support and the two other girls agreed. Neil frowned and looked at Aaron. Did he know her? There was a smug smile on his lips Neil couldn't interpret, and Aaron looked away from the girl.

"Wow, your voice sounds terrible. Did you scream as much during the game or…” Nicky started but stoppen when Aaron elbowed him in the ribs. Nicky laughed a little and shrugged. "Thanks, anyways, we appreciate it!"

The girls smiled and seemed enthusiastic about this, but Neil was distracted by a finger on his shoulder. He turned around to see Dan standing there, smiling brightly.

"Hey, could I talk to you for a second?" she asked and Neil nodded, following her without a word. She pulled him out of the room and closed the door behind them, before wrapping her arms around him in a fierce hug.

"Thank you, Neil! I don't have a clue how you did this, but thanks a lot! They're celebrating with us, how miraculous is that?" She hugged him close and let go then, smiling at him again.

"I didn't do much but ask, this is no big deal," he mumbled, but he was a little proud. Dan had asked him to mend the team and he was trying to help her.

Dan laughed a little and ruffled his hair a little. "You smile like a tipsy puppy, Neil! My goodness, you're adorable! Thanks again!"

Neil chuckled at that and ran a hand through his hair again. Why was everyone so keen on it suddenly?

They went back inside and found the Foxes as a pretty big group. That was probably not intended in
any way, considering that Aaron and Andrew stood there with their arms crossed and that Nicky was chatting with them a little. It was mainly Kevin talking to Matt, with the other Upperclassmen close behind him, and though that was only one point of touching, it was almost incredible already. It was almost like a first step.

Neil and Dan came to a halt by Kevin and Matt, who were talking about the game, what else?

"Their main problem was that they only had offensive dealers on the field, if they'd had another defensive player, they wouldn't have let us catch up as quickly during the second half," Kevin said and Matt nodded a little after considering his words.

"True, but they won anyways, so it wasn't really a problem, right?" he asked and Kevin shrugged. Neil thought it was a little weird how Matt seemed to be this interested in Kevin's opinion on this matter when they barely ever talked.

"It was a close call. I think we'd have made it during the additional time, but it's too late now," Kevin answered and Dan laughed a little.

"That's the nicest thing you ever said about this team! Is that Neil's influence?" she asked with a laugh in her voice and nudged Neil softly.

Kevin shook his head slightly, but smiled anyways. "It's not as much his influence as it is his style of playing. We don't usually have players capable of playing more than their own position and having a backliner that's free to move all over the field is really helpful. Three goals were only possible because of him," Kevin elaborated and Neil felt a warm feeling blooming up in his chest. Matt laughed and nudged Neil softly.

"Are you blushing? You're such a baby, it's not even funny," he said, laughing, and Neil couldn't keep the smile off his face. This was nice. He didn't regret attending.

"Neil, oh my God!" a girl called and Neil turned around to see Marissa standing there. "You were so great today, I'm serious! And you're here!"

Neil lost his smile a little and bit his lip. He could really hear the exclamation marks in her voice and it was exhausting already. "Hey… yeah, I don't know. How much of the game were you able to see, aren't you always facing the audience?"

Marissa lost the smile for a second, but she recovered quickly. "We do hear what's going on through the speakers, Neil! How are you feeling?"

Kevin laughed a little behind him. "We still lost, don't make him feel too good about himself," he said and Marissa looked confused for a second before smiling cheerfully.

"The game was wonderful, and your performance was spectacular! After what happened on that skiing trip, we all thought we'd never see you on court again! This is impressive!" Marissa even laughed a little, but Neil could see Kevin tense. This was a tough situation in general.

Twenty minutes later, Neil got an entirely different picture to watch. Aaron excused himself to go to bed, apparently being bored by the party already. Kevin, Nicky, Dan and Matt were talking about the game with a few of the Vixens. Seth and Allison stayed together closely until a song started and Allison beamed at Seth who simply shook his head, which resulted in Allison pulling Renee with her to the middle of the room, where most of the dancing happened. There weren't ever more than five or ten girls dancing, but it looked like fun anyways.

Andrew had walked away from their group as soon as too many others participated in it and took a
spot in the corner of the room, close to the door. Seth looked after Allison for a little until he realised
that she wasn't coming and seemed a lot more displeased than Neil would have given him credit for.
He looked at the others for a second before walking into the corner and crossing his arms while
leaning against the wall next to Andrew.

Neil thought there was something almost comical about the way Seth and Andrew stood there next
to each other, both a little grumpy but still remotely interested in the situation. He liked the way the
Foxes mixed a little. Even if their only similarities were Exy and disliking people, they got along for
once. Neil didn't especially approve of the glasses in everyone's hands, and of how quickly everyone
seemed to go through them, but he thought he'd live with that for a day.

He listened to Kevin for a little, talked to quite a number of Vixens, and relaxed in the atmosphere
for a little. Today was fading into tomorrow and no one really cared about it. There was chatter,
music, food, and the mood that really made you feel welcome. Neil went to the corner of the room
after a while, and leaned against it next to Andrew while Allison appeared and took Seth's hand,
pulling him with her to… somewhere, probably.

"Hey," Neil said with a smile.

"Can you keep your mouth shut for ten minutes?" Andrew answered and Neil almost laughed. He
knew how to deal with Andrew's way of talking by now.

"Is that your turn?" Neil asked and Andrew made an annoyed sound. He couldn't care about it,
though. Andrew being annoyed meant Andrew being affected and that was more than he got some
nights.

"Definitely not. What's the story behind Abram? That's my turn."

Neil had known this was gonna happen since he'd refused to give a straight answer the last time. But
with his muscles aching in the most positive way there was, with the air buzzing and all of this lazy
type of excitement in the air, Neil couldn't even be annoyed or displeased. He felt light, and this
couldn't weigh him down. He didn't even flinch at the name this time.

"It's my second name. My mother used it when I grew up and my father tried to beat it out of me
after she left. So… I haven't heard it in over eight years before yesterday."

"So Abram is a wound," Andrew stated, not even implying a question but giving the answer he
expected anyways.

Neil thought about that. About how his father pressed a cigarette or the tip of a knife into his arms
whenever Neil answered to the name. About how he had reserved it when he was at the Ravens,
because Junior didn't exist to them. He was being called Nathaniel for the first time, he got the new
official identity of Neil Josten, the unofficial identity of Four but… through all those years, he kept
holding on to Abram, when the only positive thing he associated with it was the mother that had left
him.

"True," he answered after a while and Andrew shrugged. "Why don't you put effort into Exy?
Everyone knows what you're capable of from last year, so how can you just let the others score like
this?" Neil asked then, wasting his turn once again.

Andrew glared at him before sipping his glass. "Because Exy is boring when everyone is pleased
with what you do and if it gets any more boring, even death will be more interesting," Andrew
answered and Neil frowned at him. How could you be so good at something yet care so little about
it?
Then again, Andrew hadn't grown up with Exy being his life. Andrew hadn't been reminded of his abilities being the only reason for him being alive for the past decade. Neil thought perhaps this was a healthier view on the game than his. Perhaps doing it because it was interesting was more intelligent than doing it because you don't know how to do anything else.

"You're staring," Andrew said and Neil blinked at him. Andrew didn't even look at Neil, he was watching the scene, eyes moving from one person to the next. This wasn't the blank look Andrew usually wore, this was somewhat interested. Almost as if he cared about what happened, eyes on Nicky and Kevin almost all the time.

"So?" Neil asked. He hadn't realised that he had been looking at Andrew, but it wasn't necessary a problem. Neil liked the way he was able to see Andrew in those moments, the way Andrew gave away tiny truths that couldn't be more valuable.

Andrew might deny it and react violently to anyone suggesting it, but he cared for his family. Nicky, Aaron and Kevin might annoy him more than anything else, but he still watched out for them. He made sure they were okay and didn't see too much of a point in expressing that. Andrew did that as a matter of fact, in a way. Neil wondered how anyone could spend time with him for long and still end up calling him violent, monstrous, soulless or dangerous. Neil doubted that Andrew had ever done anything to anyone without a legit reason.

"Don't so me. My turn, what's your real name? You seem to have quite a number of them," Andrew answered, looking at Neil for a little. Neil frowned at Andrew and opened his mouth for the answer, before realising that it wasn't that easy.

"My birth name is Nathaniel Abram Wesninski," Neil answered, but Andrew shook his head.

"I don't have a real name. Closest thing to it would be Neil Josten because it's what I want to be real. Then again, except for the press, no one ever used that name for me until I got here, so it's not — not really a truth," Neil answered and Andrew looked back at him.

"It doesn't have to be used in order to be real. It doesn't have to be given, either. Demand it to be a truth and it will be," Andrew answered with a strange look on his face.

Neil frowned a little. That wasn't true. He couldn't just decide to not be Nathaniel anymore. He couldn't simply claim Abram back after all these years. Couldn't ask for Neil to be considered a truth.

Or could he?

He took a deep breath and looked around. The Foxes had given that possibility to him. The power to make demands. Privacy, company, conversations, silence, friends, family, a name. For once in his life, Neil was able to choose these things. And the even more important aspect was that he had the freedom to make demands, but that this wasn't even necessary most of the time. They were ready to grant him what he needed without questioning it. Without him having to name it specifically, most of the time.

Neil wasn't able to label this warm feeling, but it was entirely positive. He was ready to put everything he had into their games. He wouldn't drag them down. Neil looked at all of them – smiling, laughing, dancing, spending time with each other – and felt a grim smile appear on his lips. Neil wouldn't fail. He simply refused to.
Neil thought of the next month and found that he'd managed to come upon something worth holding on to. He would have something worth looking forward to.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS!
The comments on the previous chapter had me crying with laughter sometimes! You're amazing! I was so happy to see that some of you (Cas, eliza, I'm looking at you!) are still there! And booksbreakhearts, you're a sweetheart! Then Chocolate_Hell_Cookies_Freedom2481999, you made me cry, and Bee17, you were a little disturbing if I'm honest.

I hope it's okay that I post it this public because you guys are amazing!

Also thank you two thousand times for more than 2K hits! That's amazing! Seriously awesome! Honestly, this is great (Sorry, Saya)

BY THE WAY a huge thanks for reading? I'm blown away by all of this! You seriously make me so happy and I hope that I can give a little back by writing for you!

And last but not least, AsfaHan, you! Just you! Thank you for telling me to go to bed after reading literal trash! Thank you for being there and being you and thank you for everything else!
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Kathy's show, or rather the beginning of it ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil wanted to commit murder.

They had stayed at the party until three am and six in the morning would be an unholy hour to get up anyways. How did Matt's alarm clock have the nerve to wake them?

He groaned loudly and got up, climbing down the ladder while Matt was still trying to turn off the annoying beeping.

"Matt, if you don't turn that off this second, I'm gonna kill you," Seth yelled into his pillow. As if on queue, a knock sounded on their door.

The three of them sighed heavily and Neil went outside the bedroom in order to open the door.

"Five minutes and the bus leaves. Tell them they can run after us if they don't make it by then," Wymack said and made an annoyed sound when Neil looked at him blankly. "What's your problem, Josten?"

Neil almost flinched back at the bark and just shook his head a little. "Tired," he answered and Wymack rolled his eyes.

"What did you do last night? Are the Upperclassmen or Andrew's lot gonna looks as dead as you do?" he asked and Neil stretched his armes a little before answering.

"All of us. There was a party with the Vixens and I think we all got a maximum of three hours of sleep, so…"

"Is anyone hurt? The number of team members is still ten, right?" Wymack asked and Neil offered him a shrug.

"We're all alive. Ten minutes?" Neil asked and Wymack rolled his eyes.

"I said five, it's only four thirty to go. Hurry," he said and Neil sighed heavily. This was exhausting already.

He went back inside and got dressed in the bathroom before preparing coffee for the others and himself. They basically drowned their cups and Matt swore a little when he almost burned his tongue.

They got out of their room five minutes late but the bus was waiting, quite obviously. The three of them got on there and Wymack shook his head.
"What part of five minutes did you misunderstand? Seriously, how incredibly incompetent can three grown men be? We're on a schedule!" he barked, but Matt laughed.

"C'mon, Coach, we're here! What's the matter?" he asked while slipping into the bunk next to Dan, who was half asleep against the window. Seth sat down next to Allison, who leaned her head against his shoulder and intertwined their fingers right away.

Neil looked from Renee to the Monsters and decided to go to the back. Andrew was in the last bunk, one was free, Kevin slept in the one after that and Aaron and Nicky shared the one in front of him. Neil got into the seat behind Kevin and in front of Andrew, leaning his back against the window. He liked sitting there sideways, being able to see all of them comfortably.

"I'm so tired," he mumbled and got nothing but a glare by Andrew. Neil looked up and shook his head a little. "Why are you always so annoyed?"

Andrew kept glaring and shook his head. "Because you always give me a reason to. Now shut up, I'm trying to sleep. You're the reason we're in this mess," he accused Neil and he almost laughed.

"It's Kevin's fault as well. And they're probably more interested in him, don't blame me," Neil answered and Andrew simply closed his eyes and leaned back.

"At least he has the decency to not disturb us even further," Andrew mumbled and Neil couldn't help watching him. The way Andrew let down his guard was familiar to him from their nights on the roof, but this was even more. He relaxed all the way, pulling his feet onto the bunk to get into a slightly more comfortable position. Neil realised that Andrew was measuring his pulse on his wrist before taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, while his body lost all the tension and soon, Andrew's breathing was so regular and his whole body so calm that Neil knew he was asleep. It was a weird realisation and it was weird that it was weird.

Neil found some comfort in this, in Andrew letting his guard down, in most of the Foxes sleeping and just being together. He closed his eyes and let the feeling fill him all the way until he fell asleep.

He woke up quite some time later, by his phone buzzing in his pocket. Neil sighed heavily and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes before checking it. Who knew his number and had a reason to text him? His immediate thought was Nicky being his annoying self, but when he checked the message, Neil realised that Mary Hatford had send it.

He frowned and checked it and Neil was quite genuinely relieved when he saw the "There you go" in addition to obviously information about a bank account. This was just a wrong-number text.

Wymack pulled into a gas station a few minutes later, and Abby, Renee and Wymack, the only others who were awake, went outside in order to get food, gas and coffee. Neil chose to take the chance and get up. He walked out of the bus and went a few steps until he could still see it but wouldn't be heard by the others when they'd get back.

Neil pulled out his phone and hesitated for a few seconds before calling Mary. She picked up right away and Neil heard her joy when she answered with "Good morning, Abram!"

"Hey… isn't it evening for you?," he asked and heard a soft laugh. "I'm just calling because of a text you send me. Some bank account. I wanted to let you know in case you forgot sending it to the person that's actually meant to receive it."

"I wasn't sending anything to a wrong number, Abram, this is for you. The Moriyamas didn't give you anything, I suppose, so… I don't know. Consider it my lazy attempt at being a mother," she answered and Neil frowned a little. She wasn't serious, was she?
"How much is on there?" he asked hesitantly and Mary laughed a little.

"Not too much. You'll be able to live a nice life until you make a living with that sport of yours. Feel free to ask for more, should you need anything. And I saw your game this morning. Last night, I mean. You did a good job," she added and Neil almost smiled.

"Thank you for the money. And you didn't know one last thing about Exy when I was a child. That didn't change, did it?"

Mary sighed a little and Neil had to smile, now. She'd sat through the game for the sake of watching him. That was really comforting, in a way. "No. But that's not the point. I want you financially independent so you won't have to make stupid decisions, clear? Because my money is your money and you won't ever owe me anything. Different story for anyone else, keep that in mind."

Neil sighed a little. He wasn't in for a lecture at the moment. "Okay. I don't need a lot, I'll make it work with what you sent, thanks again. So… how was the flight?" he asked and it felt really weird. He had seen his mother for the first time in ten years and two days later she was on another continent again.

"It was average. Nothing special. What about the past days for you?" she asked back and Neil bit his lip a little. Wymack, Renee and Abby exited the gas station again, but Abby handed a bag to their Coach and walked over to Neil when she saw him standing away from the bus.

"Hey, Neil, is everything fine? Do you need a moment?" she asked with a smile and looked at him. Neil shook his head a little.

"It was fine. The game was very nice. But I gotta hang up, we're driving somewhere at the moment and I need to get back on the bus," he answered and Abby smiled, walking towards the bus slowly, but Neil stayed at her side.

Mary sighed a little and Neil heard her swallow hard. "Alright, have fun, Abram! I— stay save," she said as a goodbye before hanging up.

"You don't have to talk about it, but you can," Abby said lowly and Neil shrugged a little.

"There's nothing to be kept a secret. It was my mother, that's it," he answered and Abby smiled a little.

"That's nice, I suppose. I don't see you this calm very often," Abby commented and they got to the bus together.

"What took you so long?" Wymack asked in an annoyed way and Abby smiled while shrugging.

"Nothing important, sir. Sorry for the delay," Neil answered and Wymack groaned while starting to drive again.

"We talked about the sir thing. Now either get some coffee or some more sleep," he ordered and Neil took the cup Renee offered gladly, walking to his seat in the back again. He sipped the coffee and took out his phone again. Decided to go to the bank's webpage and type in the data his mother had sent him. He was almost sure that he had misread something when he saw the zeros. Five hundred thousand dollars. Half a million. He choked a little and drank some coffee in an attempt to calm his throat. What the hell?

He wrote a text to Mary, saying "A tenth of this would have been too much already." to which Mary answered "You're welcome!" a little later.
"Josten, wake the others," Wymack called when he was halfway through his cup of coffee and Neil sighed. He knew how much of a challenge a simple thing like waking Kevin could be, so Neil started by getting up and nudging Nicky softly. Nicky awoke quickly and pushed against Aaron, who woke up right away himself. Neil went on by shaking Kevin's shoulder, which resulted in nothing but his hand being pushed away lazily.

"Kevin, get up," he mumbled and shook him again. Kevin turned a little and shifted uncomfortably, sighing heavily in his sleep and muttering things like 'fake fan' and 'rude'. Neil almost laughed a little. How had he woken Kevin up earlier? Usually by taking the blankets and pillows away or by pushing him out of bed. The last one was more realistic, considering that there was nothing to take away from him at the moment. He took Kevin's wrists and jerked, making his upper body fall and making Kevin use his arms in order to keep himself from falling. "Renee has coffee. How about you go to the front and get some?" Neil asked and Kevin nodded a little, walking up to the others very slowly.

That left him with Andrew. Neil knew that he reacted violent to being woken up, and he'd seen the others playing cruel games with that, throwing stuff at him when he was sleeping and making fun of the way he defended himself. Neil didn't want to use that technique.

He sat down in his bunk again and said his name softly. "Andrew. Hey. Morning. We're there soon, you gotta get up."

It took ages for Andrew to open his eyes, but he did eventually. Blinking at Neil with a frown in his eyes, he let his joints crack and stretched his legs out. Neil almost smiled at the way he did this, resembling a cat a lot.

Kevin was in his seat again, drinking coffee and nibbling a pretzel. "Neil? I'm tired and in a bad mood, so do me a favour and don't be yourself in front of the press. No spikes against the Ravens or the family, alright? Be the 'Neil Josten' the master wanted you to be in front of the press," Kevin said slowly and in a hoarse voice. Neil didn't have it in him to let this slide, despite Kevins sleepy state.

"I won't say anything positive about them, if that's what you're suggesting. And don't you think it's about time to stop calling Tesuji the master? It's been almost a year since you were finally able to leave them behind. They didn't waste any chance to hurt you, they took so much. You should stop granting them anything at all," Neil said and sighed a little at Kevin's stare.

"You got out of there a few months ago. How can you be like this? You're disrespectful and seem so unaffected by everything that happened. You were in there on your own. How is that even possible?"

Neil bit his lip a little and shrugged slightly. "I'm everything but unaffected because I was in there on my own. You were his favourite, Kevin. Riko is messed up on so many levels, but he always liked you best. I'm not saying he wasn't horrible, he was jealous and I'm not talking the breaking of your hand down, but you never experienced him this hurt and angry and frustrated. I hate him with an intensity that's still not enough for what they did to me. They stole your childhood and our teens, how can you not scream every time you think of what they did to you? You lost months of practice. Years of your life. How is respect even still an option when everything those people did was destroy your psyche and abuse every aspect of our lives? Don't you get that everything they ever did was exploitation and harm?"

Matt turned around when he heard Neil's emotional outbreak. His voice had sounded louder than he had intended to, but this made him so angry! How was Kevin so spineless? How was he so incredibly loyal?
Neil shrugged at Matt who gave him a smile and a thumbs-up. Why was Matt such a great person? It was unfair.

Kevin looked at Neil for a very long time with his lips pressed together and his hand so tense around the paper-cup of coffee that it was bending a lot. Then he simply shook his head one time and broke their eye contact, staring out of the windrow. Neil sighed and turned his back to him, catching Andrew considering him in an interested way.

Neil shot him a questioning look and Andrew shrugged. "He should have heard that years ago. Too late for it to make a difference now, but significant either way."

"Andrew I can hear you," Kevin said with a scratch in his voice, and Andrew seemed annoyed.

"Congratulations," he said in a dry tone, but his eyes were still on Neil. Neil wondered what Andrew saw or looked for or recognised, but he didn't want to ask, really.

"No offence, but it was about time you hear it from someone that's actually entitled to have an opinion on the matter," Nicky mumbled in front of Kevin and Neil swallowed hard. He was so mad at Kevin!

Wymack pulled into the parking lot in front of the studio and had his ID checked before parking. Neil left the Monsters in an attempt to avoid Kevin, sticking with Matt instead.

"What's up with you and Kevin?" Matt asked and Neil sighed lowly.

"He has a different view on what years of abuse are supposed do to your perception of a person," Neil answered dryly and Matt swallowed. He knew that he wasn't really in the position to judge either of them, so Matt simply patted Neil's shoulder softly.

"I'm sorry. Anything you want me to do?" Matt asked while a security guard led the twelve of them inside and down a few corridors.

Neil shook his head and tried smiling a little. Matt was such a great friend… "Thank you, but I'll live," Neil answered and Matt smiled down at him.

They were led into a room and Kathy Ferdinand stood in there with a few staff members, discussing stuff enthusiastically. She turned around when she heard the Foxes entering and wore the brightest smile there was.

"Kevin Day! Long time no see! Good morning, guys!" she called and reminded Neil of Marissa with all of the exclamation marks audible so clearly. She went over to hug Kevin and he smiled at her brightly. All of the Foxes seemed very awake, suddenly, though most of them had been sound asleep ten minutes ago.

She greeted Wymack and smiled at all of them brightly.

"So, the plan for today is a short comment on the game by all of you for quoting you during the talk, we'll have Kevin and Neil on stage, representing the team while we're on air, though. And… I'm sorry, is everything alright?" she asked, looking at Allison, who seemed annoyed beyond measure.

"Oh, yeah. I just think it's funny how we were told that this would be about the Foxes and Kevin and Neil of all people are chosen, when choosing any of us would have been just as likely, right?" Allison answered. Her annoyed look was gone, she was beaming at Kathy now, clearly making use of her press skills.
Kathy smiled back and nodded. "What an coincidence, isn't it? Now, would all of you do me the favour and get ready while I go through the questions with the two of them?"

Allison shook her head a little while looking at Wymack. "You owe all of us a day off training for making us attend. I can't believe this!" She sighed heavily and Seth smirked proudly while they left Kathy, Kevin and Neil alone. Matt ruffled Neil's hair one time and smiled at him reassuringly before leaving.

"So, Neil Josten, it's great to meet you!" she said and offered him a hand. Neil shook it and tried smiling at her, but he'd always been suspicious. A person that made Riko seem so angelic on TV couldn't be trusted, and how she treated Allison was just not okay.

"Pleasure's mine," he mumbled and sighed uncomfortably. He'd prefer pretty much anyone over Kevin and Kathy right now.

"Alright, we have clothes for the both of you ready, the stylists are in your dressing room as well, so that's no concern. Questions are about the game, training, Palmetto, the Foxes, your transfer--"

"No," Neil answered and she looked a little startled.

"Excuse me?" she asked with a bright smile that couldn't fool anyone.

"I won't talk about the transfer to the Foxes or Edgar-Allan in general. That's not up for discussion," he said and Kathy raised an eyebrow, looking at Kevin, whose smile seemed forced as well.

"Neil, you can't really demand this," Kevin started, but Neil looked at him challenging.

"Don't tell me what to do, Kevin. You don't want me to comment on the time so don't make me talk about it," Neil answered and Kevin's face became several shades paler.

"Hey, guys, is everything alright? I want you to keep it together for the show, you wouldn't want to face the nation as less of a union than you are," she said with a stern voice and Neil looked at Kevin for a second. What exactly were they arguing about? Their way of coping with their shared past? How stupid was that?

"We're good, Kathy, don't worry! And feel free to ask about the transfer in teams, it's what the fans are interested in, after all," Kevin answered and Neil felt betrayed. Why did he even consider setting things straight with Kevin when he obviously didn't have any interest in it.

Kathy didn't care about Neil's cold expression, but smiled at Kevin brightly. "Awesome! We're gonna talk about your new status as well, yeah?" she made sure, looking at Neil again.

Neil frowned a little and shrugged. "You mean the transfer in positions?" he asked, and Kathy laughed.

"God, you're adorable. No, it's about your NCAA status as third ranking striker in Class I college Exy," she explained in a tone that suggested that she thought Neil was a child.


"If you watched the news or cared about Exy, you'd have known. After last night, you're number three when it comes to strikers. Right behind me," Kevin explained and Neil heard blood rushing in his ears. What?
Kathy laughed at that and nudged Neil softly. "Wow, that's more like what I want to see later! You're adorable, try keeping that innocent, childlike look on your face, yeah? And now get ready, I'll need you about thirty minutes into the show!"

Kevin hugged her again and Neil sighed heavily before going to the dressing room he and Kevin shared. Stylists were in there, handing them clothes even as the boys entered the room. Neil frowned down at the pile of clothes in his hands and walked into the bathroom. He wouldn't change in front of these strangers.

He considered himself in the mirror after wearing this very Raven-ish outfit. It looked as if it was straight from a photo shooting, the way the torn black jeans were so tight on his legs, the way the white longsleeve was half hidden by a black plaid shirt. He sighed a little and went outside again, sitting down in a chair and letting the other people put make up onto his face, styling his hair in that way that made the curls look purposefully messy.

"Neil," Kevin started, but Neil didn't want to hear anything.

"Leave me alone, Kevin," he answered and stared himself into the eyes in the mirror.

Kevin sighed heavily and Neil heard him swallow. "I'm proud, you know? Of your status. And I'm thankful for what you did for me during the past years, but I can't let it go as easily," he almost whispered.

Neil clenched his teeth, thinking of the four stylists that were present. He wanted to talk to Kevin. Scream at him for what he was throwing away.

"We can talk this through later," he answered lowly and sighed a little when the two stylists left him and smiled, telling him they were done. Finally. They got some information over their earbuds and told the boys that their appearance was gonna be set in around ten minutes.

Neil and Kevin were led down some corridors and a staff member told them to stay silent while Kathy restarted after a commercial break.

"Alright, this is the moment all of you have been waiting for, isn't it? I present to you, after their first game in this season, the Palmetto State Foxes, represented today by two of their strikers, Kevin Day and Neil Josten!"

Neil took a deep breath and pushed his shoulders back, gaining a better posture.

"Don't forget to smile. We're in there together," Kevin mumbled and Neil nodded a little. He was still angry at Kevin's ignorance, but then again, that's what siblings did under regular conditions, right? They had fights and hated each other but were there when it came down to it.

Kevin and him entered the stage and Kathy greeted the both of them with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, really playing it up for the camera.

Neil might have come to terms with arguing with Kevin, but that didn't mean that he was okay with Kevin in general, so when he saw the two sofas that were standing there next to each other – four people had been on stage before and apparently one commercial break wasn't enough to carry one of them back down – he sat down on the one Kevin wasn't sitting on. He wore the press smile Kevin had been teaching him for days when Tesuji had considered Neil a little too grumpy for the press to deal with.

"So, I'm guessing I'm not alone when I say that your performance yesterday was more than anyone would have expected, right?" Kathy asked into the camera and was supported by some laughter by
the small studio audience. Neil tried to ignore them, but this made him look up at them anyways. He felt bad for a second, seeing them stare at him, not the Exy player in gear on court, but himself, plain and ordinary Neil Josten. Something shifted inside him, but it was shushed when he saw the Foxes in the front row. The lights were too bright to make out any other faces, but seeing them was strangely comforting.

"How did you do it? It was the first game for the two of you and five of the eight goals were your accomplishments, right?" she asked Kevin and Neil now. Kevin nodded and seemed a little proud.

"That's true. I think what everyone was able to see is that the team changed since last year. I had the pleasure of coaching them for half a year, and the willingness of them to put effort into this has increased a lot. I also think that you can really see an improvement in skills and more motivation, so that's probably a reason. Yesterday was a close call and I really think that we improved and that the upcoming season will be intense and very interesting to follow," Kevin answered in a really fake-excited voice. How did anyone believe him?

"Neil, this was your first college Exy game, right? How do you view it? What do you think your transfer in positions did to the game? How do you think it went?"

Neil didn't like the way she just talked on and on and on. The questions were mostly unrelated but he wouldn't be able to talk for long without being interrupted, though he'd really enjoy talking about these matters!

"It was incredible, in a way. The game didn't change, but everything else did. The atmosphere, the team, the audience. It felt miraculous! Even more when I scored. I'm no good striker yet, I suppose, but I'm still proud to be where I am after only a little over two months of training. And I think the close call yesterday really speaks for the Foxes as a team. Just imagine their performance with three strikers on the lineup that actually spend half their lives training on that position. It's unbelievable, really, how much they improved. I couldn't wish for a better team, if I'm honest," Neil answered, and he felt the smile on his cheeks shift from the "press-smile" to his personal one. At least he didn't have to lie. He might not especially like half the team, but he valued them, appreciated them, and he was a lot closer to liking than to disliking Aaron or Allison if it came down to it.

"Speaking of better teams, the both of you share a little something here, right? You grew up at Edgar Allan together, so the Ravens would have been the obvious choice. Why transfer? Why to the Foxes, of all teams, when you could have gone for the Big Three?" Kathy asked, only looking at Kevin. Neil felt the urge to get up and leave, but he knew that both Wymack and Kevin would kill him, so he remained still with a smile plastered to his face.

"That's a complicated question, really. The thing is, I didn't want to leave the Ravens at any point of the way, all my friends were there, my family, they were all I had. But with my hand broken and my career pretty much destroyed, I couldn't stay. I couldn't do them any good, they had the perfect trainers and players. I still wanted to do Exy in a way, and I knew Coach David Wymack pretty well, so we talked it through. The Foxes were my first choice because of him and because of the team, of course." Kevin seemed to be so comfortable, but Neil didn't like what he said. He made the Foxes seem unskilled and unprofessional.

"So you're suggesting that maybe your transfer is a reason for their sudden improvement?" Kathy asked, hitting the nail on the head.

Kevin laughed shortly and shook his head. "Not at all. I'm saying that I supported them as a trainer, they archived this on their own. I think they have an interesting lineup, and you could seriously see them improving over the whole past year, so I'm not sure how much I contributed."
Kathy smiled, seeming pleased with the way this statement would portray Kevin. "Neil, what about you? Why did you transfer, and what is your role in this?"

Neil pressed his lips together. "I've said everything I have to say about my transfer before, so if you're interested in what information I'm willing to give, watch that, maybe. And if you're interested in additional information, then do me a favour and talk to Coach Wyman beforehand so we can make sure which facts are suitable for TV and which ones aren't, alright, Kathy?" he asked with a bright smile on his lips, emphasising her name the way she emphasised his all the time. Kevin's smile lost some brightness and Kathy's turned smaller, but Neil went on.

"As for the second part, I think my place on the team shows how great they are. If they can almost win with only two legit strikes on their line up, that shows how incredibly good their performance was in general. I'm proud to be able to play with them, and I'm looking forward to support them in every way I can."

Kathy smiled at that, but Neil didn't like the look on her face. "How cute, isn't he? Neil Josten, everyone!" she exclaimed and there was actual applause by the audience. "And what you just said was interesting. About the team. I know you don't want to talk about it, but there's a four tattooed to your cheek, a two on Kevin's, and One and Three are taken as well. So what do you think about the Perfect Court, as Coach Tesuji Moriyama liked to call his favourites? Do you think it could still happen? I mean, being on different college teams doesn't mean you can't be Court together, at one point, right?"

Neil was taken aback by this a little. He hadn't considered playing with Riko again, but she was right. This was a legitimate possibility.

He felt something freeze inside him and made sure his smile wasn't shaking. Not everything, he reminded himself, Riko was not everything.

"I have honestly not thought about that, yet. It's an interesting idea, though. I guess we'll see what happens when the time is ready. As in any team, there are always people you'd rather play with again than with others, so there's that."

Kevin sighed a little at that, but Kathy smiled even more brightly. "True words, Neil, I'm sure everyone agrees. Also, I hope that you're happy about a special guest I invited for today's show and that he doesn't belong to the group of people you'd prefer not to play with anymore," she said with a giggle and Neil frowned deeply. What was she talking about? Who was she talking about? Was she was even serious? Neil thought she'd prank him in a way, fool him, maybe?

"So, a little birdie told me, while him and Kevin have already seen each other on some occasions since their transfer, that you haven't had the chance to meet him in a few months. So, ladies and gentlemen, welcome number three onto the stage, Jean Moreau!"

The audience went crazy, started screaming, almost flipped, and Neil… Neil stared at the entrance until he saw Jean walking in, wearing that smile all of them shared, but managing to look insecure and apologetical at the same time. Then he… what exactly? Then he got up and ran and hugged him close. Neil wrapped his arms around Jean's rib cage and hid his face in the taller boy's neck. They hadn't ever been big huggers, but Neil needed to have him close.

"You're safe," he whispered and couldn't let go. Relief washed over him, nearly drowning Neil. He clenched onto Jean's shirt and Jean's arms were around his shoulders, pulling Neil closer as well.

He'd thought there'd be mixed feelings towards Jean, but he'd been wrong. This was relief, happiness, love, affection. Everything. This was something he was willing to let in, pull him with it.
"I'm so glad you're out of there," Jean whispered in French. He hadn't been there for Neil very often in the Nest. Hadn't taken care if him, hadn't defended him. But he'd always been there. He'd always woken Neil up when he'd had nightmares. Had taught him French. Helped him with homework. Jean had been present, and Neil realised that turning away was a bad thing, a mistake Jean had made over and over again, but that he always turned back around.

"Hey, easy. It's fine. I didn't know you'd be here until I saw the Fox-bus, but I couldn't reach either of you, sorry," Jean said lowly and Neil nodded. He wouldn't cry on TV. They let go slowly and Neil ran his hand over his eyes. He felt happiness in every cell of his body, felt warmth fill him. He'd done it. He'd managed to keep the both of them safe. Seeing them here, next to each other, smiling, so obviously healthy and fine was a lot. Too much to keep the tears out of his eyes. He managed to suppress them, though. He wouldn't cry on TV, but he felt his eyes burning in the most positive way.

Jean greeted Kevin with a smile and sat down on Kevin's sofa, but practically next to Neil because of the arrangement. Kevin's smile was legit now, and when he beamed at Neil, Neil couldn't help but smile back.

"So, here we have the three members of the Perfect Court that decided to leave the Ravens behind. Is there anything you guys agree on missing there?" she asked and they exchanged looks. Did she have to take this moment from them?

"What I really miss are the rooms. Try finding two bed-rooms on any other college," Jean started and Neil and Kevin laughed a little forced. They didn't have positive memories of their time at Edgar Allan. Not a single one.

"I kinda miss the food, because we do have a cafeteria for athletes, but we end up eating junk food in our rooms anyways, and that diet makes me sick at the moment," Kevin answered light heartedly and the audience chuckled.

Kathy turned to Neil now, smiling brightly, implying the 'What about you?' pretty obviously.

Neil shrugged a little and bit his lip before remembering that she couldn't take the happiness by such a small question. This was his moment.

"If I'm honest, what I missed most was not a thing. Kevin and Jean. I missed them so much when they transferred, but now that they're both here, I don't have a whole lot to miss anymore. Nothing I don't have at the Foxes, really," Neil answered and while he knew that Kevin didn't approve of the answer, the smile on his face gave away what this meant to him.

"We won't kick you out, stop licking our boots!" Allison called while laughing in the front row and Kathy gave her a death stare for a split second before turning back to Neil with a bright smile.

"That's a really nice thing to say. I'm just wondering if something looks a little off here. Does anyone else have the feeling that something's missing?" she asked into the camera and Jean and Kevin shot each other confused looks while Neil felt his happiness drown in ice water.

"Raven King," someone called, while someone else said something like "Number One," and others only yelled his name. No! No, no, no, no, no!

Kathy smiled even more brightly at that. "You guessed it! I said something incredible was gonna happen today, didn't I? So let's all welcome Number One, the only member of the Perfect Court that's still missing!"
They'd cheered when Kevin and Neil entered the stage and they'd been excited when Jean came as well. But this? This was crazy. They went wild. The happier they became, the more Neil's shoulders sunk. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Couldn't move. Couldn't feel anything anymore.

Neil's fingernails dug themselves into the bandages at his wrists until he felt perceived pain in the back of his mind. His vision turned blurry and when he looked at Kevin for reassurance, he could see terror beneath his nearly-perfect mask. Neil turned to Jean then, but he was totally frozen. They were back to square one. Jean too weak to stand up, Kevin too afraid, and Neil on the blurred line between helpful and disobedient. But too much had happened. He couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't.

Neil looked up at a sudden and low "Andrew, what the hell?" from the audience. He couldn't make out expressions, but he saw Wymack looking at Andrew while the other boy looked at Neil or Kevin or the stage. Neil looked for something to hold onto and he found it in the blade that reflected light in Andrew's lap. Andrew was there and he had his knives out. He was ready to be there for them if it came down to it. Andrew's presence was oddly comforting.

Riko entered the stage and Neil pushed his shoulders back. He'd left as a victim, he wouldn't face him as one.

Chapter End Notes

Guyyyyyyyyyy
Sorry for ending the chapter here but I didn't have a choice hahaha it would have easily ended up being 10 k words by the point I wanted to end it (which will be the ending of the next chapter now, what the hell???)

Also thank you for the comments! Someone binge read the whole thing, can you imagine?

I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts because I'd probably stop writing if it weren't for them. You make me smile so badly! I love the 2.2K people who waste their time on this so much it's not even funny!

But of course there's one person that wastes more time than anyone else on R2F, and that's beautiful AsfaHan. I've said it before and I'll say it again, you're incredible. Thanks for putting up with me oversha ring my personal life and Neil's journey. Thanks for keeping up with my "I think XXX is gonna die in the story" at around two am. Thanks for being in this with me ❤️
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Kathy's show
Training
Roof

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kathy got up and hugged Riko as well, smiling brightly. "There we have him, Riko Moriyama. The King of Exy, the only Raven on the Perfect Court so far."

"Pleasure to see you again, Kathy!" he answered, and sat down next to Neil on the sofa. Kathy smiled so brightly at all of them and Neil felt sick. She made money by bringing them together. The Fox and the Rabbit. Just that Neil refused to be the rabbit this time around.

"There you are, four out of four, reunited for the first time in eight months. How does that feel?"

Kevin ran a hand through his hair and smiled, regaining his press-self again. "It's fantastic. We spent so much time together growing up, but a part of becoming an adult is separating yourself from your roots a little. This feels really good, am I right? A little like time traveling," he started and all of the others agreed.

"Edgar Allan is empty without them in the Nest," Riko added with a bright smile on his lips, and when he shifted a little, his and Neil's legs touched and Neil wanted to throw up.

"So you're saying that perhaps there's something missing on the team? I mean, Jean is number one Backliner on NCAAs list and Kevin and Neil are star-Strikers right behind you. That's quite negative for the team, isn't it?" Kathy asked and smiled at Riko, who simply shrugged a little.

"The Ravens are almost undefeated, and we don't depend on certain members on our lineup. So I don't think that the transfer of some players has a negative effect on us, honestly," Riko answered and Neil felt his jaw tense.

"I bet you wish you would have thought about that before raising us to be Exy players, right?" Neil asked with a laugh in his voice, but the accusation was in there anyways.

Riko raised an eyebrow at that and smiled a little. "My family took you in and provided you with the same opportunities I had. Exy is a family sport for us. Training with you guys never had anything to do with success or chances and you all know that, don't you?" he asked and nudged Neil softly.

"Are you sure? Because the numbers tattooed on our cheeks kinda say something else," Neil answered and Riko raised his eyebrows.

"We got them because we're brothers, didn't we? Neil, is everything alright? You seem angry about something. Is it because of the absolute amount of incapability you proved to have yesterday?" Riko asked back and Neil laughed a little.
"Sure, brothers with the same opportunities. That's the reason there are different numbers, right? Because we're all equal?" Neil asked and Kathy clapped a little.

"Guys, sorry to interrupt — I know there's a lot to talk through after meeting for the first time in forever, but we have a little something to talk about. The different teams, for example. How is that going? I mean, you all grew up as Ravens, and the Trojans and Foxes are totally different, aren't they?" Kathy tried to keep her voice melodious, but it didn't really work. She was too tense.

"I find it interesting, if I'm honest. The Foxes train in a very different way and it's something entirely new to me. I think that it's a good thing to make various experiences," Kevin answered, and Jean nodded.

"That's true. Raven-training was centred around your own performance. You were trained to be the best player you can be. It was rather pairs, though. You and your roommate spent most of training together as well. At USC, training is about the team in general, interaction is the keyword. That's a great change, in a way," Jean added and swallowed. He'd talked back to Riko a little. Calling USC better than Edgar Allan. That was unacceptable.

"How great that you get to make new experiences! What does our dearest striker have to say about training without his former teammates?" Kathy asked, smiling brightly at Riko, who smiled back with a toothy grin.

"Honestly, I don't think too much changed since they—"

"Oh Goodness, Riko, how awkward, isn't it? She said Dearest Striker, so she's obviously referring to Kevin. We'll just pretend this didn't happen!" Neil promised and Riko's perfect mask actually fell for a second.

"How c—" Riko started, but Neil interrupted him again, not even reacting to Riko's statement.

"So, Kevin. How's training without the Ravens?" he asked and Kevin looked between Riko and Neil for a second. Take my side, Neil thought, for once in our lives, take my side!

"It was hard when I started coaching them last year because what I expected was something different from what they were willing to give. But now that it's not them anymore, but us, it's a lot less tense. We adapted to each other a little and it's a great experience!" Kevin answered and Neil smiled. This was great.

Kathy frowned and nodded very slightly, apparently getting directions through her in-ears. Then she smiled very brightly at them.

"I fear we're getting to an end already, how unfortunate! Is there anything you'd still like to say? A prognosis for the upcoming season or your futures, maybe," she suggested.

Riko smiled brightly at that. "I'm looking forward to seeing how the current lineup will affect the Ravens' statistics. I think we have quite a good chance of winning this year."

Kathy turned to Jean then, who shrugged a little. "I enjoy seeing the Trojans from this perspective. They're a great team and I really think that I can learn a lot from them."

Some people clapped and whistled at that, and Neil smiled. Jean could be so nice if he wanted to.

"I think growing into the role of a legit striker will be my ultimate goal for the next couple of weeks and months," Neil answered, and he laughed a little when he heard Seth's "Won't happen," and a slap that he guessed was performed by Allison or Matt.
"What I'm looking forward to most is playing with Neil by my side. I think he and I will make a
great team of strikers. Better that what you've seen anywhere so far," Kevin answered, and Neil had
trouble suppressing a cough. Kevin went against Riko unprovoked. That was something new.
Something he really wanted to get used to!

"Now that we have this settled, I think it's time for some commercials. Thank you for coming, it's
been a pleasure to have you! And I think I'm speaking for everyone when I say that we're looking
forward to the season at least as much as you are!"

The studio lights were turned off and they sat in normal lighting now. Kathy buried her face in her
hands and shook her head. "I'm never surprising guests again. That was a catastrophe!"

The audience chatted loudly and Neil got up with shaking legs. Riko was still sitting there, hands
gripping his knees tightly. "Run, Four, or I'm gonna kill you in front of the cameras," Riko
whispered and Neil didn't really need to challenge him.

"Kevin, Jean, would you wait by the bus? I can get your stuff," he said to Kevin, and the two of
them got up, leaving the stage on their opposite side quickly. Neil released a breath he'd been holding
for about since Riko had entered the room. They were safe again.

"You'll regret this," Riko said, when left him on the sofa and went to exit the stage.

"Not as much as you will regret ever laying a hand on either of them," he answered lowly and left.
Riko would suffer for everything when the time was ready.

Neil went to the changing room and changed back into his own clothes quickly. He sighed when he
felt the familiar fabric on his skin and almost smiled at himself in the mirror when he used some
handkerchiefs to wipe off the make up. That was himself again.

He gathered Kevin's clothes and looked around another time to make sure he had everything he
needed before exiting the room and closing the door behind him. Neil wanted to turn to the right and
walk down the corridor in order to get to the parking lot, but barely suppressed a scream when he felt
a hand on his shoulder, hauling him backwards.

"Nathaniel, considering that you spent the last months running, you're incredibly bad at it, don't you
think so?" Riko asked behind him and suddenly, there was cold metal pressed against his throat. Neil
tensed and felt his breath hitch. Not a rabbit, he reminded himself. Be the fox.

"That's not my name," he said in a stern voice and turned around slowly. Riko didn't press harder but
actually let Neil turn to face him a little. He stoped with Neil halfway around, though. Neil yelped
when Riko kicked him in the back of his knees and let go of Kevin's clothes when he fell.

He cursed himself because they were back here again. Back to Neil on the ground, back to Riko
kneeling on his upper arms, taking every possibility to move.

"Oh, you're not comfortable with Nathaniel? How unfortunate that you don't deserve Four
anymore," he whispered and brought the knife up slowly. "I could cut the number off your face, you
know? Or outline your lips and eyes. I could also just stab you anywhere and see if you're still so
good at suppressing screams. Oh, the possibilities."

Neil swallowed hard and reminded him to breathe. "There are people here. Staff members. They'll
hear me and see you and then all of this will be out. I could scream and there's nothing you could do
about it." Neil's voice was low and dangerous. There was no need for fear. No need for anything but
disgust with this person.
Riko's smile widened. "Oh, and I could slit your throat and let you choke on your own blood. I could do everything to you, and you couldn't stop it."

Neil clenched his muscles, but he couldn't exactly move anything but his legs. Nothing to a useful degree.

"You're so weak. That's repulsive, Nathaniel. But it's all you'll ever be," Riko whispered, while bringing the knife up and pressing it against his untattooed cheek. Slicing across the cheekbone very slowly. Neil pressed his eyes close and tried breathing against the pain. His muscles clenched and his teeth hurt from where he pressed them together. He couldn't muffle a few choked sounds, but he didn't scream. His heart raced and he tried to concentrate on other things. Not the pain. Not the blood running into his ear and hair because of his position. His fists clenched and he thought of the Foxes. Of how they had welcomed him. Of how they'd included him as one of them. Of how he was never second or third or fourth, but equal.

"Look at me, bastard," Riko whispered when he took the knife from Neil's face. Neil opened his eyes and stared up at Riko, who looked like he was gonna say something.

He was interrupted by steps in the hallway. Neil sighed in relief, and even more, when he heard the cold and disconnected "You know what happens when you touch what's mine, Riko."

The murderous boy was still on top of Neil, but before he could bark a response, Andrew was beside them, and he hauled Riko off Neil and slammed him against the wall.

"Andrew, back off. You know what I'm capable of," Riko said with a threat in his voice and Andrew tilted his head a little.

"That's because you always have that family of yours watching your back. But you're here alone, Riko, and I could do what I want. Neil, leave. I'll show Riko out," Andrew said and only then did Neil see the knife Andrew pressed against Riko's throat firmly.

Neil found himself strangely reminded of when his father had been there. When Andrew had protected him the last time. He couldn't believe that this kept happening. Neil went into to their bus while Andrew led Riko into the other direction.

He walked slowly and touched his cheek. His fingers came back with blood, but he didn't flinch at the touch. This was odd… where was the pain?

Neil went around the bus and saw no one but Kevin and Jean outside. Jean turned around quickly and frowned when he saw blood on Neil's cheek. He would have wiped it away, but he kind of wanted Abby to clean this properly. Neil had no need for another scar on his face.

"Riko?" Jean asked, and Neil shrugged a little.

"Where's Andrew? He went looking for you. Neil, did you see him? I'm gonna call him," Kevin mumbled and went to get his phone, but Andrew came out from a different entrance than Neil had a few second later and walked towards them.

"Hey. You good?" Kevin asked with a very worried tone in his voice.

"Just stop," Andrew answered after flicking his fingers into Kevin's face and entered the bus.

"Now that Josten is here, we're leaving," Wymack yelled from the driver's seat, which was totally redundant, considering that they were two meters away.
Neil handed the clothes to Kevin who bit his lip and nodded. "Thanks… I'll leave you two, yeah?" he asked hesitantly and entered the bus as well.

Jean and Neil looked at each other for a while and seemed to be uncomfortable. The silence was heavy, for neither of them knew which words were to be said and which to better remain unspoken. Looks were exchanged and they sighed. Moments of silence felt like weeks and months of separation like seconds.

"I'm sorry about everything I did," Neil started and Jean swallowed hard before nodding.

"I'm sorry for everything I didn't," Jean whispered back. Neil didn't argue. They knew that this was what it boiled down to.

"Since there's no 'back to normal' for us… what do you think of just trying to be – I don't even know – friends? Brothers?" Neil asked and Jean smiled weakly but honestly.

"Something like that. We'll have to figure it out, I guess," Jean answered and they looked at each other again before hugging tightly. Neil wrapped his arms around Jean's rib cage again and he liked how this felt. How letting go afterwards didn't feel like losing him.

How Jean's "Goodbye" sounded like a "See you soon."

"Josten!" Wymack barked a second after Jean turned back around and Neil almost smiled when he got on the bus. The man froze when he caught a look at Neil's face. "What the hell?"

Neil shrugged a little and entered the bus all the way. "It's not deep. Abby, do you have antiseptics with you?" he asked, and the Upperclassmen stared at him, while the Monsters either hadn't noticed him on the bus yet, or didn't care.

Abby pressed her lips together and patted the seat next to her. Neil sat down and stayed still while she took a medical kit out of her purse. That woman…

She cleaned his face quickly and talked him through the entire process, but Neil zoned out. He knew when to brace for the bite of a touch or chemicals. This wasn't new to him.

When she had taken care of him, she actually smiled. "It's not as bad as the blood made it seem. Is everything else alright?" she asked while putting a band aid along the cut.

"I'm fine," Neil answered and she nodded and patted his shoulder softly.

"Great. I'm here should you need anything else," she said and Neil nodded. He got up and walked down the bus, going for his seat in the back, but Matt stopped him.

"Hey, Neil, what happened? And 'Riko' is not a suitable answer," he said and Neil felt their eyes on him.

He shrugged again and swallowed heavily. "Nothing, really. I collected our stuff and Riko was outside the dressing room with a knife. Andrew came and took care of it. Everything's fine!"

"Neil, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but 'being attacked with a knife' doesn't exactly qualify as fine," Allison said and Neil actually smiled at that.

"Thanks for the clarification. We'll see each other later, yeah?" he asked with a small laugh audible in his voice and they nodded.
"Be careful," Dan said and Seth let out a small laugh.

"I know Neil is really stupid, but I think he'll manage walking down the bus," he said and Matt smirked. Man, he really liked these people. They were everything he ever wished for in a team. In friends, even. Just that he never knew what exactly he was missing.

Neil went to the back of the bus and sat down sideways in his bunk again. Nicky looked at him a little worriedly and Neil actually gave him the smallest of smiles. He lost it seconds later, though, when Andrew started talking.

"Stop fighting other people's battles. You're making this harder on everyone," he started, and Neil turned to face him.

"Excuse me?" he asked lowly and felt like his stomach twisted slightly. What was Andrew's problem?

"You provoke him on TV and expect him not to come after you. I don't know if it's stupidity or stubbornness or a mixture, but it's making my job harder," Andrew said calmly, almost disinterested. He looked at Neil, though, and seemed slightly annoyed.

"How am I making your job hard?" Neil asked, not understanding the implications at all.

"I think we can settle for stupidity. I promised to protect you. That's not easy when you literally jump into any situation to get yourself killed," Andrew answered and Neil frowned a little.

"I was making sure all of us would get out of there. He would have been unbearable to Jean and Kevin if I hadn't done anything about it," Neil argued and Andrew simply shook his head.

"Kevin's safety is my business as well. So do me a favour and stay out of it," he said and Neil just laid back against his window. He didn't feel like discussing at the moment.

"Thank you for today. He wouldn't have stopped if you hadn't been there," Neil answered and Andrew actually seemed surprised at this. Neil wasn't fighting, he gave something to Andrew and Andrew wasn't sure how to deal with that. The looks on his face faded away after no longer than a second, but Neil smiled anyways. He liked that he could make Andrew express something. Neil wasn't entirely sure what it was, but it was still nice.

"Shut up and stop staring at me," Andrew demanded and Neil nodded shortly before turning back to Kevin in front of him.

"Kev, we good?" Neil asked lowly and Kevin nodded a little.

"I'm not over it, and it bothers me that you are," he admitted, and Neil almost laughed. He knew this feeling the other way around. He worked so hard on letting the Ravens go, and the way Kevin held on to that part of his life was just so frustrating!

"I almost understand, I guess. But... seriously, Kevin, it's like that one time when we were at a diner and Tesuji told us to behave but we totally didn't and I went back to training the next day, as if nothing had happened, while you apologised for two days straight! That's not needed, Kevin. Everything is over now!" Neil said and Kevin shook his head.

"First of all, today showed every one of us how this isn't over at all. And second of all, you behaved off. I was told to watch you and you got drunk! And apparently, you don't remember most of the night. Otherwise you would have apologised!" Kevin argued, and Nicky turned around in his bunk.
"How is Neil as a usual drunk? I mean, we only saw him totally gone. How is he normally?" Nicky asked and Kevin actually smiled.

"A catastrophe! He can't keep his mouth shut. He's talkative when he's sober, but his brain to mouth filter doesn't work when he's drunk. Now imagine that with people like Riko around!" Kevin said and Nicky laughed.

"Neil, you're unbelievably rude like this! How could it get any worse?" Nicky asked and Neil shook his head, but he smiled a little.

"It's not as bad as he puts it! And now that he tells stupid stories, let me tell you something about Kevin! He might not react too hard to alcohol, but Kevin on sugar is like a child with ADHD that forgot to take his meds. He's buzzing, walking around, voice loud. That's why he doesn't ever eat candy. Sure, it's bad for your body, but it's incredible to Kevin in general!" Neil answered and Kevin rolled his eyes.

"That's not true," he argued, but Nicky smiled brightly already.

"Don't deny it! We knew it wasn't all the way about being healthy! This makes so much sense! That's why you only eat chocolate before training, right?" Nicky asked and Kevin buried his face in his hands.

Neil treasured this. Truths being spilled, without anyone counting. Memories shared so eagerly. Hidden facets of a person slowly rising to the top. He loved to watch the protective layers of these people unfolding. Loved the moment.

He looked back to Andrew ever so often, trying to get him to participate in the conversation a few times, but let it slide whenever Andrew showed him that he didn't want to.

Getting back to the Fox Tower took ages, but this drive felt shorter than the one before. Neil liked the atmosphere, the carefree attitude of his friends.

Wymack dropped them off and they walked upstairs as a group. Neil went to his own room and dropped into a sofa next to Renee. Matt and Dan were in the other one while Allison and Seth shared an armchair, as usual.

"Who's hungry? I'm gonna die if we don't order pizza right now!" Matt announced with a laugh. Renee checked her phone and shook her head a little.

"I'll be gone in ten minutes. Andrew and I will go somewhere, I think we'll be eating out," Renee answered and smiled, while Dan sighed.

"Don't you think you shouldn't spend too much time with him? No offence, but... they're called Monsters for a reason, you know?" Dan said lowly and Renee sighed while Neil frowned.

"You should give him a chance. He's the best Goalkeeper you could have wished for, so just try considering him a person off the court as well," Renee said calmly, but Neil shook his head a little.

"They're called Monsters because you call them that. What exactly makes them monsters? They're good people, when it comes down to it," Neil argued. He wasn't loud or especially accusing with his tone, but he managed to get his point across.

"Neil, not to be rude, but you don't know what they did last year. To Matt, especially. How can you even be like this when only a week ago, Seth picked you up from Columbia?" Dan asked, and Neil took a deep breath.
"I doubt that what they did was worse than what Riko or Tesuji did. I get that you're not friends, and that's none of my business, but you don't really have to talk this badly about them, do you? Seriously, they're not monsters," Neil said silently. He'd seen monsters growing up, and while the group of friends might not exactly qualify as the best people, they sure as hell were nothing compared to the real monsters.

"I mean, if it bothers you…," Matt started and Seth rolled his eyes.

"We don't consider them Monsters, Neil. That's the name of their group. Don't take this personally," he said with a smile, and Renee sighed again.

"He's right, if you think about it. I mean, no problem with the name itself, but you don't have to say it as if you meant it. Deal?" she asked with a smile, and no one bothered agreeing. "Great! So, I'm leaving now. See you guys later!"

Renee got up and waved at them, before exiting the room. Matt looked around for a little before smiling. "So… pizza?" he asked again and the others nodded, but Neil felt weird, thinking about spending the day inside. There were too many feelings left inside, and he needed to get rid of them.

"I'd go to the stadium for an hour or two before eating, if that's fine by you," he said, and they exchanged looks.

"Neil, it's the day after the game, do you really want to play again? Take it easy," Dan said with a smile, but Neil shrugged.

"Why not? I have too much energy and I kinda want to use it up," Neil answered, while they looked at him funnily.

"Alright. We'll just order your usual stuff and you'll eat when you get back, yeah?" Matt asked and Neil nodded before getting up and changing into workout clothes. He said goodbye and went to the Monsters' room – was that an appropriate term?

Neil knocked and Aaron opened the door, seeming annoyed by Neil already. "What?" he asked, and Neil almost frowned. Why in God's name was Aaron so negative?

"Kevin's in the kitchen, but you won't be able to practice with him," Aaron explained and Neil frowned. He went into the kitchen slowly and sighed when he saw Kevin sitting against a wall, with a bottle of vodka on the floor next to him. They'd been home for, what, thirty minutes?

"Kevin?" Neil asked slowly, not sure of his shape.

"We're running in circles, Neil. We don't live at the Nest anymore, but look at you. He'll find ways. We can't do anything about it. He'll catch up and we'll be exactly where we came from. It'll always be the master and Riko against us." Neil had difficulties understanding some words. He mumbled and took sips directly from the bottle, at times. Neil had known this side of Kevin for years now, but if was unbearable anyways.

"Wanna go to bed, Kev? You'll only hurt yourself like this," Neil mumbled. Kevin was too honest when he was drunk. He told you everything he thought, and Neil didn't want to know about some of his thoughts. They were too negative.
"Neil, it's true. And it's noon. I won't go to bed…" Kevin argued and gripped the bottle closer. Neil bit his lip and nodded. He knew from years of experience that pushing Kevin would result in fights, not in solving conflicts.

"Alright… I'll be at the stadium," he said and Kevin shrugged. Neil hated seeing him like this, but he knew that Kevin would need to find the will to stop in himself. He didn't want to, at the moment, and it wasn't Neil's place to push him.

He went to the living room again and looked at Nicky and Aaron, who were both on their phones. Nicky looked up, though, and smiled uncertainly. "I could join you, if you don't wanna go alone," he offered, and Neil considered this for a few moments.

Nicky and him had said they wanted to work this through. He didn't want to endanger whatever they had. Neil also thought that some of Nicky's attitude might be just what he needed at the moment.

"Sure, why not? If you don't mind running," Neil said and tried to smile. Nicky made a face.

"Andrew's gonna be gone for a few hours. We could take the car," he said and Neil nodded. Nothing wrong with that, right?

"Alright. Now?" he made sure and Nicky laughed.

"Of course. Give me five minutes," he said, and Neil waited for him to change into something more appropriate before leaving. The car felt strange with Nicky driving and Neil on the passenger seat, but it was kind of nice. Neil leaned back and looked out of the window.

"You were great today, by the way," Nicky said after a few moments. Neil almost laughed. "Kevin seems to disagree," he mumbled a little bitterly.

"Neil, he has a tough time with this, don't worry about him. Kevin is a bit of a chicken and that's alright, I guess. You grew up like brothers, and let me tell you one thing about this kind of stuff; if your family is perfect, it's fake. Real families are hard to deal with and a little broken at times, but that's what they're supposed to be like," Nicky said with a smile, and Neil wondered how you could sound so cheerful while saying something this dark. Then again, the twins as your family probably made the concept harder.

"What's the deal with your family?" Neil asked hesitantly and Nicky sighed, but smiled.

"I grew up as Christian as it gets. My parents disapprove of my sexuality and I'm not welcome home. I'd have stayed in Germany with my boyfriend, but the twins needed a legal guardian when their mother died, so… here I am. They're my family," he said and smiled a little. "What about you? Wanna give me an inside of that tragic backstory of yours?"

Neil almost laughed at that and shrugged a little. "You know about my father already, that's the main part. Then there's my mother. She left when I was a child. Ran from my father. I didn't know she was alive since when you saw us in my room this week. She lives in Britain and apparently, she's a criminal as well, but we're working on something, I guess," Neil said and it felt weird. Granting Nicky knowledge of that part of his life, just because.

"That's… wow. That's weird. But I'm glad you're working on that," Nicky said with a smile before pulling into the parking lot in front of the stadium.

"What about Aaron and Andrew? Andrew said that their mother died or something, right?" he asked, then and Nicky shrugged a little.
"That's a complicated story. The short version is that Andrew grew up in the foster system, Aaron with their mother. They found each other later in life, and then their mother died in a car accident. Aaron blames Andrew but… who am I to judge either of them?" Nicky asked and sighed a little. Neil frowned at that and nodded a little while entering the stadium. He thought back to his conversation with Andrew, how he'd been so casual about not having a mother. That made a little more sense now. Then again, not really…

"Why would he have done that?" Neil asked and Nicky shrugged a little.

"Talk to him about that, should you be able to get straight answers from him. I quite honestly don't know, but I do know that they're not the apathetic or rude monsters so many people choose to see in them," Nicky answered, and Neil nodded in agreement.

They went to the dressing rooms and both changed into gear, Neil in the bathroom and Nicky in their usual locker room.

Neil was surprised when Nicky smiled at him once they were on court. He seemed to have forgotten about the tough topics just minutes ago. "So, what would you like to do? Train your aim or how to play with backliners? I can help with the second thing!" Nicky announced and Neil gave that a thought. He knew how to play with backliners by his side, not in his back. But the bigger problem was that he didn't know how to fight them off.

"Could you play against me? I don't really know how to deal with defensive players and I guess that's gonna be a problem if I don't work on it," Neil explained and Nicky nodded cheerfully.

Training with Nicky turned out to be extremely helpful. Neil was walked though every kind of block he knew to carry out himself, but Nicky was able to explain how to get past them. Neil's training at the Ravens had centred around how to be the best blocker, the ultimate defensive wall. Nicky knew all the Plan Bs, all the What Ifs. Nicky knew that people could get past him, and he explained just how to do that to Neil.

They were on court for the whole of two hours before they were soaked and drained alike. Washing the sweat off in the shower felt like he was washing off the day's memories as well, and it was strangely comforting.

Neil and Nicky drove back home, but stopped at a gas station because the car was low on petrol and Nicky wanted some snacks for the evening. Neil found some spare money in his pocket and thought about it for a moment before joining Nicky and buying a pack of cigarettes.

"You smoke?" Nicky asked and Neil shook his head before shrugging.

"Andrew does," he answered and Nicky didn't seem any less confused. Neil wanted to thank Andrew in some way, for everything he did for him, but he really didn't know how to do that. He thought perhaps this was a start.

They drove back to the Fox Tower and separated in the hallway, but Neil turned around one more time. "Thanks for wasting your afternoon on this," he said, and Nicky waved it off.

"You're welcome, Neil. Heaven knows I owe you a lot more than this," he answered, and smiled brightly. Neil shook his head a little and smiled back.

"I think we're good, Nicky," he answered and smiled at the look on his face.

They went to their rooms and Neil smiled when he saw the others watching a movie again. He took his cold pizza from the kitchen and sat down next to Renee on the sofa. Neil didn't complain when
the others stole almost half his food. He liked it, in a way. The casual closeness.

Renee explained bits of the movie Neil had missed and he found himself enjoying the second half of it. It was early evening, but due to the small amount of sleep they had gotten last night, all of them were yawning. Neil pushed himself up when the girls did, too, and went outside with them. They went into their room while Neil took the stairs and walked to the roof. He sat down by the edge and enjoyed the view for a few minutes. Neil liked the heavy smell of warm asphalt that he could still recognise up here. He even enjoyed the humid and hot air, liked the slight burning of the sun. Whenever he went to the roof, Neil felt as if he arrived someplace he'd been looking for.

Andrew arrived not even ten minutes later, sitting down next to Neil on the edge, looking down and taking a deep breath. Neil didn't get how Andrew could always seem so… hurtable? Afraid? For a few seconds on the roof, before becoming totally untouchable again.

"How was your day with Renee?" Neil asked and Andrew looked at him for a second before taking time to light a cigarette for himself and Neil.

"Why do you care?" Andrew asked back and Neil smiled when he took the cigarette. He found comfort in the way it burned off slowly, and cherished the smell of smoke as much as the look and the oddly calming feeling it gave you.

"Just because. Was that a date thing? She said you planned to get food together," Neil said and Andrew took his time again, taking drags of his cigarette and not rushing anything. Neil wondered if he did this to annoy him or if he was genuinely enjoying the moment.

"Turn?" Andrew asked after probably half a minute. Neil shrugged. He wanted to talk to Andrew.

"Sure. So?" he asked and smiled a little. Andrew rolled his eyes a little and shrugged.

"Day was average. We fought and got ice cream. Not a date," he answered and looked at Neil when he laid down with his legs dangling from the roof and his arms hidden behind his head. Neil smiled at the short explanation of the day. He liked how familiar this way of talking felt. "My turn. Why did you do what you did today?"

Neil looked up surprised and shrugged a little. "He can't do anything about me talking back now. There's no reason to not show him exactly what I think of him," Neil answered and Andrew nodded slightly.

"The thing is that this didn't work out too well. Riko got you," he answered drily and Neil shook his head a little.

"Not true. You were there," Neil said and Andrew seemed almost surprised at that answer. Neil smiled at the look on Andrew's face, even though it lasted shorter than three seconds. He thought of a way to bring it back, and smiled even more when he remembered the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. Neil pulled it out and handed it to Andrew. "I owe you quite a number of them, right?"

Andrew frowned and looked between Neil's face and his hand before taking the pack and pushing it into his back pocket. "Right," he answered and looked away again. Neil smiled brightly at the answer. It wasn't surprise, the way Neil had intended. It was the neutral way Andrew dealt with nearly everything. It was almost nicer than the look of surprise. It was very Andrew.

Neil smiled and laid back again. "What happened to your mother?" he asked lowly and felt Andrew's eyes on him.

"Your turn?" Andrew asked and Neil bit his lip a little, watching the clouds.
"No. Just a question," Neil answered and closed his eyes. He wouldn't push Andrew into this conversation if he didn't feel like having it.

"You know that I don't have a mother. I told you about that already," Andrew said and that was okay. Neil appreciated the answer he got, because it was more than enough. It was what he was willing to give.

"Alright. So, my turn," Neil continued with closed eyes. The sun was so comforting and he was incredibly tired. "What's your favourite ice cream flavour?"

Andrew let out an annoyed sound and Neil smiled. Yes, he was wasting a turn, but he liked the way Andrew reacted to it either way.

"That's a stupid question," Andrew answered, but went silent for a few seconds. "Chocolate Chip. My turn. What's the matter with you, Kevin and Jean?"

Neil considered the question and shrugged. "It's hard. There are days I don't want to look at Kevin not because of what he did but because of what he didn't do. But we lived through a very hard time together before they left. It's like… a very shattered version of brothers. You and Aaron?" Neil asked back then, and he felt Andrew's eyes on him.

"Turn?" he asked, and Neil shook his head.

"Don't talk about it if you don't want to," he mumbled and Andrew went silent.

"I'll protect him, even if he doesn't see it," Andrew said after a long time. Neil hadn't expected an answer anymore, but he suppressed a smile when he heard that. Something Andrew had given without trading it for something else. This was a nice feeling.

"How's that?" Neil asked, but he heard another annoyed tsk-sound.

"Shut up," Andrew demanded, and Neil did. He laid there next to Andrew until the burning of the sun turned into something slightly more endurable. Neil heard Andrew move beside him, and knew that he must be laying by his side a little while later. Neil relaxed when he smelled a cigarette's burnt tobacco every once in a while. Relaxed when he heard Andrew's breathing, the sound of a lighter, the sound of a pack shuffling.

He relaxed up to the point that he was actually drifting into sleep slowly. Neil couldn't do anything about it, he was tired and he felt so secure. He didn't know how long he was in that state of half-sleeping, half-waking, but it felt like at least an hour or two when he opened his eyes slowly and stretched. He saw Andrew's eyes on him and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"That was stupid. You'd be dead if you had rolled over," Andrew declared and threw a cigarette off the roof.

"I don't usually move. Except for during nightmares, but that's a different story," Neil mumbled and sat up very slowly. He felt nice. Heavy and too hot from laying in the sun, but relaxed and very calm.

"Still," Andrew gave back and Neil sighed with a smile.

"You'd have held me here," he answered, and Andrew shot him a cold stare.

"Wouldn't bet too much on that," he answered and Neil smiled.
"Sure. How stupid, my mistake," he mumbled. Andrew looked a little off to Neil and he smiled when he realised that he wasn't wearing the long sleeved shirt anymore, but a white tank top and his bands, using the pullover as a pillow. "Why do you wear those? Don't ask, you know I'm not taking a turn," Neil made clear and Andrew watched Neil's face for some very long seconds before shaking his head. Neil nodded and gave him a smile. Andrew rolled his eyes again and looked around while sitting up.

"You're staring," Andrew said, and Neil shook his head.

"You were looking at me," Neil argued and Andrew shrugged.

"Still staring," he shot back and Neil smiled. He didn't care about the way Andrew pointed this out. Andrew noticed things around him and he understood them. Neil didn't understand what was happening all the way. He liked it, that much was certain, but he wasn't exactly able to assess anything. He spent time with Andrew and he was happy about their talks. This was enough. More than enough. It was enjoyable and something worth looking forward to.

"You're not the monster everyone tries to make you seem," Neil said after a while, and Andrew looked up at him and seemed almost surprised again.

"You're one of the few people who question the word," he answered neutrally and Neil smiled.

"You could prove them wrong, you know?" he brought up and Andrew shot him a death stare.

"We're Foxes, Neil. No one cares about what we're proving. We are nothing but fucked up failures, and we won't ever be anything else," he announced and Neil shook his head.

"We can be anyone we want to be, Andrew, but that's the step we have to take. We have to want to be someone else," he said, and Andrew waited for a whole minute before shaking his head.

"That would be a nice lie to believe in," Andrew said and Neil shrugged. Andrew would see this soon enough. Neil had experienced changing into someone he wanted to be by becoming Neil Josten. Andrew just had to start looking for something to hold on to. He had to start looking for something worth looking forward to.

Chapter End Notes

Would you do me a favour and read my oversharing? I know you probably don't care, but this is important to me.

I keep writing the paragraph and delete it again all the time. *sigh*

It boils down to this: I was anorexic for around six years, add or take two, and now I'm saying goodbye to my therapist. Not "see you soon", the way Jean's goodbye was meant in this chapter, but "Goodbye". And while that's frightening, it's a good feeling.

And the reason I'm writing this is because I just want everyone to keep fighting. Because you have to. Because it's worth it. Because fighting means living. And because those Caramel Macchiatos taste incredibe, no matter the sugar there is in those things.
And now that that's settled and I think I scared everyone off: you are amazing. I was astonished by the amount of feedback the last chapter got! I can't believe the response I'm getting and it makes me unbelievably happy!
So this is the biggest thank you to every single one of you. To the 2.5K people giving R2F a shot. It's amazing! I can't believe it!! So a huge thank you to you! To you reading this and you scrolling past it because you don't care! I love you!!

Plus — you guessed it — AsfaHan is the most amazing person on the planet! You're awesome and you make me happy and this is just a thank you? Because you're there, because you listen, because you tell me stuff, because of everything!
The upcoming week led them to their second game already. Training was hard in the perfect way and Neil found a routine between practice, classes, the Upperclassmen and the Monsters. He divided the meals between the two groups and spent the evenings on the sofa next to Renee, in between Matt and Seth, or on the roof with Andrew. He also found that he grew even closer to all of them. Neil participated in conversations even when he didn't have too much to say and agreed with complaints about lecturers or students he didn't know. When he was with the Upperclassmen, Neil became a college student slowly.

One afternoon, Seth chimed into their room while everyone else was in class and sat down next to Neil with his arms crossed and shook his head. "Just stupid," he mumbled and Neil frowned at him but remained silent. Seth started telling Neil about it anyways, how him and Allison had argued about nothing really, how it was exhausting, how he didn't get why she made everything a bigger deal than it was. He said everything quickly and didn't spice up the story, so it took less than ten seconds for him to explain things before he sighed and leaned back against the sofa. Neil was confused because Seth had talked to him about his problems, but he'd been so fast that Neil didn't know if this meant that Seth trusted him or that he was just too angry to keep it in. He tried to assume it was about anger, but he had small hopes that this actually had something to do with friendship.

The afternoons in the Monsters’ room were spent with homework or Nicky's patient attempts to teach him how to play video games, which usually resulted in Nicky and Aaron playing and Neil watching the screen.

It was Wednesday morning after practice when Neil looked up from a book he was reading for Spanish and saw Allison entering the room. She had her bag with her and sat down in the armchair, putting a book a textbook onto the table.

"Hey," Neil greeted, though it sounded more like a question.

"The others are in class and I dislike being alone," she said and shrugged while opening the book and skimming a few pages until she found the chapter she was looking for. Then she took an elastic from her wrist and pulled her hair into a ponytail so it wouldn't disturb her anymore. Neil looked at her for a little and was confused. Her and Seth had argued for the past few days, yet he saw hickeys pretty much all over her throat. He looked away as soon as he realised that he stared at her and tried concentrating on the book on his lap. He couldn't shake the question off, though.
"You and Seth are good again?" Neil asked and Allison looked surprised for a moment before groaning a little.

"Haven't put makeup over them yet, thanks for the reminder. We're – I don't know. No. Not really," she answered and Neil frowned even more. Allison saw the look on his face and actually smiled. "Neil, we're having a rough time, that doesn't mean we can't kiss, right?" she asked and Neil shrugged a little. He didn't quite get it.

"Why? I mean, if you're not happy with him, what's the point?" he asked and Allison put her book down and leaned back, but kept her eyes on Neil. She was still smiling.

"I'm not unhappy with him, Neil. I'm… We're working on being together, I think. There's no need to stop kissing," Allison said slowly and laughed very softly. Neil still didn't get the answer and Allison chuckled when she saw the look on his face. "You know how that is, right? I mean, you've kissed people. Arguing doesn't mean you don't want to be close," Allison went on and Neil looked a little blankly. He couldn't imagine wanting to kiss anyone he couldn't talk to without screaming. Then again, he couldn't really imagine kissing anyone.

Allison raised her eyebrows at him and her smile deepened. "Neil, you've kissed people, right?" she asked again and Neil thought back to the two times that technically qualified as kisses. Andrew had disagreed, though, naming it "sexual assault". Neil also doubted that this was what Allison considered kisses.

"Not really. And like… I don't get why everyone is making such a fuzz about it. What's the whole point?" he asked with a shrug. It was nothing to be ashamed of. Allison seemed delighted by that and smirked.

"You're adorable, really. How old are you again? Eighteen? Nineteen? How haven't you ever kissed anyone?" she asked but let it slide when Neil only looked at her. "Alright, you were serious about the question, weren't you? Have you ever been in love? It's that feeling of wanting to be close. And it's a nice thing because kissing means showing love and being kissed back means that you're loved back. That's why Seth and I do this while arguing. You're mad at each other, but you still need them to know that you like them," she explained and smiled a little.

Neil frowned at her explanation and thought about it. Love was nothing he associated with the instances he might call kisses. However, he understood what she meant. Sometimes, you can't say what you feel. Sometimes, words were way too much and way too little to express what you wanted to communicate.

He remembered that from when his mother had taken care of his wounds after his father had beaten him up badly. She remained totally silent as long as she needed to make sure he'd be okay. While he knew that this was an entirely different thing, Neil felt like he understood what Allison meant anyways.

"But if it's about expressing your feelings, why does everyone do it all the time? I mean, are you saying that there's not a single couple that has normal conversations about this matter?" he asked and Allison actually laughed at that, but it didn't feel insulting. It was rather the uncomfortable topic and their approach. Neil kind of liked the way Allison talked about it so casually.

"It's more than a message, Neil. It's nice as well. Like, it's a great feeling in itself. Otherwise people wouldn't randomly hook up with others on parties. It really has something to do with the way your body responds, I suppose. Haven't you ever… I don't know… haven't you ever wanted to be really close to anyone? It doesn't get much closer, that's another reason," she said with a smile and gestured a little more than usually. Allison looked almost happy like this and Neil couldn't help smiling a little.
He thought about her question for a while.

"You mean like physical closeness? Like… I like being close to all of you guys, but I wouldn't want to do anything like what you're describing," Neil said and Allison sighed a little.

"It's not only wanting to be close. It's… that's hard to describe. Probably simply attraction. On many levels, of course. It's a nice thing, really! You'll love it," Allison said and Neil laughed a little. He doubted that he'd ever feel that way towards anyone. He liked closeness on the emotional level, when he was with his friends and he felt welcome, but he didn't ever feel the need to be a lot closer to any of them.

He thought to his nights on the roof with Andrew, then. To the way Andrew made you want to be closer. The way he also made sure you left space. He didn't want to kiss him, though. Neil liked everything he had at the moment. The integration into the Monsters' and Upperclassmen's groups, the emotional closeness with Andrew. The way they shared things in conversations. The way Andrew always asked a question instead of demanding an answer.

"I honestly don't think so," Neil mumbled and Allison giggled.

"Alright. You go your pace! And let me know if you have questions! I'm both more reliable and more trustworthy than everyone else on the team!" she announced and Neil smiled. She was really nice when she let herself be.

"You're different when the others are around," Neil stated and Allison looked at him with a frown.

"It's nice to talk to you, Neil. We don't do that often enough and there's not a lot to say with the room full of people," Allison answered and Neil realised something when she said that.

A problem with the Upperclassmen has always been the way they talked about nearly everything that was totally insignificant. Now Neil understood that they shared their important truths behind closed doors. That they couldn't talk about significant stuff with the room crowded. That they still chose to fill the silence with words because they spend time together like that.

"You're nice to talk to as well," Neil answered and Allison gifted him a bright smile before turning back to her book slowly. Neil read his own book as well, and they remained silent for the rest of the morning. He actually liked this. How silence was tolerated for once. How no one forced him to participate in conversations.

Neil thought perhaps he'd had a wrong perception of Allison all along.

Spanish class was boring that day, and Neil regretted attending at all. The other students asked questions about anything and everything they could have looked up on SparkNotes. Discussions about clear topics broke loose because some students refused to see that they had obviously misinterpreted words. It was draining.

He was glad to be out of the room after the period and went to the Fox Tower. His room was empty and he knew that all of the Monsters were still in class, so he checked the girls' room. Dan and Renee were sitting on a sofa next to each other and smiled when he entered the room. It smelled delicious.

"Hey, Neil! Renee baked cookies and they're amazing!" Dan greeted him and he couldn't help smiling.

"Hey," he answered and Renee smiled.
"Do you want some of them? I need most of them for Andrew, but I think I can spare a few," she said with a laugh in her voice. Neil shrugged a little and nodded. He followed her into the kitchen and closed his eyes at the smell. Neil had never smelled something like this. The warm, sweet smell, the distant trace of slightly burnt chocolate, the way you could almost taste the cookies already.

"I always feel like it smells like Christmas," Renee said with a smile and Neil looked at her again.

"I think it's better," he answered with a tiny smile. His mother had never baked for them, but she had bought candy sometimes, for occasions like Christmas or his birthday. When she was gone, that ended as well. At the Ravens, no one celebrated those events. He knew something similar to this smell from a few rare occasions when they had attended official dinners, but this was the first time he was in a kitchen with the aroma so present in the air.

Renee laughed a little and handed him a plate before putting a few cookies the size of his palm onto it.

"Jean called this morning. He says hi," she said then and Neil sighed a little at that and nodded. They hadn't exactly had enough time to catch up on Saturday, and Neil didn't know if he could even do that at the moment.

He nodded a little and started nibbling on one of the cookies. He liked the way it crumbled and he loved the taste of molten chocolate.

"How is he in general? We said we wanted to talk about this once, and…," Neil started a little insecurely. He didn't want to push her into a conversation she didn't want to have, but Renee sat down on the counter of the kitchen and smiled.

"Sure, the conversation is overdue already! Jean has been doing great. He's adjusting to the Trojans, but it's really hard for him to let the Ravens go. I quite honestly doubt he'll be able to stay out of getting yellow or red cards," she said with a laugh. Neil nodded and smiled a little shyly. He didn't know what to say but he really wanted to talk to her about everything.

"That's good. Good news, I mean. Kinda," he mumbled and took a deep breath. Could they even talk about the most important things? Neil nibbled on the cookie and couldn't find it in him to look at her.

"Neil? What's up?" she asked after a while and Neil leaned against the counter next to her because that way it was less rude to not meet her eyes.

"It's just weird. I don't know. There's so much to say," he said lowly and Renee laid a hand on Neil's shoulder and pulled him a little closer softly.

"Don't worry. He talked about you all the time when he got out of there. Jean is thankful for everything you did. The way every one of you acted had something to do with the situation you were in, and taking that into account, you're the best friend Jean could have wished for," Renee said in a very soft voice and Neil felt his breath stutter. She was partly right, but Neil thought back to their first confrontation.

"But you were right that night. When you said that this was my fault. I should have done a lot more," he mumbled. Neil didn't know why he said this. Maybe because these were her words to begin with. Maybe because the words needed to be heard.

He felt her hand pulling him even closer but Neil didn't feel like hugging. He looked out of the window and set the plate down before crossing his arms. She got the hint and simply ran her hand
over his shoulder softly.

"Neil, that's not true. Look at the situation you were in. Jean knows that you did everything you could do while still making sure you'd get out there without being hurt. Though you did more than that, right? You kept them safe whenever you could and endured the worst things in the world for that. You're an incredibly good person, and you have to try and accept that. I know it's hard to come to terms with mistakes, but the best thing you can do now that you made them is trying to be the best person you can be. I'm not saying you should feel guilty. I'm saying that – even though it's very early for that – you might want to try leaving this in the past," she said. Her voice was very calm and melodious for her entire talk and Neil nodded slowly, unraveling the meanings behind her words in his mind.

He closed his eyes again and took a deep breath. Neil didn't believe her. Renee was a very sweet girl and he doubted that she deserved to be on a team like the Foxes. She was saying this to make him feel better about himself, but she couldn't exactly pull it off. Renee was too good to regret anything.

"That's an easy thing to say as a person that never made any mistakes," Neil mumbled and sounded a little more bitter than he intended to.

Renee sighed a little beside him and he actually looked at her when he answered. "That's a story for another day, but I earned my place on this team, don't worry," she said, and Neil couldn't get how she could say this with a smile on her lips when she'd sighed so heavily before.

He looked at her for a little and she jumped down the countertop. "Neil, don't worry. You're a good person. Jean knows. Kevin does, too. Even Andrew doesn't have make negative comments on you than the others. Matt loves you, so how bad of a person can you be, really? You're a Fox, and all of us agree with that," she said and it sounded strangely encouraging.

He got his plate of cookies again when Renee went to the living room again, and Neil sat down next to Dan. She stole a few cookies and they talked about their days. Neil wondered how the past four hours could leave them with so many things to talk about, but he enjoyed their chatter, even though he found himself participating less than he would have tried to, normally.

The conversations turned louder and more heated when the missing three Upperclassmen arrived, though it was a good kind of enthusiasm. Neil was used to this by now and actually felt quite comfortable with all the lively chatter around him.

Night practices with Kevin turned out to be the best thing to happen to Neil. It was during practice and games that Neil saw glimpses of the person he always hoped Kevin could be one day. He was fighting his way out of Riko's shadow and Neil loved every bit of determination Kevin showed.

He didn't quite love the way Kevin screamed at him when Neil seemed incapable of managing a drill, but he knew it was for the better. Neil knew he was improving, as well. It was a good feeling.

Team practice was a little less productive. That was due to the fact of Seth and Kevin constantly provoking each other, resulting in fights all the time. Matt and Aaron screamed at each other a lot as well and Dan yelled at them quite often herself, thought not even half as often as Wymack or Kevin. Her yells were less negative as well, being rather encouraging, actually.

It was the morning of their second game – against the Rebels this time – when it was especially disastrous. Neil hated it.
Kevin yelled at Allison because she didn't play with the cousins in the way she was supposed to. Allison said she couldn't rely on them as their defense.

"How are we supposed to play tonight if you only play with Matt and Seth?" he asked loudly and Allison shrugged and crossed her arms.

"Make up your mind, champion. I won't play with the Monsters. And in case you haven't realised, I won't be too keen on playing with Seth either," she said with a shrug and crossed her arms. Neil was astonished by the way she remained calm and smiled so brightly. She was acting almost grown up.

"How is that supposed to work? They're the defense line, you have to play with at least two people you can't stand," Kevin replied and Allison sighed. "Make up your mind, champion. I won't play with the Monsters. And in case you haven't realised, I won't be too keen on playing with Seth either," she said with a shrug and crossed her arms. Neil was astonished by the way she remained calm and smiled so brightly. She was acting almost grown up.

"How is that supposed to work? They're the defense line, you have to play with at least two people you can't stand," Kevin replied and Allison sighed. "Replace them, I don't care. I won't play with them," she said, and for some reason, Aaron was the one who answered.

"And why is that, exactly? Your fear of looking bad while playing with better players, right?" Aaron asked back and Matt laughed at that.

"Aaron, come on. You and I both know that I'm the best backliner on this team, so do me a favour and get off that high horse of yours," Matt said with a smirk and Aaron went closer.

"Oh, is it like that? Boyd, you're walking on thin ice, don't tempt me," he said lowly and sounded a little dangerous.

Matt laughed at that again, crossing his arms. "Or what, minion? Seriously, is that your own bad temper or is it what your mother left you with?" he asked and everyone else stared at them in silence. What was happening?

"Matt, you're not in the position to talk about mothers," Aaron answered with a low voice and Matt lost his cheerfulness, turning threatening and aggressive.

"Oh yeah, how's that? Because last time I checked, you killed yours," he answered, and Aaron's body radiated fury when he spat, "At least she didn't want to kill me the way yours wanted us to make you overdose last year."

The next seconds stretched to months. Neil had known that Matt was a good boxer, but seeing him raise his arms felt surreal. Matt couldn't bring himself to kill spiders in their room. How could he bring his arms up and slam his fists into Aaron's body with such precision?

Aaron fought back all the way he could but he was overpowered the second he started the argument. That was, until Andrew made his way across the court and shoved Aaron out of the way. He went for Matt instead, and Andrew fighting Matt seemed even more unrealistic than Matt fighting Aaron.

Andrew looked like a machine, the way he jerked Matt's wrists backwards and hauled them upwards after crossing them behind his back, making it impossible for Matt to do much about the position. Andrew forced him to his knees and Matt seemed as unable to understand the situation as the rest of their team.

Neil couldn't grasp what was happening. Andrew pulled a knife out then, after letting go of Matt's arms. He pressed it into his throat and Neil could see horror in Matt's eyes when he raised his arms in a defenceless way.

No one dared doing anything. Renee was coming closer slowly, while Aaron stared at the situation in disbelief. Kevin and Nicky just stood there, frozen, staring as well. Dan had a hand pressed to her
mouth and Allison seemed shook.

"Andrew, don't do this," Renee said in a calm voice while walking closer.

"No one is allowed to touch what's mine. There are consequences," Andrew answered and Renee nodded.

"I know they argued, but you told me to watch them, remember? Now let me watch Matt and go on watching Aaron," she suggested and sat down beside Matt on the ground. She took his hands and smiled a little encouragingly, but Matt swallowed thickly and had troubles breathing against the blade.

"I'm not putting Matt over him," Andrew said and his jaw tensed. His hand seemed to tense too, considering the choked sound Matt let out.

Neil couldn't believe how everyone looked at the scene without helping! How could they let this happen?

"Andrew, they provoked each other. Don't do this," Neil said lowly and Andrew actually looked at him, keeping the stealth grip on Matt's neck and the knife.

"How unfortunate that I don't care," he answered, and Neil shook his head.

"This isn't about caring. This is about you. Go ahead and let them see the monster, that's not my problem. But the alternative is doing what you're trying to do and taking care of Aaron," he said lowly and went closer to Andrew. Their eyes locked and Neil saw something in Andrew's look. He couldn't identify it, but he was sure it was more than one feeling coming to light in Andrew.

"This isn't about Aaron or Matt. It's about a promise," he said, but Neil wasn't fooled. He knew that Andrew was trying to protect Aaron.

"If it's not about them, then let him go," Neil whispered. He stood less than a foot away now, and he saw Andrew's jaw move slowly.

He kicked Matt in the back heavily once, before turning around. "Touch any of them another time, Matthew, and you won't live long enough to regret it," Andrew said threateningly. Neil reached out for Andrew when he was going, but only barely touched his sleeve when Andrew turned around and stared at him. "That's a promise you won't make me break," he whispered with the accusation clearly audible between himself and Neil before leaving the Foxes. Neil swallowed heavily. Why was Andrew mad at him? He hadn't done anything, right?

But now wasn't the time to worry about Andrew. Neil kneeled down next to Matt, who was breathing heavily for half a minute before letting Renee and Neil pull him up. Dan didn't leave his side when he went to Abby, and Neil looked around, wondering what had become of their last training before the game.

Aaron looked at Neil for a long moment before shaking his head and leaving as well. Nicky and Kevin looked at each other and Nicky was very pale.

"How did you do that?"

Neil turned around and looked at Seth. The boy had his arms crossed and looked at Neil demandingly.

Neil shrugged a little and looked at his fingers. "I used his words against him. That's not especially
"fair play," he mumbled, but Seth laughed.

"He would have killed Matt just like that! Seriously, putting him into a straightjacket would have been too little," he shot back and Neil shook his head.

"Don't say that. I'm serious," he answered, and Seth rolled his eyes.

"I'm leaving," he announced, and Allison crossed her arms and looked at him.

"How? Matt is probably gonna take some time and we're here in his car," she said and seemed annoyed at even the suggestion.

"Could you stop turning everything into an argument?" Seth asked and Allison shrugged.

"Why would I do that? Matt is unwell and you only think about yourself," she answered and Seth shook his head, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

"Wasn't serious, babe, calm down," he said, which resulted in a shove.

"Whatever. I think all of us should change into normal clothes again. Training is over," she announced, and even though Kevin protested, they left the court together and separated into their locker rooms. Neil finished quickly and went to Matt and Dan in Wymack's office.

Abby was there, disinfecting the small cut Andrew had left. Neil doubted it was necessary, considering that there was no blood or anything. This was more about Abby's need to take care of them.

Wymack and Dan were talking, and he called Neil over. He approached them and looked up. Neil had wanted to check on Matt, but he couldn't say no to their Coach.

"Hey," he mumbled, and looked around a little. Dan hugged him to her chest for a few seconds before letting go, and Wymack looked at him for a long moment.

"I doubt there's a single person apart from you that could have prevented further things to happen. Thanks for getting through to them," he said and Neil nodded a little. He didn't know what to say. Wymack raised his arm and Neil flinched away for a millisecond before reminding himself that this was Wymack. He wouldn't hurt him.

Coach must have noticed, but he patted Neil's shoulder softly anyways before letting his hand fall. "I guess all of us should leave now. This game is gonna be a disaster," he said and sighed, and Dan and Neil turned to face Matt, then.

Abby was done and ran her hand through Matt's hair softly before smiling at him. "You're free to go," she said and took a few steps back. Matt nodded and smiled back at her before turning to Neil and Dan.

"Let's leave. I want to go home and finish up a chapter before class," he announced, but Dan swallowed thickly and Neil still felt bad because of what had happened.

"How are you feeling?" he asked on their way out and Matt shrugged.

"The minion took me down, so my ego is scratched. But apart from that, nothing happened," he said and Dan shook her head.

"There was a knife against your throat! That's not nothing!" She protested but Matt laid his arm
around Neil's shoulder and almost smiled.

"He stopped the killing machine, calm down," he said and Neil almost smiled. He liked how Matt dealt with this. Especially since to Neil, a knife was nothing special. Knives were used on him for measures of education for all his life and while he understood that this wasn't the case for the rest of the Foxes, he didn't get how they made it such a big deal. Sure, it wasn't nice, but was it really important enough to end training?

They exited the stadium and found Allison, Renee and Seth waiting by the car already. Seth and Al seemed to be arguing again. Or still, maybe.

Andrew's car was nowhere to be seen and Neil bit his lip when Kevin, Aaron and Nicky came out behind them. Dan ignored them and went for Matt's truck quickly, while Matt looked down at Neil's troubled expression and sighed.

"You owe me one for this, Neil," he mumbled but wore a small smile when he turned around.

Neil frowned at Matt. He didn't understand what exactly Matt was implying until he yelled "Need a drive?" at the others. How could he offer this to Aaron after they had fought? Maybe the bruise on his left cheek was satisfying to Matt in a way.

Kevin raised his eyebrow and looked at Aaron, who crossed his arms and seemed ready to decline, when Nicky elbowed him before walking towards Matt and Neil.

"That would be awesome. Thanks, Matt! You look better than the last person I saw fighting with Andrew," Nicky announced and Matt actually smiled.

"Great, let's go," he said, walking to the truck with his arm still around Neil. When he attempted climbing into the driver's seat, Neil looked at him for a second.

"That was really nice of you," he said, and Matt laughed.

"Maybe. Might have been stupid, though. Get in the car," he said and ruffled Neil's hair again before actually taking his seat.

Neil climbed into the back of the car and sat down next to Nicky. The Upperclassmen were facing them and even Renee looked uncomfortable.

Dan wasn't in the back with them but rode shotgun. Renee was playing with her necklace while trying to look as unaffected by this as possible. Allison and Seth, on the other hand, were too busy arguing in hushed voices to care about the Monsters on the car.

When they arrived, Kevin, Aaron and Nicky left as quickly as possible, and Renee sighed heavily. The Upperclassmen got out as well, splitting into their rooms. The boys were silent and Seth went to bed, considering that he had classes late that day, and Matt got out a textbook. Neil checked the time when he collected his stuff to leave for class, and realised that he had a few minutes before he had to go. He left, anyways, and decided to check the roof. If Andrew wasn't there, he could just leave and go to class. If he was, Neil thought this conversation would be more important than Spanish.

Neil almost smiled when he saw Andrew on the edge next to a small pile of cigarette-stumps.

"Hey," he said when he sat down next to him. Andrew didn't look up, and Neil saw him pressing his own fingers against his wrist. He caught Andrew doing that quite often, measuring his own pulse. It usually meant that Andrew wasn't good to talk to during those times.
Neil bit his lip and watched him closely. It was one half "looking for something to interpret" and one half "hoping to make Andrew talk to him by pointing out the staring". Neil didn't succeed with either of the plans, so he sighed quietly.

"I'm sorry for what I did," he mumbled and Andrew shook his head, still looking at everything but Neil.

"I don't care about your personal regrets," he answered and Neil bit his lip. He swallowed and tried to find words to describe his feelings accurately.

"That's the point, actually. I don't regret it. It was the only way I knew to react and if you don't tell me how else to get through to you, it's gonna repeat itself. I do feel sorry because it isn't fair, but you were hurting Matt and I had to protect him," Neil answered and Andrew looked at him, then, watching his expressions closely.

"That's not your job. It's Renee's," he answered and Neil shrugged.

"You didn't listen to her and I didn't want you to hurt Matt," Neil repeated.

Andrew scoffed at that and looked away again. "He hit Aaron. He knew this was coming, that's not my fault. Matt knows fully well what happens if you touch what's mine."

Neil shook his head a little and watched Andrew. "You care for all of them. Aaron, Nicky, Kevin, Renee. Even me, right?"

"You're delusional. I'm keeping promises," Andrew answered in a rough tone and Neil shook his head again.

"You pretend to keep the promises you made as an excuse to defend the people closest to you," he said, and Andrew pushed against his shoulder roughly.

"Shut up," Andrew said in an annoyed voice and the push was probably hard enough to leave bruises, but Neil didn't acknowledge that.

"Do you want me to shut up because you don't want to know the truth yourself or because you don't want me to know it?" Neil challenged and Andrew turned to him now, pushing Neil onto his back by his shoulders with so much force Neil cringed when his head hit the ground.

"I said shut up," Andrew almost yelled into his face, and Neil couldn't feel the pain on his arms, shoulders or head.

Andrew had reacted to him. Sure, it was an aggressive and painful way, but the fact itself meant that the words moved something inside Andrew, right? That Neil had hit a spot in a way that made Andrew show emotions, and even though he was denying it, Neil also knew that Andrew had very positive feelings towards his family. He knew how hard that was to acknowledge, considering his relationship to literally any family member, but he also knew that it was important to realise what you're feeling. It's easier to use it against someone if that person isn't aware of the weakness itself.

And somehow making Andrew aware of his emotions felt like a very good thing.

Chapter End Notes
So here's the new chapter haha

I'd LOVE to hear your thoughts on Allison and Andrew, by the way! Seriously, PLEASE tell me! Especially Andrew of course hahah

The current chapters are slightly slow, which is important because oh dang, shit is gonna go down. Not right now but give me three chapters to screw with all of them. I just hope no one had a problem with that!

As always, let me hear your thoughts!!

I literally CANNOT wait to upload the next chapter.

I'm feeling slightly uncomfortable thanking AsfaHan because I seriously suspect her to have poisoned her sister… But that doesn't change anything about the fact that she's my favourite person online at the moment. Or that she answers my texts. That she makes me feel better about stuff I'm uncomfortable with. That she's the only person I trust with my messy writing.

You're the best! ❤️
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Andreil on the roof
The Foxes' second game
Columbia again (featuring Roland and AARON OMG OMG)
Allison being the best girl ever
Andreil on the roof pt. 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil had spent around an hour there with Andrew. He didn't know how exactly, but they managed to have somewhat of a normal conversation after that. He felt a little weird when he went to his Math class, but it was quite a positive kind of weird. He hadn't wanted to leave Andrew, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to fully grasp the topic if he didn't attend class. That way, math was more demanding than languages.

His mood improved even further when he saw the whole school in orange, enthusiastically expecting the game tonight. Marissa sat down next to him in an orange tank top that had PALMETTO STATE FOXES printed in such an intense white that you felt screamed at.

"Hey," she said with a bright smile," the game is gonna be great, right? And the party we planned will be the greatest thing ever! I got to decide the music!"

Neil didn't find her way of talking too bad today. He actually liked the way her attitude caught him as well. Yes, the Foxes have had an awful morning, but they were prepared to face the Rebels. Neil knew that they were strong as individuals, so their arguments wouldn't change too much about that.

Then he thought about the evening. Aaron had made Andrew agree to the party with the others only under the condition that they'd go to Columbia this week and at this point, Neil was undecided whether or not to join them.

"I'm looking forward to the game as well. But I think I have other plans for tonight, sorry," he said, and her shoulders sank a little.

"Katelyn said that some of you would be out of town after the game! So you'll be gone with her boyfriend?" she asked, and Neil frowned at her. Boyfriend? "Oh shit, that's still secret, right? Damn…"

Neil thought of the possibilities. Nicky… not even a possiblity. Kevin? He might and might not have a thing with Thea going on. That left him with the twins…

"Who is it?" Neil asked, and Marissa sighed heavily.

"Might as well tell you now, right? Aaron and her have something going on, but he doesn't exactly want his team to know. It's just that you can't exactly keep things secret from her roommates if you're meeting in their room, so…" she actually smirked at that and Neil thought back to that party, when a
blonde girl had told Aaron how great "you" did, before looking at Andrew and emphasising that she was talking about the "plural you". Why would Aaron keep his girlfriend from Andrew?

Neil made a "huh" sound, not sure what to say. He might ask Aaron about it, though. For some reason, he wasn't too keen on keeping things from Andrew.

"Whatever, right? Have fun tonight! I think you might win!" she announced and Neil actually offered a smile.

"Isn't 'believing in us' kind of your job as a cheerleader?" he asked, and she laughed softly.

"Maybe. But that doesn't change anything, does it?"

Neil didn't invest too many thoughts into that. She might be right. He concentrated on his classes for the rest of the day before walking home. Matt and Seth were in the room, seeming totally relaxed.

"Hey," Matt said with a smile and Neil sat down next to them.

"Everything alright?" he asked hesitantly. Seth had his arms crossed and Matt seemed uncomfortable.

"Nothing's alright, Neil. Do me a favour and never ever bring a girl into this room. Seriously," Seth said while tensing.

Neil looked at Matt, who shrugged a little.

"What happened?" Neil asked cautiously and Seth scoffed.

"Allison is the worst person to exist," he answered and Matt looked up. Apparently, it was a clearer answer than anything he had gotten so far.

"How's that?" Matt asked with a frown.

"Because she's an overly jealous and spying bitch," Seth said, while practically yelling the last words. Neil flinched a little, and then he heard something crash against the wall in the room next to them.

"Seth, you moron, the walls are thin," Allison screamed, thought her voice was muffled by the wall.

"Nothing's alright, Neil. Do me a favour and never ever bring a girl into this room. Seriously," Seth said while tensing.

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"Seth, you moron, the walls are thin," Allison screamed, thought her voice was muffled by the wall.

Seth sighed heavily and shook his head. "We'd be fine if you listend to conversations with you as well as you do to conversations about you," he yelled back and Allison let out a furious sound. Seth sighed again and got up, walking over to her, apparently. He slammed the two doors shut behind him.

"So they broke up?" Neil asked, and Matt shook his head while shrugging helplessly.

"I don't think so, but I don't think they'll be able to keep it together much longer," Matt sighed and closed his eyes when the yelling went on in the room next to them. A few seconds later, Dan and Renee came into their room, Renee biting her lip and Dan looking exhausted.

"Will they be like this all the time or will it be better once they break up?" he asked insecurely. He hated the screaming and fighting all the time.

Dan scoffed a little and sat down next to Matt while Renee took an armchair. "It's gonna be a lot worse than this until they're back together," Dan said and Neil sighed. He didn't think he'd spend a lot of time with them if they kept being like this.
"But don't worry! They'll work this through in no time at all! It's rarely longer than a month," she assured, but Neil didn't feel better. A month of this?

They had some food before checking the time. "We have to be at the stadium soon. I guess we should leave," Dan announced, and they nodded. Matt got his keys and they left their room, knocking at the girls' door.

"We have to leave," Matt yelled, and Seth appeared a few seconds later, pulling his shirt all the way down. Allison joined them a little later, cheeks pink and a little out of breath. She had a small smile on her lips for the whole drive to the stadium and leaned her head against Seth's shoulder. Neil thought back to what she had said about kisses, about how it meant that the other person cared for you, and he found that he understood her.

Driving to the stadium brought some excitement back to Neil, and he was glad for the positive emotions. He'd be playing again! Neil took a deep breath as they entered the stadium and started training a little later, warming up before the game.

Neil loved what games did to the team. He loved how the look of determination was visible in the eyes of them. The twins hid it or didn't realise they were suppressing it or just showed a weaker version of it, but Neil saw them change as well. Exy did this to people.

They met in Wymack's office then, and were handed the Rebel's lineup then. No one complained this time, they just took time studying the names.

"They concentrated the focus on their offence," Matt commented, and Nicky groaned.

"Seems like it. Oh man," he mumbled. Neil smiled a little. He knew that the concentration on the offence wouldn't mean that the Rebels' backliners would be bad, but it was comforting anyways.

"Alright, guys, get out there. And you," he said, looking at Andrew, "could at least pretend to secure the goal, yeah?"

Andrew rolled his eyes and left the room. The others followed and Neil felt excitement crash into him. He thought he could drown in the sound of the fans. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The announcer called in the Rebels first, which resulted in cheering, but it was nothing compared to the pure ecstasy that followed the Foxes' names. You could see that when you looked around the stadium as well. Orange screamed at them from everywhere, the Rebels' green only shone through some spots they had saved. It made Neil feel good, seeing their fans so supportive.

Dan, Kevin, Seth, Matt, Aaron and Renee entered the stadium, and the crowd went wild. It was incredible.

The Foxes themselves were amazing. Their strategy was easy; keeping the defense on court until the Rebels had to substitute their strong strikers for weaker ones, then swapping Dan with Allison so they'd have three offensive players on court in the end.

It worked pretty well. Because Aaron, Matt and Nicky were swapped pretty often, the backliners were kept from being exhausted and held the defense with a Dan's help almost miraculously. And while Seth and Kevin both played pretty isolated, they managed to score twice each. The problem was that the Rebels' strikers were pretty good.

Neil caught himself biting his nails whenever he wasn't cheering on his teammates.
Renee was working with everything she had in her and managed to deflect most shots fired.

Halftime came and they met, most of them drenched in sweat already. Neil was still buzzing. He wanted to get out there!

The score was 4:4 and they expected the Rebels to weaken now. It was only a hypothesis, of course, but when they went over the tactics again, Neil felt confident. Even more so when he entered the court. He loved this. Going in there with Kevin and Allison, with Nicky and Aaron, with Andrew…

It was breathtaking. Neil outran his backliner and prepared a goal for Kevin. He played with Allison, prepared another goal. Kevin had a clean shot when — Neil cringed when he saw Kevin spamming against the wall with his backliner, but Allison was right there, picking up the ball and passing it to Neil. He caught it, threw it, and scored.

Neil turned around and smiled at Kevin brightly. He'd done it! But Kevin had his eyes pressed shut and was holding his hand. Neil's face fell when he ran towards him, but Wymack was screaming already.

"Josten, play! Day, get off there! Gordon, get your ass on the field," he yelled and Neil swallowed hard. The fracture must have healed all the way already. Kevin was hypersensitive. He was overreacting. Nothing had happened… at least Neil hoped so with his whole heart.

Andrew deflected pretty much every shot fired into the direction of the backliner, hitting his head and shins all the time. Neil smiled a little when he realised that the Rebels hadn't scored a single time yet. When Andrew was mad at the opposing team, he sure put effort into making them look lousy.

Seth and Allison played together like a union, and Neil knew he could rely on the team to have his back. He scored another time that evening, and it was the most amazing feeling in the world. Neil prepared a goal for Seth after he asked him to, and supported the defense whenever a striker or dealer got too close.

Seth scored again, for the fourth time that evening, and Andrew seemed to be bored by the game when his least favourite Rebel backliner wasn't on court anymore, so he didn't put any effort into blocking shots in the last fifteen minutes of the game. Thanks to the Foxes' defense and Neil, though, the Rebels only scored twice.

That left the Foxes with the first win of their season, 9:6. The sound blared through the speakers and Neil couldn't believe it. They had won. He had scored two times. They had done it!

The other Foxes entered the court and Neil found that a group hug to the sound of their fans and the Vixens cheering was the best feeling in the world. Even though Aaron didn't look too happy about being pulled in there. Even though Andrew remained in the goal for as long as he wanted to before leaving.

Even though Neil couldn't see Kevin.

The thought felt like ice water. Where was Kevin? Why wasn't he here?

When they thanked the Rebels for the game, Neil wasn't thinking straight. As soon as they were free to leave the court, Neil ran for Abby's office, only to realise that Kevin was sitting on the bench for substitute players, Abby by his side, ice pressed to his hand.

"How are you? Are you gonna be okay? You didn't break anything, right?" Neil made sure and Kevin seemed too pale. Neil felt his stomach freeze.
"Neil, don't worry. The hand is one hundred percent fine! He's shocked because he slammed it against the wall, but he's physically fine," Abby explained and Neil closed his eyes while taking a deep breath. He'd been so worried!

But the enthusiasm came back when the other Foxes were behind him again. He smiled when the Vixens came to congratulate them. He even hugged Marissa back when she yelled at him about how incredible he'd been.

"Good job, guys. No training this weekend. I see you on Monday afternoon," Wymack announced and Dan frowned.

"No morning practice?" she made sure and Allison elbowed her in the ribs softly.

"I have better things to do than keep up with you guys that early. Now get showered before we all pass out from the smell!" Neil knew Wymack well enough by now to know that this was his good mood. The Foxes didn't need to hear that twice, they stormed into the locker rooms and showered quickly.

"Neil, you're coming to Columbia tonight, right?" Nicky asked when they got dressed. Matt looked up, seeming ready to fight Neil out of this if he needed to. Seth seemed annoyed.

Neil thought about this for a second. "If you don't drug me this time," he said, looking at Andrew. Andrew seemed unimpressed, but actually answered.

"Promise. That would be boring," he said, so Neil shrugged.

"Alright… I guess I'm coming," Neil said and Nicky smiled.

Seth rolled his eyes. "Masochist," he mumbled, but patted Neil on the shoulder on the way out. Neil couldn't help smiling. He really liked the way the Upperclassmen treated him, sometimes.

He drove back to the Fox Tower in Andrew's car, and Kevin still seemed pretty drained. He kept massaging his hand and needed to be called a few times when you wanted to talk to him.

"Alright, we'll meet at the car in fifteen minutes. I want everyone dressed appropriately," Nicky announced and pretty much everyone seemed annoyed. Neil found himself smiling again. The game's excitement was still in every cell of his body and while he didn't especially like the idea of Columbia with the Monsters, he was ready to see about the evening. He wouldn't drink too much – probably only soda if he thought about it – and he definitely wouldn't do drugs. Neil intended to spend the evening silent, seeing about the Monsters as a group of friends.

He got dressed into semi-formal clothing, consisting yet again of a plaid shirt over a tee and some skinny jeans.

He exited the bathroom and wanted to go straight down, but saw the girls sitting on the sofas while Matt and Seth were still walking around, getting ready.

"I don't like that you're going," Dan started, while Renee smiled at him and said "Have fun, take care of yourself!" Allison smirked a little and seemed happy about his outfit.

"You look great. Get some free drinks!" she said and Neil laughed a little.

"Have a great night," he said and they nodded.

"Be safe! Call if you need someone to pick you up," Matt called from the bedroom.
"Don't you dare," Seth yelled from the kitchen, and Neil laughed. The thing was that he knew Seth would pick him up if he needed him to. That was all that mattered.

"See you tomorrow," he called and went outside.

The Monsters were waiting already, and Neil climbed into the middle seat as usually. Honestly, if he had to decide between last week and this week, Neil would have chosen last week's evening. Sure, they had lost, but he'd spent the evening with his whole team, the mood had been amazing and the Vixens were supportive. He could only dream of the way today's party must be like, especially compared to the silent drive to Columbia that took over an hour.

Aaron was on his phone, Kevin was still not paying attention to anything but his hand, and Andrew was silent. That left Neil with Nicky as a conversation partner, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Nicky told him everything about Erik, how they'd grown closer, how great of a person he was. He was only interrupted by Aaron's frequent "Could you cut down the gay for a second" and "Nicky, for fuck's sake, shut up!"

Nicky didn't even stop talking at the remarks, which made Neil a little sad. How often did Aaron make homophobic comments for Nicky to not even hear them anymore? Neil wondered how that must feel to Nicky when even his parents had been unsupportive. He couldn't help listening to the stories of Erik. Neil felt like Nicky needed to get some sort of not-negative feedback for once.

They arrived at Sweetie's and Neil knew better than to order ice cream. He remembered not eating half of it before they left last time.

Neil felt good when the small bags of drugs were distributed and his "I don't want them," was accepted with a shrug. Kevin still looked like there was nothing more interesting in the world but his hand.

It didn't take long for the others to finish their ice and they got up soon, driving to Eden's Twilight. Neil didn't feel too good about that place. Partly because of what he remembered, but mainly because of what he didn't.

It took almost ten minutes for them to find a parking space and Neil sighed a little when they went inside, Aaron simply shaking hands with the security guards instead of waiting in the queue. They went inside and were surrounded by bodies, sounds, lights and darkness. It was exhausting already. Neil understood why people drank so much liquor in these spaces. You couldn't bear them otherwise.

"We'll get a table," Nicky announced, and Aaron and Kevin followed him, so Andrew and Neil went to the bar. They waited for that barkeeper whose name Neil could not recall.

"Back again so soon?" he asked, after greeting them. He seemed to recognise Neil, then, and smiled at him brightly. "And you brought the blue-eyed-one again. Usual stuff?" the man asked and Andrew shook his head.

"For us, yes. Neil?" he asked, but Neil didn't care too much.

"Coke?" he asked and Andrew nodded at the barkeeper, who raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything while mixing the drinks.

"So now you're more than the 'newest fuckup on the team'?'" he asked when he was almost done, and Neil frowned at the words. The man said them as if he was quoting someone, but Neil couldn't recall the line.
“He cheated his way into the group through Kevin,” Andrew explained, and the man laughed.

“That’s interesting,” he answered, while handing them a tray with a couple of glasses, “First round’s on me,” he announced and Andrew shrugged, taking the tray and walking to the others already.

“Do me a favour and take care of him,” the guy told Neil when Andrew couldn’t hear him anymore, and Neil frowned. He didn’t know what he meant, so Neil left with a shrug.

Andrew had brought an enormous amount of alcohol and unsurprisingly, Kevin consumed most of it that night. While the others settled for a rather normal amount of liquor, Kevin drowned the fear for his hand and for once, Neil didn’t have a big problem with it. He saw Kevin morph into more of the normal him.

Neil sticked with coke and water for the evening, which was fine by him. He was fine with seeing others get drunk. Neil actually enjoyed recognising the little things; Andrew starting to lean back in the bench while always keeping his eyes on his family, Nicky’s smile becoming brighter while his eyes became a little dull. Aaron let his guard down after a few drinks. His shoulders relaxed. Nicky and Aaron went dancing every once in a while, which left Neil with Kevin and Andrew.

Kevin was working hard on passing out, drinking beer like water, and Andrew never talked much with people around, so Neil felt a little lonely. He smiled at the number of “U ok???” texts he received by Matt and answered every time.

When Nicky and Aaron came back the next time, Kevin complained about being out of alcohol. Aaron sighed, but got up, waking towards the bar. Neil thought about it for a second before getting up and joining him.

"Hey—" Neil started, but Aaron cut him off already

"What’s your problem?” he asked in an annoyed voice, while waiting for their favourite barkeeper to be free.

Neil had wanted to be subtle and ask his questions in a way that wouldn’t give him away, but with Aaron like… Aaron, there was no point in trying.

"I was wondering if we could talk a little," Neil explained, and Aaron rolled his eyes.

"About?" he asked in an demanding tone and Neil sighed a little.

"Maybe about what happened to your mother, or what happened during training this morning or why Andrew isn't allowed to know about your girlfriend," Neil suggested, and Aaron's jaw tensed.

"You'll regret this," Aaron threatened and Neil gave him a cold smile while he leaned against the counter.

"If it's like that, I could just ask Andrew about his opinion on this matter," Neil said and Aaron's face turned to ice. Neil didn't know where the attitude came from, but he wanted answers and he was ready to work for them.

"Don't you dare. What do you want to know?" Aaron asked, and actually managed ordering drinks now.

"Whatever you're willing to tell me," Neil answered and Aaron seemed to debate with himself for a few moments.
"Talk to him about Matt or our mother. Not my place to say anything about the psychopath's intentions," he said, and Neil sighed, "As for Katelyn, leave her out of this. Andrew and I have a deal, I'm breaking it by being with her, so don't tell him, don't ask him about it, and don't ask me about it ever again. Mind your own business!"

Neil sighed a little when Aaron said this and suppressed rolling his eyes. He'd talk to Andrew about it, but seeing Aaron so angry about it meant that it was important to him, so Neil decided to not make it about Katelyn.

They got the drinks and brought them to the table. Nicky managed to pull Neil out of the bench, after a while into the evening, and took him dancing. It was weird but felt like celebrating their win, his scores. It felt almost good.

Coming back to Kevin almost laying in his chair, half asleep, wasn't as good. Nicky's eyes weren't focusing on anything properly anymore and Aaron was starting to tense all over his body. For some reason, his relaxation was followed by rising aggression, and Andrew seemed to see that Aaron was entering this stage now.

They called it a night pretty soon, and Neil helped Kevin to the car. Nicky was being unbearable when they left the club, giggling and telling them how great of an evening he had. Neil preferred Nicky's reaction to alcohol over the others' a lot!

"You're driving," Andrew said and threw the key to Neil before getting into the passenger seat. Neil caught the key and frowned a little. Then again, he was the only sober person, so he really should be the one to drive.

Neil took Andrew's directions and brought them to their house safely, which wasn't as easy as it sounds with Kevin groaning and complaining every single second of the way and Nicky constantly telling them how much he loved them and how important they were to him. Aaron seemed ready to kill him.

Andrew showed Neil where the bedrooms of the others were, so Neil helped Kevin up the stairs and into his bed. When he went down the stairs and saw Andrew in the living room, there was a pillow and a blanket on the sofa and Neil couldn't help smiling a little.

"Thanks," he said, and handed the keys back to Andrew, who simply looked back with a blank expression on his face.

"You don't seriously think that I would have given my keys to you," Andrew said, and simply left Neil in the living room on his own.

Neil stared at the key in his hand and swallowed thickly. How had that happened? He closed his fingers around the key and held it close. When he tucked himself in on the sofa, Neil closed his eyes and thought to himself that he'd fight anyone who ever dared to call Andrew a monster again.

The next morning was almost nice. Sure, waking up by Nicky jumping down the stairs while yelling "Good morning! Breakfast in half an hour!" wasn't a nice way of waking up, but walking into the kitchen around twenty minutes later and finding buns and cups of coffee and scrambled eggs there sure was a great start into the day.

"Morning, Neil!" Nicky smiled, and Neil rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"Hey… shouldn't you be hung over and asleep?" Neil asked, and Nicky shrugged.
"I'm good. And Columbia-mornings are the only times all of us sit on the same table without killing each other. And there's a bakery around the corner, so doing this takes very little effort," he explained and Neil nodded. He knew what Nicky meant. Those moments of peace and calmness were important for a family.

The twins came into the kitchen a little later, both looking ready to kill anyone who dared to speak to them, but Nicky made conversation anyways, even though he didn't get more than two syllables out of either of them.

After breakfast, Aaron sighed heavily and stretched. "When are we leaving?" he asked, and Andrew checked the time.

"Right now. Get Kevin into the car," he said and got up, leaving the house. Aaron rolled his eyes and went upstairs while Neil helped Nicky clean up the table and do the dishes quickly. Despite cleaning everything and making sure the house would be ready the next time they came here, they were faster than Aaron, whose only task was to get Kevin.

They met at Andrew's car and a very sleepy and very moody version of Kevin attempted to get into the passenger seat.

"You won't sit next to me for an hour if you're like this. Get in the back seat," Andrew said, and sat down in his seat.

Nicky and Aaron got into the back of the car with Kevin, so Neil took the passenger seat with a frown. Shouldn't they have been the ones to sit in the front?

But Andrew didn't argue, simply drove, and Neil couldn't help smirking a little. Nicky leaned forward, turned the radio on, and was satisfied when Andrew let him. Music filled the car, which made Kevin mad. He complained about the volume, so Andrew hit the breaks and since Kevin was the only one who didn't have his seatbelt buckled, his head hit the back of Neil's chair because of the force.

"Shut up," Andrew said after the smashing sound and drove on. Aaron actually chuckled and Nicky laughed. Neil didn't like how Kevin must feel because of this, but he really had it coming. The rest of the way was as silent as it got with Nicky on the car, which was probably Neil's favourite kind of silent these days.

Arriving at the Fox Tower before noon felt like they hadn't even left, especially when Neil got into his room and saw Matt on the sofa, Dan cuddled against him and barely awake, eating cornflakes. Allison was sitting in one of the armchairs, hugging a pillow and sighing.

"You're alive!" Matt said in lieu of 'hello' and Neil smiled, sitting down in an armchair.

"How was your night?" Neil asked, and Matt smiled.

"Great. The girls celebrated with the Vixens and Seth and I went to a bar downtown," Matt said and smiled a little.

Allison looked up at that, with a frown.

"I thought you spent time with the basketball-guys," she said, seeming a lot more awake than just a second ago.

Matt nodded at that, seeming confused. "Yeah. We went to that sports bar. The one we spent every weekend at last summer," he elaborated, and Neil saw her jaw tense.
"What's up?" he asked hesitantly, and Allison actually laughed at that and got up, letting the pillow fall to the floor.

"Oh, that's something I'd love to know, Neil," she said, and went into the bedroom where Seth was sleeping. She didn't bother closing the door behind her, maybe knowing they'd hear them anyways, maybe simply not caring.

The beginning of the conversation was whispered, Seth waking up, Allison checking the situation, apparently. Neil looked at Matt, who shrugged a little, but they heard them soon.

"Oh God, and if I checked your pockets?"

"Allison—"

"Who'd have guessed? Well, I didn't, obviously, when I trusted you to not screw this up for a single evening!" Her voice was loud and they heard the bed creak a little when Seth got up.

"Al, I didn't take anyt—" The rest of his excuse turned into a slap, which turned into a shove, which turned into another slap.

"Don't lie into my face, Seth. I can see it, how stupid do you think I am? Let go of me!" Allison sounded furious and helpless at the same time.

"If you stop being like this," he answered, and seemed to let go of her. The next thing Neil heard sounded like Seth's body slamming against a wall.

"You're a piece of shit, Seth! If I stop being like what? Like a person that cares for you? I had one condition, a single one, and you screwed up! You're so incredibly useless! I thought you'd learned how to be a good man by seeing what your father did to your family, but no, you end up being just…"

The sounds suggested that Allison kept hitting Seth, shoving him, hurting him in a way, up to then. The next slap didn't sound like anything she'd be capable of. Neil got up and wanted to help, but Dan took his hand and shook her head. He bit his lip and sat back down slowly, but his hand was shaking. He wanted to help her.

There was a long pause and Neil stared into the bedroom, but they were around the corner.

"Don't do this," he heard Seth say, and Allison scoffed audibly.

"As I said; just like your father. We're over, Seth. It's… it's over," she said, with her voice breaking, and left the bedroom. Allison didn't look down when she went with her hand pressed to her left cheek, and she didn't slam the doors this time. She kept her head up high when she left. Dan swallowed thickly and left the room after her, and Neil pressed his lips together.

Matt got up and sighed heavily, going into their bedroom. Neil knew he hadn't been around for long enough to say something against this or support Seth, even, so he got up slowly.

Neil went to the roof and took a deep breath. This was good. No arguments, no screaming, no violence. Just Andrew sitting there, lighting a cigarette.

"How are you always here when I come?" Neil asked and Andrew shrugged, but handed him a cigarette anyways.

"Allison and Seth broke up," Neil mumbled, and Andrew raised an eyebrow but didn't look at Neil.
"That's their thing," he answered, and Neil swallowed, watching the paper of his cigarette burn slowly.

"She hit him and he slapped her. No one would do anything about it," Neil said and felt a lump form in his throat. He didn't know why he told Andrew about all of this. It came so naturally.

"That's their battle to fight, not yours to pick," Andrew answered, and Neil nodded a little, even though that didn't make him feel any better.

"You seem to pick every battle you come across. Why is that?" Neil asked after a while. Andrew looked at him for a moment and raised an eyebrow, so Neil nodded. "My turn," he added.

"Because I'm better at fighting than the others," Andrew explained and took a deep drag of his cigarette, before going back to watching the campus. The sun was burning again and Neil liked how Andrew's hair turned almost white like this, or how he seemed even paler in the light.

"My turn. How can you talk to your mother after she abandoned you?" Andrew asked and Neil raised his eyebrow but knew better than to look up. Neil didn't know too much about Andrew's mother, but he had a feeling that this was important to him.

"She came back, so I guess she's trying. And I think she was a good mother before she left. I want to see if she's the person I remember," Neil explained hesitantly and Andrew didn't react, but by the way his cigarette burned down unused, Neil knew he was thinking about his words.

"Should I change the topic?" Neil asked and Andrew scoffed.

"Shut up," he said, and Neil couldn't help smiling.

"But who would annoy you with conversations about the other Foxes or Exy if I didn't talk to you anymore?" Neil asked with a smirk.

Andrew shrugged slightly and looked down the building. "Nicky and Kevin, unfortunately. And since those are the only things you talk about, you should really stop talking," he repeated.

"You can use your turns to ask about other stuff. And since it's my turn again, I'd like to know what you would do if you could do anything at all right now. Like, literally anything," Neil said and Andrew shot him a quick glance before looking away again.

Neil smiled, maybe because he knew that Andrew didn't like the way he threw his turns away. But to Neil, his turns weren't about forcing Andrew to give him truths. They were about making Andrew comfortable enough to give truths willingly. He liked how Andrew's questions held hidden truths themselves. Liked how he revealed them so rarely, so you always knew that this was special and important.

Andrew inhaled deeply before releasing the smoke and stubbed out the cigarette. Then he turned to face Neil and asked "Yes or no?"

Neil frowned at the question and nodded. Andrew had made sure that Neil was or wasn't taking turns in the past week as well, but it never sounded like this. "Yeah, sure," he answered. It wasn't a big question, he thought. Otherwise he wouldn't have made Andrew answer.

Neil had expected a harmless answer. Something slightly annoyed while still being very interesting and honest. What Neil received was something different.

It was a hand in his neck. A pull that could have been violent but wasn't. Andrew so close Neil could
see the constellations in his eyes, small dots on his iris, so beautiful to look at, so unrecognisable from father away.

And half a second later, it was warmer than midday's sun. It was a miracle. Neil felt his breath, felt Andrew's, closed his eyes. Andrew was pulling him up, steadying him, keeping him close yet distant. His heart thumped faster, pumping blood, pumping feelings, pumping awareness of this very moment into every cell of his body.

Neil drowned in the feeling, he didn't think of anything else. There was nothing. Nothing but Andrew. This was everything. Nothing he'd have ever dared to dream of, but everything there was.

Andrew kissed like he meant to do it, and that alone was worth more than anything else to Neil. That he meant it. Wanted it. Felt something.

These few seconds were everything.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO GUYS
THE NEW CHAPTER IS UP
YOU KNOW THAT ALREADY I MEAN THIS IS THE END BUT OMG

Alright HUGE thank you to Booksbreakhearts because you lit up by day! This is for you and Avap23 because of Allison.

OH MY GOD PLEASE I WANT THOUGHTS ON ALLISON

ALSO THE BIGGEST THANK YOU OF THEM ALL TO AsfaHan AS ALWAYS BECAUSE YOU LET ANDREIL KISS AND THAT'S AWESOME

OMG THOUGHTS ON ANDREIL AS WELL PLEASE
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Andreil kissing, obviously
Kinda goes down from then on
Some issues with Allison and Seth and Andrew so :/
I guess you could say this chapter is about nothing (I'm so sorry)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil felt like there was nothing in the world apart from Andrew. Nothing but his lips, nothing but the hand on his neck and on his shoulder. Nothing but Andrew's hot breath.

He didn't know how exactly he kissed back. It came naturally, the way talking to Andrew came naturally, the way everything about him was just a given.

Neil knew that this was the best thing he's ever felt. When Andrew's hand slipped down to Neil's other shoulder, he realised that he wanted Andrew much closer as well. He didn't think when he brought his hands up, slowly wrapping his arms around Andrew's shoulders, pulling him in.

He was getting lost in the feeling, when Andrew took it away. He wasn't gentle when he pushed against Neil's shoulders with force, ending the kiss so roughly Neil needed a second to get his thoughts straight.

"Don't touch me," Andrew said, and Neil saw emotions on his face for once. His expression showed some kind of angry confusion, but he remained close, so Neil bit his lip and nodded.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, and Andrew shook his head.

"Shut up for once, would you?" he asked, and Neil swallowed against the feeling. How did people stand kisses if that's what they left you with? If they filled you with so much warmth, but felt like ice water when they ended?

Neil received the answer to his question a second later. When Andrew's lips became everything again. When the warm feeling was back. Neil closed his eyes again and sighed very softly, letting the feeling drown every fear.

Andrew's hands were on him again, lightly touching his shoulders and neck. It was cruel, Neil thought, because he wanted to lean into the kiss and the touch at the same time. He wanted Andrew so much closer.

Neil brought his hands up another time, but forced himself to let them fall to his sides. Andrew had made a request, and Neil wouldn't ignore that. Not when Andrew was always there when he needed him. Not ever.

But whenever Andrew's hands moved on his shoulders or neck, Neil really wanted to touch him back, and forcing his hands down felt oddly familiar.
Neil didn't expect the memories to crash into him so forcibly. He didn't expect them to just come, when Andrew was right there, kissing him, letting him stay close. He didn't expect this perfect kiss to turn into one he was desperately trying to turn away from. Didn't expect the hands he was told not to lay on Andrew to morph into hands that were tied down to a bed. He didn't expect Andrew's hands on him to become someone else's.

Still Andrew, Neil told himself, and tried pushing the thought away. This was still Andrew. He liked it, the moment, the person, the place, the action. But the memories remained, omnipresent in his head, and Neil had trouble focusing on anything but keeping them away.

He knew that there was a simple solution. Andrew. Andrew was always the solution, he always knew what to do. And right then, him being himself was enough.

Neil couldn't think straight when he brought his hands up, but when he touched Andrew's hair, he was able to breathe again. He could touch back. This was Andrew. No need for anything else…

But of course, the moment didn't last. Andrew pushed against Neil another time, and he felt even colder this time. Andrew's face no longer showed a mix of emotion. It was only anger, maybe with a little disappointment.

"I'm sorry," Neil said, and Andrew shook his head.

"I'm not stupid. I know when you're panicking. But apparently, you are incredibly dumb. Instead of saying no, instead of letting go, you lean in. That's even more self destructive than I gave you credit for," Andrew said, and Neil felt small. He swallowed and almost scratched at his wrists again, but stopping a moment earlier. He didn't want to make Andrew angrier.

The thing was that 'no' hasn't ever been an option before. With his father, with the Moriyamas. 'No' wasn't a part of his vocabulary.

"But it was fine when I made sure it was you," Neil said lowly. He didn't know why exactly, but he wanted him to know.

Andrew scoffed and shook his head. "I'm not your solution, Neil. I'm not here to fight your demons," he said, and Neil took a deep breath. He let his legs dangle from the roof and looked over the campus, mainly so he wouldn't have to look at Andrew.

"I know. I don't want you to," he said, but Andrew seemed mad.

"Then don't make me," Andrew shot back and Neil swallowed hard. He heard the steps backing off, heard the heavy door opening and closing, and for once since he had arrived at Fox Tower, Neil felt alone.

Andrew must have been in the Monsters' room, the girls were comforting Allison and Matt was there for Seth.

Neil found himself strangely reminded of his first days here, when Seth had told him to choose a group. He wished he'd done that, now that he was alone and had no one to talk to.

Of course, there was a phone in his pocket. He could call the Moriyama-family, Exy journalists, Nathan's people, his mother or Jean. None of these were numbers he was willing to dial.

Neil spend an eternity on the roof, watching the sun, some students, clouds. Still, Neil wanted someone close. He couldn't stand the isolation right then. While Neil didn't normally have a problem with this, it felt like the worst possible thing right then.
He got up very slowly, and his muscles ached when he went down the stairs after sitting for so long. Neil wanted to go to his room, get workout-clothes and run to the stadium, but almost ran into Allison when she left her room.

"Oh wow, you look like shit," she greeted him, and Neil looked into her face. She didn't look better than he felt, for that matter. "I'm sick of people telling me how bad of a person Seth is. Wanna go get some coffee with me?"

But she was walking down the stairs already and Neil didn't want her to go alone, so he followed her and eyed yer pink car cautiously when he got into the passenger seat.

"So, what's up?" she asked, and Neil sighed and shrugged.

"You won't wanna talk about it. It's...," Neil bit his lip. He was gonna say 'It's not important', but it was. "It's nothing we have to talk about right now," he said, and Allison looked at him.

Neil admired her. The way she put on an extra layer of makeup over her red cheek. The way she walked through the world with her head held high when she had just broken up with her boyfriend. "Why wouldn't I want to talk about it? If it's about Seth, I'm the best person to help you, and if it's about relationship drama, I'd honestly rather think about yours than mine," she explained, and Neil swallowed. He didn't know if he could.

Allison drove for a while before pulling into the parking lot of the mall, and taking Neil to Starbucks with her. He raised an eyebrow when she ordered the fanciest drink there was, requesting pumps of hazelnut and vanilla syrup, extra shots of decaf espresso, soy milk and a ton of other things Neil couldn't care enough about to remember.

"Why do you do that?" Neil asked when they sat down, and sipped his plain black coffee that had cost around a third of her drink.

Allison shrugged. "Sometimes I just need to know I could theoretically still be the bitch others see me as," she explained and played with her straw. "So? What's your problem?"

Neil looked around, but they were no customers in hearing range at the moment. He didn't exactly want to talk about it, but he felt like this was important, maybe. "I think I might have screwed something up before it started," he explained lowly and Allison frowned.

"What are you talking about? Is it about crushing on someone? Seriously, it's never as embarrassing as it feels to you, don't worry," she explained and Neil couldn't help smiling.

"I don't think that's the problem. Remember what we talked about this week? I just think... I don't know. I feel like I did something wrong," he said, and Allison raised her eyebrows.

"You kissed someone? Just now? Whom? What could you possibly do to screw up a first kiss?" she asked, but wasn't mad when he didn't answer.

"Alright, sorry. It's too fresh to give real information, isn't it? So... there are two things that could feel wrong. One is being bad at kissing, which might be the case, but no one cares about that. It was the first one, it's probably supposed to suck. Reason two is pace. Whether you felt like you went too slow or rushed things, take a breath and reconsider, yeah? You can always talk to the person about that. Try being confident in who you are and who you're trying to be, alright?" she asked, and Neil chewed on the inside of his cheek before doing anything else. He didn't know how to answer to any of that.

Neil looked at her and sighed. "How can you talk about any of this?" he asked and saw her tense a
"I'm not stupid, Neil. Seth and I break up every few months, and every single time people come and tell me how I'm too good for him and how I should move on. Then when we're back together, everyone acts so happy. It's nice to concentrate on your drama instead of mine, because seriously? I'm sick of people talking shit about Seth and it has been – what? – an hour?" She played with her fingers and looked into her cup for a little before looking up. Allison kept her head high and seemed confident.

Neil admired this, even though he didn't understand how she did this. "I don't think whatever is happening to me qualifies as drama," Neil started, and Allison smiled with a shrug. "But if you'd like to talk about yours, I'm listening. I know what it feels like, to have people tell you what you can and cannot say and I just want you to know I won't judge you."

Allison smiled brighter at that and nodded. "You're cute, Neil. The thing is that I know how bad of a person Seth is. I know now and I know when we're together. I also know how good of a person he is. How good we are together. It's plain and easy and difficult and twisted. Seth and I are too different to stay together but too similar to keep away, you know?" She didn't look at him, but combed her hair with her fingers and braided the endings or played with it in general.

"But you argue all the time," Neil said. He didn't understand what she meant. They were always screaming and yelling. He didn't get how they even stood each other. Neil himself barely stood them when they argued.

Allison shrugged and straightened her top. She was thinking about the answer to such a short statement much longer than she should have.

"That's because we see everything we are. I see him for who he is and he does, too. Neither of us is afraid to call the other one out on it. It's important for us, I think, to know exactly about the other one's problems. We need to know where we're at. There's no guessing," she answered after a long minute and sipped her coffee.

Neil bit his lip and looked into his mug. He got that. The thing was that it hadn't stopped. "But you hurt each other today," he said, and Allison swallowed and bit into her lip before nodding. "That was not okay. As far from it as it gets. And we're gonna have to talk it through once we're ready for it. The thing is that I'm not mad. I'm sorry I hurt him first. But I know he feels bad about it as well," she said and Neil knew that she regretted it. He had only heard it from the living room, but she had sounded furious and had invested a lot of strength into hurting him. Neil had still flinched when Seth had hit back. He could feel the impact of the hand on his own face and needed to take a deep breath to remind him that this was neither Tesuji nor his father. It wasn't even happening to him. He was fine.

"Do you think it's over for good?" Neil asked cautiously and Allison shrugged almost helplessly.

"It's complicated. I think I need him and I think he needs me, but that might be the problem. I don't tolerate drugs and he won't stop using them. And today was worse than usually. I mean, I don't know for sure, but I think we're closer to 'over' than we ever were. If he starts seeing other girls the way he usually does, I'm afraid I won't want to come back," she said, and the way she talked suggested that she really needed to get this out. Neil saw how she swallowed hard and felt like he had to do something, but he didn't know what.

Allison sighed and shook her head a little. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this. Sorry, but this is more exhausting than it should be," she said and her voice was so excusing, Neil felt even worse for
"It's fine. I like listening to you. It helps understanding you better," he answered and tried smiling at her. Neil stopped when he realised how fake it felt. He didn't want to lie and by the look on her face, she appreciated that.

"Okay, sure. Do you want to talk about that kiss?" she asked and smiled when Neil shook his head. "Fine. No problem, but don't hesitate to come in the future, alright?"

Allison seemed satisfied when he nodded. Neil didn't particularly want to talk to her about anything in that moment, but it was nice to know that you had someone to give advice should it ever come down to it.

"Great. Wanna go home? I hope the girls are calm enough to spend a chill evening in with me now," she muttered and got up. Neil shrugged and checked his watch. He didn't care too much.

Allison drove them back and stopped at a gas station, considering how she wouldn't make it to the stadium with what was left in the tank. Neil bit his lip before he got out of the car and inside the gas station. He wouldn't apologise to Andrew. He hadn't really done something wrong. At least not too much. But he'd try to make up for it. Neil knew that a container of ice cream and a pack of cigarettes were basically nothing, but he also knew that Andrew didn't get presents all too often and that he'd know this meant something.

Allison raised an eyebrow when she saw what he had purchased but didn't say anything when she payed her bill and left. She drove back to the Fox Tower and smiled at Neil before getting off the car.

"I liked the time with you, Neil. I appreciate that you spent the time with me," she said and nudged him softly. "Can I just be the crazy ex-girlfriend and ask you to take care of Seth?" Allison asked then and Neil almost chuckled.

"I liked it as well. And sure, don't worry," he answered, though he didn't know who Seth could need protection from.

They went inside in silence, Allison entering the girls' room while Neil entered the Monsters'. He went to the kitchen and couldn't hide a smile when he saw Andrew there. Allison had said he should just talk about it, right?

"Hey," he greeted Andrew but wasn't offended when he didn't receive an answer. "You said you liked chocolate chip ice cream, so…," Neil went on and just handed the bag to Andrew. He didn't know what he was trying to do here, but Neil was sure it was important.

Andrew took the plastic bag and looked inside almost suspiciously before taking the pack of cigarettes out and putting the ice container into the freezer. "Why?" he asked and Neil had troubles finding the corresponding words to his thoughts.

"Because I was at a gas station and felt like I should get you something," Neil explained helplessly, but Andrew was dissatisfied.

"Why?" he asked again and Neil bit his lip.

"I don't know. I mean, I was there and I thought you might appreciate it," Neil answered. Andrew didn't look convinced but Neil didn't know what to say. Sure, this was his way of saying sorry. Not all the way, but a little.
Andrew turned to leave with the sandwich he'd been preparing before Neil had entered the kitchen, but Neil interrupted him again. "Hey, do you have a second to talk about this morning?" Neil asked and found himself biting his lip. Andrew turned back and looked at him.

"There's nothing to talk about because nothing happened," he said, and Neil felt a little cold.

"But–," he argued, just to be interrupted by Andrew.

"Don't. Stop interpreting anything at all into what happened. Because it was nothing and it's easier on both of us if you realise that already," he said and left Neil in the kitchen. Neil felt as if he had been screamed at, but Andrew was talking in the monotonous voice he had most of the time. Somehow, that had made it worse. That Andrew wasn't showing a single emotion, that he wasn't even angry. Neil thought for a second he might be serious. That this was nothing. That this was just what Andrew did. He was hurt, in a way, which was stupid, he knew that himself. But what Andrew said was hurtful anyways. For as long as Neil believed it.

But when he buried his hands in his pockets, he felt the keys to Andrew's car and felt better. He had been granted a piece of Andrew, a piece of something Andrew considered valuable and important, and that was enough. Enough to realise that this wasn't nothing. It might have been insignificant and small and unimportant, but whatever it was existed. Mattered. And it was good.

Neil bit his lip and left the Monsters' room, entering his own. He didn't feel like spending time with them at the moment, because even thought he knew Andrew hadn't been all the way honest with him, he felt bad. The sense of belonging he usually felt in the living room of them was gone and he felt like more of an intruder. Kevin was still weird because of his hand, he didn't concentrate on anything else. Aaron liked him even less than usually, Andrew was weird, and any conversation with Nicky would feel forced and uncomfortable.

He went into his room and got into one of the armchairs. Matt and Seth were on the sofa next to each other and Seth radiated anger.

"Hey," he mumbled, and Matt smiled at him while Seth shot him a death stare. Neil didn't feel well to begin with, but this was even worse, in a way. He didn't want to ask about his problem, though, knowing that Seth's reaction would be even worse than this.

"Could you do everyone a favour and just shut up?" Seth asked with a loud voice and Neil looked up and leaned against the armrest of his seat, raising his eyebrow a little. The feeling in his chest was heavy and Seth made him feel even colder than he had to begin with, but the sadness and frustration turned into something stronger. Angrier, somehow.

"Seth, c'mon," Matt whispered and put a hand on Seth's shoulder, but Seth shoved him away roughly.

"No, Matt, leave me alone. He didn't decide whether to be with us or the Monsters, fine. You were okay with him only caring about you when he had a problem with Kevin, so it didn't matter to me, but this? This is sick. We broke up this morning and he's out with her, that's disrespectful and just a dick move," he said and got louder and louder. Neil couldn't help nibbling his lip the whole time, and he felt sick when Seth was done.

"We had coffee, it's not as if I tried to insult you or anything," Neil assured in a neutral voice. He wasn't sure whether or not this was a battle he wanted to pick, but Seth made a throw-away gesture and Neil made a decision.
"Neil, that's the point. We broke up. It's time for you to choose a side. You can't spend time with the both of us after what happened," Seth said loudly and Neil's negative feelings increased. He swallowed hard and knew he should take a step back, leave him space, be the nice guy he tried to be. But Neil was sick of people treating him like this today. He didn't want to let Seth win this battle.

"After what happened exactly? After you hit her in the face? Because I feel like there should be someone to be there for her after that," he answered and Seth raised his eyebrows.

"What's that supposed to mean? You can fuck her because we have a problem? Neil, go, I'm serious. Do me a favour and leave. And don't think you can get away with this. You have to choose one side, you can't keep doing this!"

Neil didn't get how Seth could scream at him so furiously for no reason at all, but it felt incredibly bad anyways. He was cold all over and tried hard to contain his emotions. Neil swallowed against the pain welling up and tried to concentrate. The anger was slowly subsiding. Making space for something colder again.

Andrew didn't want to spend time with him. The Monsters had better stuff to do than keep up with him. Seth made Neil decide between the five people left he still talked to, knowing he wouldn't ever be able to fully belong with either of their groups.

"Seth," Matt tried again, but Seth shoved him away again.

"Leave me alone, Matt. Neil has to stop being the traitor he is and try being a real person for once. Really, Neil, the way you are makes me sick. Never on anyone's side just because you fear we might kick you out of be mad. That's bullshit. We're mad because you're never truly on our side," Seth spat and Neil just couldn't. He got up and felt his hands tremble. There wasn't a lot he'd be more willing to do than hit Seth in the face, but he didn't. Neil turned around and left the room in shaky steps. He felt sick with anger and hurt.

"Hey, Neil," Matt called after him, but Seth was even more infuriated by that.

"Shut up, Matt. He's even worse of a person than I assumed. How low can you get that you make a move on her when it hasn't even been a day?"

Neil closed the door behind him and went upstairs to the roof. He still felt like throwing up but at least he found himself breathing again.

He couldn't quite grasp what had happened throughout the day, but he knew that it was unbelievably wrong. If he couldn't spend time with the Monsters or the Upperclassmen, that left him with no one at all.

Andrew would have disagreed, though. Saying that that left him with himself and that he was someone.

Or he'd have let him say it, because he agreed. Hadn't he just made that very clear? That this was nothing at all, that it didn't matter?

The thought was sickening in itself and Neil swallowed hard. He was alone…

It took hours to understand the familiarity of the feeling. This was what he'd felt after Jean had left. When Riko had let out every bit of anger on Neil. When Neil had understood that no one was there to pick up the pieces. That he'd have to care for himself completely alone.

Neil had troubles breathing again. How stupid could you even be? He had given so much away. To
the Foxes. To pick him up, hold him together. He'd let them be there for him, he'd let them ensure his safety; he'd been comfortable enough around them to let his guard down. And they threw it away.

He wondered why he was feeling bad. Hadn't he always known that this was a bad idea? But he'd done it anyways, of course. And now he felt the consequences of his actions. And even though he was back where he'd been all his life, Neil felt miserable. Probably because he'd never known what the other option felt like. Having it taken away was a crushing feeling, as if everything Neil had been trying to be was falling apart.

Neil sat there for three hours. Four. Five. And many more. The sun was setting and even though the building still radiated warmth, Neil was freezing. He pulled his legs close and listened to the blood rushing through his ears. To his breath. It didn't help. He was alone.

An eternity later, he flinched heavily when his phone went off loudly. The sound was so oddly real that Neil had to blink a few times before finding his way out of his thoughts back into his position.

He almost smiled when he saw Matt's name on the display, and picked up.

"Thank God! Where are you? Are you okay? Can I pick you up?"

Neil blinked and swallowed. He felt numb. Sitting here for hours had taken some sadness from him but left him with void.

"I'm on the roof. And I'm fine. What's wrong?" Neil asked, and his voice sounded alien. Raspy and broken and emotionless.

"I thought you were somewhere with Andrew and now Renee gets here telling us about her day with Andrew! I'm worried! What are you doing all by yourself? Would you please get here?"

Neil swallowed hard when he heard the sound in Matt's voice. It warmed him up a little. Neil was just so frozen, that instead of melting, he felt something inside him crack. It hurt almost physically.

"I'm coming. Don't worry," Neil said, and hung up. He took a deep breath and got up. Neil didn't want to go there and pretend to be fine. It felt like attending training after Riko had a bad afternoon and punished him for it. It was like facing the press and pretending to be glad this family adopted you. It was playing pretend when nothing was okay. Nothing at all.

He entered his room and saw Dan, Renee and Matt in the living room. Since the door to their bedroom was closed, Neil assumed that this was where Seth was.

"Hey. Al is alone?" Neil asked, and Matt looked at the bedroom door, as if to check if Seth heard him or not.

"She doesn't want company," Dan explained and Neil nodded. He looked around a little and felt uncomfortable. He didn't want them to pretend to like him more than they did. Neil wanted to be alone. He couldn't keep up with false promises at this point.

"Hey, I'll be right back, okay?" he asked and turned around already. He couldn't stand this right now. Them.

"You just got here. Where are you going?" Dan asked and Neil bit his lip and shrugged a little.

"Nowhere. I don't know. I don't feel like being inside at the moment," he mumbled and almost ran out of the room. Neil knew that his behaviour was off, but he was in flight mode and didn't know how to deal with it.
It was… weird. Almost. Not all the way. But running into Andrew in the hallway felt oddly calming.

"Hey," he started, and Andrew looked up with a blank look on his face. Whatever he saw on Neil's face was something he didn't approve of, apparently. Neil's shoulders sank.

"I want to be alone," Andrew announced and opened the door to the roof. Neil took a deep breath and tried not to acknowledge the way his heart felt as if it was cracking.

"Sure. I get that. It's just that I'd like to talk to you for a second. About… I don't know. About this morning and about what you said before and just… like generally what happened, I guess," Neil said a little helplessly while trying to sound less lost than he felt.

Andrew actually turned around and looked at Neil for a long moment before saying "I said I wanted to be alone," very slowly.

"Andrew, just a minute, please," Neil tried again, but Andrew shot him a death stare.

"No. And don't say that. It's disgusting and won't change anything about your situation," Andrew said and turned to leave again. Neil hadn't even considered Andrew's presence, but him going away felt bad anyways.

How could everyone be so rude, all of a sudden? This wasn't okay. It was hurtful and inconsiderate. Leaving him alone when Neil tried reaching out. When he needed someone to hold on to. It was unbearable.

"Stop looking at me like that. I told you already. I'm not the answer to whatever question you found here," he said, turned around, and left.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS! Your response on the last chapter was amazing, thank you! I'm very sorry for not answering some of you but… you were commenting on the kissing and I just couldn't!!!!

What did you think about Andreils catastrophe of a first kiss?
What do you think about allison? Share your thoughts, please (Andrew wouldn't be too please-d I used that word) {someone kill me that joke was terrible}

As ALWAYS (there we go again) AsfaHan is literally the best person ever! Seriously, i'm on an internship atm and I'd die AND not post if she wasn't doing this with me! Thanks for encouraging me and thank you a lot for telling me what to leave out! Thank you very very much. You're the greatest!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Neil is lonely and sad
A game
Allison is bae
I try changin' POVs I hope it worked

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS

Trigger warnings apply to this chapter:
Violence. Not a lot, not detailed, but I wanted to let you know

And for the next chapters starting in this one: eating disorders (bulimia relapse in particular, Allison obviously) (this is a bit of a Spoiler but I know I always want a warning ahead before reading that type of content)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's mood didn't improve anymore, that day. When Kevin came to pick him up for night practices, he said no. He spent the night with Matt, Renee and Dan, but he didn't watch the movie they had turned on and didn't even attempt to participate in their conversations today.

He didn't know why exactly he was like this. Matt tried. He really did. But Neil couldn't help thinking of Seth and the way he had treated Neil. He felt so incredibly unwelcome all of a sudden. Neil didn't really talk to any of them and was glad when he could finally go to bed. He wasn't tired but he really couldn't socialise that day.

Neil spent the next days pretty isolated. He rode to training with Matt and the others but ran back. On Monday after classes, Nicky actually approached Neil in the parking lot and smiled at him.

"Hey. Why don't you ride with us?" he asked cheerfully, but Neil only bit his lip for a little while and shook his head.

"I'm driving with Matt. I honestly don't think Andrew wants me on his car at the moment," he answered lowly and looked over to Andrew's car. It was weird, knowing he had keys to that car but couldn't even be in there.

"That's bullshit, Neil. He won't let anyone else sit on the passenger seat. Seriously, just drive with us again," Nicky said and nudged Neil softly. Neil didn't really believe that until he saw Kevin and Aaron getting into the back seat. Why would Andrew do that if he wouldn't even talk to Neil? He couldn't make sense out of this.
Honestly, Neil was close to coming with Nicky when Andrew got out of the car and yelled over half the parking lot. "Nicky, get over here, we're leaving!"

Nicky raised an eyebrow and shrugged while Neil drifted further into the dark corner of his mind. He felt abandoned.

Kevin noticed that something was up and asked Neil to walk to classes together on Tuesday, but Neil was bad at making conversation. He wanted to talk to Andrew and about Andrew, but he was never on the roof when Neil was and Neil didn't want to bother him by going when he knew Andrew would be there.

Seth didn't talk to Neil at all, which wasn't too different from usually, but it felt a lot worse. Matt was always there, though, making food for all of them, taking them to the cinema or just making excuses for the three of them to spend time with each other. He was the glue keeping them together.

Training was weird. Neil could forget about everything else for an hour, turned around and saw that Andrew wasn't looking at him. He was actually ignoring him, and the bad feelings came crashing back down. It was horrible.

Wednesday was a little different. Neil wanted to spend his free moment alone, procrastinating over things he couldn't change, when the door opened.

Allison got in with a textbook and a highlighter in her hand and sat down on the sofa next to Neil.

"Morning," she mumbled, and Neil looked up at her. How could she smile?

"I'm not in the mood for conversations at the moment," Neil warned. He didn't want to be rude, but he didn't want to talk to her, either.

"So I've heard. What's up? Dan is worried sick about you, she talks about your moods all the time," she said and set her book down. Neil looked up at her and shrugged.

He actually liked the way Allison and him spent those mornings together. They had two more hours before classes started and the conversations were pretty nice. There was no pressure, it was just comfort and a little time for relaxation.

"I'm fine. Bad mood, that's all," he mumbled as an explanation and Allison sighed heavily.

"Neil, you're most definitely not fine. Just tell me about your problem and we'll find a solution," she said, and Neil bit his lip and looked up at her.

"Don't you have your own problems to worry about?" Neil asked and Allison crossed her arms while raising an eyebrow.

"Alright, since you don't talk about it, I'm guessing it's personal. If it was about Riko or any of those people, you'd talk to Kevin or one of the Monsters, I guess, but since you behave exactly the way I feel, I think it's more recent. An educated guess would be the kissing-thing we talked about. So do the both of us a favour and tell me how the conversation went." Neil raised his eyebrow at that. Even though she wasn't all the way right, she was so close Neil wondered if he hid this as badly or if she read his mind.

"It's nothing you should be concerned about," Neil said and leaned back, but Allison shook her head.

"Wrong. You're walking around like a kicked puppy and expect us to ignore that? Darling, we are your friends, so get over it and talk to me," Allison said with an almost angry tone in her voice and
Neil swallowed hard. He thought back to what Andrew had said. Insignificant. Nothing.

"It's not important. I interpreted too much into it and messed up. It was nothing at all," he answered when the lump in his throat was gone. The words were hurting even when he just repeated what Andrew had said.

The look Allison shot him was filled with all the compassion there was in the world. "Aw, Neil, you're... oh man," she mumbled and laid an arm around him. Neil frowned a little. Sure, he was hurting, but was it really necessary for her to hug him? But... it was kind of comforting. "Can I just give some advice to you? If it feels like something worth putting effort into, it most definitely is. Don't let anyone tell you that you deserve better or have to move on if it feels important. Talk to them about it again. Even if they said this, it doesn't mean it's what they feel. It's probably some kind of fear. I just don't want you to lose hope, yeah?"

Neil was almost happy he didn't have to look at her. He found a little comfort the way she treated him. Her words seemed to mean something. They felt as if they were important and Neil closed his eyes for a second, thinking about Andrew. What could he possibly be afraid of? The only thing he cared about was his family, and Neil hadn't done anything to harm them.

"Is there anything else I can help you with? We're all worried about you," she said and pulled Neil even closer. He couldn't help smiling a little at the way she treated him. The way she cared for him.

"I'm fine, don't worry. Thank you," he mumbled. Sure, the Monsters didn't talk to him, neither did Seth, but he wouldn't whine about that right now.

"I'm just gonna believe you, yeah? But come talk to me when you need to!" she said and ruffled his hair. It was weird, how something this small could make him feel so much better.

"If you say so," he answered lowly and smiled a little. Sure, he wouldn't ever do that, but the offer was nice anyways. "How are you dealing with the whole Seth-thing?"

Allison sighed a little and let go of him softly, actually facing Neil now. "I don't know if you really want to know it, but I'll just tell you anyways. I don't think I ever missed him so much. It's hard. Can you tell me anything about him? How he's been? Is that Vixen around often? The red haired one?"

Neil wanted to make her feel better but didn't know how to do that. Was a hug appropriate? It felt weird, so he didn't do it. "I don't know what he usually does but he's pretty rude. And I think he saw her once or twice, but we don't talk at the moment, so I don't know for sure."

He didn't want to lie to her, but judging from the look of her face, she knew that already. "Typical. He always sees the prettiest ones because he knows that hurts most," she mumbled and Neil bit the inside of his cheek uncertainly.

"You shouldn't be worried about her," he said. Neil wasn't sure how to comfort her exactly, but he thought he had to try, at least.

"Why not? I mean, let's be real, she's taller and generally... just look at her. There's so much she has that I quite obviously don't have," Allison said with a sigh and Neil raised his eyebrows.

"Hey, I don't quite know what to say, but, Allison, you're pretty awesome. And you play Exy, that's a plus," he said, and Allison smiled quite brightly at him. With her face so happy, Neil couldn't suppress a smile.

"You're adorable, Neil! Thank you," she mumbled and ran a hand through her hair before sighing. "I should take notes on this chapter now."
They spent this Wednesday morning like that, and the one the week later as well. It was weirdly comfortable and calming. It was a little time without his depressing thoughts. Nothing else changed. Training resulted in fighting all too often, even though they would be facing Brekenridge this Friday.

Neil tried talking to Andrew once a day but learned to leave him be after a week. The worst part wasn't that Andrew didn't talk to him or made rude remarks whenever he did. The really tragic part was that he didn't have his presence anymore. That the roof wasn't theirs anymore. That Neil felt less 'home' whenever he ran into Andrew.

Kevin learned to trust his hand again. He hadn't hurt it badly, but it was tough on the psychological level. He was still trying to cope with the traumatic events.

Seth screwed up whatever chance him and Allison had by spending too much time with the ginger Vixen and Allison was probably the strongest girl Neil ever knew. Her reactions were limited to a tense jaw or straighter gaze, but she never broke. She was enduring a situation she shouldn't have to be in.

The others, however, were a blessing. Matt, Dan and Renee took care of them in every way they could. The girls were there for Allison and Neil, even when they didn't know where his bad mood came from, and Matt divided his time between his roommates and did his best to make them get along better.

Neil couldn't help warming up a little. It was natural around them. Yes, they could be exhausting and a little hard to stand sometimes, but they were the best people Neil could have ever even wished for.

The game was like the one before. Renee worked hard, Andrew didn't care enough to do so, the backliners pushed with everything they had and the dealers supported the offence mainly — even when they preferred a rather defensive play. Kevin and Seth didn't score as often, because Kevin and Neil hadn't trained together lately and weren't too keen on risking anything. Seth, on the other hand, was just too proud to rely on Neil for goals. They ended up barely winning, 6-5, after each of the strikers scored twice.

The mood after the game was weird. The others were flying high on the game's enthusiasm, but Neil wasn't feeling the same today. He felt the rush of playing Exy fade off slowly and bit his lip when he was showered and changed. Neil didn't feel like having company, right then. He was looking forward to a night in on his own. He'd finally have a little time to think.

Matt caught Neil on the way to the parking lot, putting an arm around his shoulders and dragging him towards Seth.

"You guys were amazing tonight! What do you think about a night at the sports bar?" he asked, and Seth raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"I thought there was a party with the Vixens again," he said, and Neil barely kept himself from rolling his eyes.

"You're hurting her by spending time with that girl," Neil said lowly. He didn't think it was a secret, and he really needed Seth to know. To be aware of Allison being so unhappy while Neil couldn't make her feel better. She was miserable.

"Shut up, Neil, seriously," Seth said, and Matt bit his lip before pulling the both of them closer.

"So… the Vixens and our girls are having a girls night or something, so I thought we could hang out
with the soccer or the basket ball guys?" Matt suggested, and Seth shrugged.

"I don't care. As long as Neil minds his own business," he said with a sigh and Neil was ready to fight him when Matt interrupted his anger.

"Seth, don't give him a hard time," he said and nudged Seth softly before wrapping his arm back around him.

Neil sighed and swallowed. He didn't feel like spending the evening with ten strangers and a guy that didn't want him there. He'd have spent the evening in with only Matt, even with all the Upperclassmen in general, but this? He wasn't up for it.

"I'd like to, but I'm in Columbia with the Monsters," he lied, and Matt smiled.

"That's great. I mean… worrying, but you can always call, yeah?" he asked, while Seth sighed.

"Matt, you're unbearable. Stop," he said and Matt laughed.

"You guys are equally unbearable, how are you not getting along? Get on the truck!"

It was always weird, with Seth, Renee and Allison, because the connections shifted. Neil stuck with Seth because Renee sticked with Allison. It was strange, but Neil didn't want him to be alone. He knew that Seth was hurting, somewhere deep down. While Neil and him didn't get along too well these days, he refused to leave him alone.

They remained pretty silent for the drive, and when they were in their room, Matt was the only one even attempting to make conversation. When Seth and Matt sat down on the sofa Neil suppressed a sigh. He felt so trapped and while he knew that he shouldn't, that those were his friends after all, he just couldn't help it.

"I'm leaving," he said and headed for the door, while Matt raised an eyebrow.

"Like that? I thought you were going to Columbia," he said, and Neil bit his lip.

"Yeah… Nicky doesn't like my clothes. He got something he approves of," Neil mumbled and scratched the back of his neck.

His father and mother had beaten every attempt to lie right out of him, but the years at the Ravens had shown him that the truth was whatever Riko wanted it to be.

For someone who had spent a decade doing nothing but lying to everyone around him, Neil was incredibly bad at lying to Matt's face. His voice stuttered and broke. His posture became slightly sloppier. He was insecure.

"Neil, is everything alright?" Matt asked.

For a second, Neil thought he could tell Matt about it. How he felt abandoned. How he was hurting. For that bit of a second, he wanted to be honest.

But the second was over, and Neil Josten became the lie he was.

"I'm fine. Don't worry, I'll see you tomorrow," he said with a smile that was burning his cheeks, and left the room.

Neil practically ran down the stairs and felt dizzy. A liar. Nothing but a liar. Without any reason to be one. He needed the Foxes. They were the only reason for his questionable safety. The only reason
for his freedom. They were his friends.

Or at least he had thought so before Andrew had pushed him away. Before the Monsters had just abandoned him. Before Seth had made him choose sides over and over again.

And now he pushed them away. Refused to let anyone in. Ran. Ran like the rabbit he was.

Ironically, running made him feel alive again. He could finally breathe again when he sped up. His blood was rushing faster and faster and finally, Neil could feel something apart from the numbness. It wasn't just apathy anymore. It was sadness creeping in very slowly. Then anger, a little faster, then frustration with himself. With his team.

Neil only realised that he was running towards the stadium when he felt something positive spark up. Two goals in a game. That was good. Very good. He was improving.

It was comforting, in a way. Neil was more than a Raven. He was better than he had been there.

The thought was weird. The thought that being a Fox was better than being a Raven. It was obvious, after what he'd been through, but it only fully occurred to him when he ran past the buildings late at night. It was as nice as it was hurting. As comforting as stressing.

It was true.

Neil didn't know where all of this came from, suddenly, but the cold night air contributed to the clarity in his head. He didn't have a problem with the slight drizzle that turned into real rain a little later. He actually liked the smell of rain on summer nights. The feeling of wet clothes clinging to your body.

He had only actually learned to treasure truths when Andrew had assigned them a value. Andrew… He was an entirely different topic to begin with. The truths, the keys, the safety, the cigarettes, the roof, the nights.

And that disaster of a kiss, of course. Neil was still not sure what had happened. How exactly it had been. He just knew that, even though the outcome had been a catastrophe, the feeling had been nice. He knew that he had never felt this warm in his life. But he knew that it had passed, the way every happy moment of his life did. He knew that it had left him too cold for any warmth to make up.

It was weird. The isolation felt so familiar Neil was almost comfortable with it.

He was breathing heavily when he practically ran into a person and halted abruptly.

"Sorry," Neil muttered and took a step back. He hadn't seen the man on the street, and while Neil hadn't exactly been concentrating, he was sure that this person must have left the small side street.

Neil was ready to run on and forget about the incident, when the man started talking.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Could you tell me about the time before leaving, though?"

The person had almost a head on him and Neil frowned for a second. Something about this didn't feel right.

"He told himself to stop being so hypersensitive and ignored the feeling in his gut. This was nothing to worry about. He was on edge because he had spent the past thirty minutes in his own mind, which was a messed up place to stay at. The rain probably contributed to the unease.
"Yeah… uh," he started and pulled the phone out of his pocket. Neil smiled a little when he saw the three texts Matt had sent him. "Is the drive alright?", "Hey, r u ok?" and "Neil?" He took a mental note to answer him right away, when everything happened at the same time.

His phone flew out of his hands and landed a few yards away in a puddle on the sidewalk. The man slapped Neil's hands away. Neil was slammed into the wall of a building, hitting his head heavily, before being pushed to the wet ground.

Matt was sitting on the sofa with Dan cuddled against him and couldn't help smiling. He loved this. Spending time with his girlfriend after a win. Looking forward to an evening with his friends.

He took out his phone to check for any messages. Neil hadn't answered the one about the drive, so Matt sent another text. "Hey, r u ok?" He had been so worried about Neil lately, and him not answering was a little worrying.

"Matt, Kevin is like his brother. He'll take care," Dan whispered and pressed a kiss to his cheek, and Matt couldn't help smiling even more brightly and pulling her a little closer.

"You're right," he mumbled and poked her cheek. She always was.

Seth went out of the bedroom then, dressed nicely. "When are we leaving? Just need to know how much time I have in the bathroom," he said and sighed.

Matt shrugged a little. "Whenever you're ready," he answered when the door opened and Allison stood in their room.

"Hey, Dan? Renee and I are done, can we leave?" she asked, ignoring Seth pretty much all the way.

Matt sighed softly. This would escalate.

"Allison," Seth started, but Allison crossed her arms and looked at Dan.

"So?" she asked, and Dan shrugged.

"Allison, if you want to, we can leave, if you'd rather have a conversation before, no one is gonna stop you. But you're making the calls. Don't make this my decision," she answered. Matt loved this about her. How she always made sure you fought your own battles.

Allison shot her an annoyed look and checked her phone, then. "Ten minutes," she told Seth, who looked like he couldn't care less. Matt knew he was playing pretend. Knew how badly Seth wanted her back. Don't screw this up!

Seth leaved against the wall and looked at her. Matt couldn't believe Allison actually made her way across the room and stood closer to him. She shouldn't be the one approaching him. He also couldn't believe they were doing this in the living room.

"So?" Allison asked, and Seth looked at her for a long moment.

"It's been three weeks. I think that's enough," he said, and Matt heard Dan sigh beside him. He was screwing this up.

"That's a shitty argument. You're wasting my time," she said in annoyed tone and crossed her arms tightly.
"Why can't we just be together again the way we usually are?" he asked and tried to sound unaffected so hard Matt knew it was 100 percent not what he felt.

"Because this time is different and you know that! We have both known it since the moment we broke up! You slapped me, Seth, that's nothing I'm willing to just—"

"Don't you dare to go there! You know exactly what the situation was like," he answered so loudly Matt actually flinched.

Allison became silent for a few seconds, but shook her head. "That doesn't change anything. You're sleeping with the Vixen again. You're pretty good at showing me what I am to you," she answered and Dan looked up from the sofa. Allison sounded so broken with the way her voice scratched and Matt thought she deserved a hug.

"That's not fair. You know she doesn't mean anything to me. At all. She's…"

Seth stopped and Allison scoffed. Matt wished they'd do this elsewhere.

"It's not only about her. I know you're simply doing this to hurt me. The worst part isn't what you're doing when we're off but what you're doing when we're dating! You're not only hurting me by taking that shit! You're a terrible influence on Matt and Aaron, for that matter. You're destroying yourself. How many times do you want to be at the hospital because you overdosed? Because for me, the past times were more than enough," she said, voice growing louder and louder.

Dan pressed Matt's hand, but he simply shook his head. He wasn't fighting that battle anymore. Not in the way Allison had implied. Sure, seeing Seth taking drugs wasn't especially good for Matt, but he didn't care too much.

"I told you I could stop if I wanted to," he said, but Allison stared into his eyes for a long moment before shaking her head.

"You say that every time. Prove it. Do it now. Just stop. Because the way you are makes me sick, Seth. I know you could, but I also know you don't want to. Maybe you're afraid if being a good person, maybe you don't believe you can be one, but if you tried… and instead of doing that, you're sleeping with cheerleaders and do drugs and throw away your life."

She had been getting more and more silently and Matt was almost sorry him and Dan were stealing the moment, but Allison almost yelled the last words at Seth and left.

"Call when you want to work on having a life," she said, and looked at Dan for a long moment. Dan sighed lowly and kissed Matt on the cheek once more.

"Love you. I'll be here later," she mumbled and left with Allison.

Matt looked up from his place on the sofa and Seth stared at the door.

"Don't talk to me about her. Ever," he said and went into the bathroom. Matt nibbled his lip and sighed softly. Why were his friends always so unhappy?

That brought his thoughts right back to Neil. He checked his phone and his unease grew when he saw that Neil still hadn't answered. He sent a simple question mark and waited for Seth.

Seth left the bathroom and rolled his eyes when he saw Matt like that. "What wrong? That's your 'concerned about Neil' face," he said and crossed his arms. Matt just shrugged. "He'll live. Now try and stop looking like a mother without her babies," he said and took out his phone.
"Who are you texting?" Matt asked, and Seth shrugged.

"Julie," he answered and Matt almost sighed.

"Don't you think you should put a little more effort into setting things straight with Allison?" he asked lowly and Seth only shrugged.

"I'm not talking about her. And she'll be crawling back anyways. You know she will," Seth mumbled and Matt swallowed hard. He wouldn't live to understand the twisted layers of their relationship, but this seemed wrong even to him.

"But—" Matt protested lowly, and Seth interrupted him.

"Not about Allison," he warned and checked his hair in front of the mirror.

Matt checked his phone again with a sigh. The last time he'd been to Columbia, Neil had answered after a maximum of five minutes.

"Do you think they did it again?" Matt asked, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He wanted to talk to Seth about Allison, but if he couldn't do that, he'd at least try getting his mind off thins.

"I think neither him nor them are stupid enough for that. His phone is probably dead or something," Seth answered lowly, but it wasn't enough to ease the bad feeling in Matt's stomach.

"No, the messages are arriving. He's not answering," he explained. This wasn't like Neil.

"He hasn't been exactly talkative lately. He probably doesn't want to. And they might not have left, go check their room and stop being this annoying," Seth answered monotonously. Matt took a deep breath and nodded. While he wished other answers from Seth, this was probably alright. Talking about Neil was just as important and he wouldn't be able to enjoy the evening if he kept worrying about this.

"Yeah… I'll be right back," Matt announced and got up. He left the room and bit his lip when he walked by the girls' room to the Monsters'. If they weren't there, he'd just call Kevin. Maybe Nicky. One of them would have to pick up.

He knocked the door and waited a second. Two. He started to worry even more badly until the door opened and Nicky stood there.

"Make it quick, we're leaving in a second. I still need to change into other stuff and while I wouldn't have a problem with you joining me, I doubt you're in for that," Nicky announced and Matt was too relieved to be annoyed. They weren't gone yet.

"I just wanted to see if Neil was alright. He's not answering his phone, so I thought I —" Matt started with a small smile, but Nicky just frowned.

"Uh… Neil isn't here," Nicky interrupted and opened the door to grant Matt a look inside. Kevin exited the bedroom and raised an eyebrow.

"What about Neil?" he asked in an alarmed tone and Matt tensed a little.

"He said he was going to Columbia with you," he explained slowly. The twins joined them as well, Andrew coming from the kitchen while Aaron left the bathroom. Kevin's face lost it's colour and he swallowed visibly.
"Well, he's not here, you can leave," Aaron said unapologetic and shrugged.

Matt was too troubled to be mad. He felt sick. "Neil left more than thirty minutes ago. What do you mean he's not here? He said he was gonna be here!" He knew that he shouldn't be this accusing, but he really couldn't help it.

"Neil didn't exactly spend time with us, lately, Matt, why would you think he'd be with us?" Nicky asked, way too calm about Neil being missing.

"Well..." Matt started and swallowed. Neil was missing. Gone. No one knew where he was. This was not okay! "He said so. Why wouldn't I believe him?"

Nicky had a concerned look on his face and checked his phone for messages or missed calls. Aaron seemed slightly annoyed and crossed his arms, walking back into the bathroom. Kevin looked like he was gonna throw up and held on to the wall. "This can't be happening," he mumbled.

Andrew was tense in the middle of the room. Matt looked at him when he made his way across the room, took his keys from a table and shoved the taller one out of the way.

"Because he's a fucking liar, in case any of you didn't notice," he practically spat at Matt and went down the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter! In particular Booksbreakhearts (I only have to type Booksb in order for my phone to autocorrect your name) and thatfandomlife153 and Asylum and Avap23 for sticking around and being so nice!

And thanks to Serris and Dramaya for giving this a shot! You guys are amazing.

LET'S GET REAL THOUGH! What did you think about the pov change? WHO DO YOU THINK IS ATTACKING NEIL PLEASE TELL ME. (Hint you know hin)

And PLEASE give me options on allison and Seth! And the Monsters maybe?

THANK YOU

Alright the most important thing is yet to come! AsfaHan is literally the best person ever (half the characters would be deadid it weren't for her) (okay it would only be two/three of then but whatevs)

You're so amazing and I'm looking forward to our fanfic-drives that are SO gonna happen now that they're a think in my head! I love you
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

THERE ARE MEET UPS HAPPENING ALL OVER EUROPE
I CAN POST THE URL TO THE TUMBLR POSTS
IS ANYONE OF YOU FROM GERMANY
BECAUSE I'M ORGANISING THE ONE IN FRANKFURT

I REPEAT: FOXHOLE COURT MEET UP!!!!

Okay now that this is settled:

The mysterious attacker

Andrew and Neil ft. Andrew’s car

Chapter Notes

I'm triggerwarning attempted rape here, should anyone need specific warnings go ahead and ask!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Neil blinked against the flashing lights he saw. This couldn't be happening… He wished for knives, then. Neil hated them with everything he had in him, but he knew he could defend himself with them. He wasn't good at fighting one on one. Not without any warning whatsoever. In addition to that, there hadn't been an opportunity to fight back in the past decade. Neil was used to just endure these things.

*Endure beatings*. Fighting back only occurred to him now that it was too late.

*Endure the pain*. He wasn't allowed to fight, so he always ran.

*Endure Riko*. He wished he could do just that now. Run. Run wherever. He didn't care. He wanted to be gone.

He looked up and saw the figure on top of him. Felt his weight. They were farther in the side street than Neil remembered. He didn't know if he had just missed being dragged a few feet or if he'd lost consciousness for a few seconds because of the way his head hit the wall and floor. He hoped it wasn't the latter. He couldn't afford loosing his mind. He needed to think. Needed to get out of there someway. He really couldn't afford loosing his mind right then. Couln't loose control.

Though he'd probably done that already.

The man was on top of him, and Neil felt horror in every cell when he tried moving and his wrists
were trapped over his head and it was embarrassing to know that he was weak enough to be held down with one hand. The person kneed on top of Neil, and while he could move his legs slightly, it wasn't in a way to defend himself or do any harm.

It took every bit of willpower to not panic right then and there.

"I'm not actually supposed to talk to you, but when Riko called to say he'd pay me for this, I didn't think you were this easy of a target," he whispered against Neil's ear and Neil shivered with disgust. This couldn't be happening. Not again. Not after everything he'd managed to change in the past months. He would be able to do this. He could if he only kept his thoughts straight. The warm, humid breath in his ear couldn't be real. Wasn't allowed to be real. Neil had been used to attacks and that kind of deals at the Nest, but it had always been Riko or Tesuji. Never this.

"I'll pay twice what he does. Three times. Name a number, you'll get it," Neil said lowly. He couldn't breathe and was nauseous, but he couldn't have this happening. His mother would pay for whatever this was.

"Oh, but it's not only the money. Sure, that's nice, but do you know what he promised? Said he'd give your teammate to me as a present. Good old times, I'm sure AJ talks about it quite often," he muttered, and Neil pressed his eyes shut. There was a way out of this. There always was. But this seemed so hopeless. Neil wouldn't be able to free himself…

He couldn't grasp the words all the way. Who was he talking about?

"Oh, I forgot how dull you student-athletes are. He goes by Andrew now. Riko figured out or has contacts who told him, either way. Pays enough for this to be worth it. Wouldn't it be great if you were there later as well? Riko said AJ is pretending to be your bodyguard. I'd like to see what you two look like next to each other. When you see that he's nothing but a pathetic coward and that you're just as weak and insignificant," he whispered again, and Neil's stomach clenched so hard he was sure he'd have thrown up, if he had eaten anything at all that day.

Time. He only needed time for anyone to walk by and call the police.

"What makes you think you can get to Andrew? Riko knows he won't ever be able to beat him," Neil said and swallowed against the panic. Not now. He tested his range of movement again, but was restrained even more badly than before. Restrained… just like when —

No. Not now. Not ever. He took a deep breath and swallowed against the acrid taste in his mouth.

"You don't know him too well if you think he'd fight me. Not when all I'm doing is showing brotherly affection."

He whispered the last words in such a twisted way, Neil couldn't stop a shiver running down his spine. He couldn't wrap his mind around the meaning of these words all the way. Like a piece was missing. The most important piece of the puzzle that was needed for the others to make sense.

Neil was good at keeping it together until then. Until the free hand started touching his face. Throat. Neil's muscles clenched and he tried. He really did. Tried turning away, tried fighting.

Neil closed his eyes and pressed his teeth together. A hand on him. His torso. Down his waist. To the hem of his shirt. Pulling it upwards.

He fought. Kicked. Tried.

"Stop," he said, with whatever ounce of control was left. He couldn't open his eyes. Couldn't.
The hand moving upwards again. Felt the eyes on his body. Fingers mapping the scars. It was repulsive. Sickening. Neil shivered against the cold air. Against the rain. Against the person. Against this…

"These look like they hurt. Was that mummy or daddy? Riko? Wait, don't tell me. I'd rather use my imagination…"


Somewhere in a place between now and all those months ago. Between hands, bodies, heat, touches, breathing, whispers. In the darkness.

Neil could barely differentiate between now and then when the man on top of him turned his head and laughed. "Came to join us, AJ?"

There was fear in all of his body. Horror. Panic. Frustration. Hatred. But mainly fear.

What a weird thing that a knife made that fear fade a little. How a slit throat felt like a good thing. Blood was warm, the body was, too, when Andrew pulled Neil from under it.

Neil didn't care about the situation anymore. He didn't care about where the feelings were, that had been drowning him just a second ago. He wasn't there. Neil was on the roof, smoking a cigarette with Andrew. Everything was totally superfluous. Nothing mattered. Why would you care about anything to begin with?

"Abram."

Neil flinched. It wasn't okay. He wasn't feeling anything and Andrew chose to use a name he had so many mixed feelings about. How rude… He blinked down at Andrew and swallowed.

"You're good with knives. I'll take that as a compliment," he mumbled and turned to go, when Andrew slapped his cheek heavily and Neil flinched away from the pain.

"Stop. Don't bottle this up. Panic now so we can get rid of the body," Andrew said with a stern tone in his voice. His face was so cold, Neil couldn't help looking at it for a long moment. He took a ragged breath and swallowed when his head was back in the situation. Riko had done it again. Invaded his life, made him feel unsafe and helpless. Neil was gonna be sick. He wasn't breathing. Then he was, in once a second, barely getting any air out. He couldn't get any air, though. He was choking. He couldn't move.

Neil started shivering and his vision started to blur. Everything was shaking and twisting and fading and he was falling. Wouldn't ever be able to stand on his own. Neil felt dizzy, nauseous, sick, hurting, unsafe.

He reached out slowly, needing to hold on to something. And Andrew was there. So close. He could use him to steady him, to clench on to something. To finally feel steady again.

But he stopped. Andrew had abandoned him the last time Neil had tried doing this. Fighting his demons by being physically closer. Now? He couldn't. Could not have Andrew abandon him again. Could not loose him again.

But then he felt Andrew's hand in his neck, pulling him closer. It was no hug by any means, rather a guide. Neil's ear against Andrew's chest, feeling it raise and fall with each breath. Neil closed his
eyes. Breathed along until his muscles relaxed slowly.

Andrew pushed Neil to his knees a little harshly but not violently when he realised Neil didn't need the physical closeness as badly anymore. He kneeled down next to him, telling him when to take a breath and when to let it go. Where to look. How to remain upright when everything you were started crumbling.

They got up slowly when Neil didn't feel the panic in every cell of his body anymore. He used the wall for support.

"Now think. You're the Butcher's son. Where would you hide a body?" he asked, and Neil shrugged helplessly. How could Andrew just get back to this? After Neil barely knew how to breathe again.

"You're the murderer, where would you?" he asked lowly. He was talking about his mother, but Andrew didn't bat an eye. Neil needed some reaction. Something to see that the moment wasn't a lie. That Andrew was feeling something at all.

"Listen closely, Neil. You owe me two favours for letting you stay and keeping you safe. I'm using the first one now. Make sure I won't be forced to take the pills. I don't care about what you do, how you do it, but I'm asking you to do it," Andrew said in a low and dangerous voice, but his face showed something less certain.

Something almost close to fear.

Neil needed a second to get the implications. Andrew had been on his pills for an eternity. Neil didn't know if it was because he was suspected to have killed his mother or because of those men he almost killed at a club or something else, but he knew that Kevin had invested money and favours alike to get him off them a year early. He knew that any link to a murder would get Andrew on them right away.

He tried getting his thoughts straight but couldn't quite focus. Someone he knew must know how to deal with this. Someone like his father, just… less keen on hurting Neil? Less criminal?

He took a few wobbly steps before bending down and taking his phone from a small puddle on the ground. The screen was cracked many times and it was dripping, but it actually worked.

Neil did something he didn't want to do. The person picked up after the second ring.

"Hello, Abram! Great game today! I was gonna call, but —" his mother started, but Neil interrupted her.

"I need you to get rid of a body and any evidence linked to the murder," he greeted, and heard a soft sigh.

"Where exactly?"

Neil looked around and told her about his location before swallowing and listening to the silence on the other end of the line.

"Stay where you are. They're on their way," she explained, and Neil swallowed. She wasn't being a mother but a criminal, and it was honestly a lot closer to what Neil needed. She was being so professional and cold about it that she actually took some of his panic away. She made this seem like a minor inconvenience. "Anyways, are you alone?" she asked then, and sounded stressed about it. It seemed like she was already thinking of how exactly to get rid of the witnesses.
"Andrew is here," he said in a scratchy voice and Mary sighed.

"What does Kevin's bodyguard have to do with this again?" she asked him and Neil heard the slight annoyance in her voice.

Neil looked at Andrew who was staring into the side street, measuring his own pulse and seeming stressed.

"I'll call you. And Andrew... he's not..." Neil mumbled lowly and Andrew didn't react when he hesitated, stumbling over the words. He couldn't say 'killed'. That wasn't what this had been. His mother took a deep breath.

Neil looked at Andrew for a long moment while raising his hand and putting it into his own neck. Andrew had done so much more than killing someone. He'd taken care of Neil. Came for him. Made sure he wouldn't fall apart. Had been a constant when suddenly, Neil had been shifting and shaking. Andrew wasn't the monster so many tried to see in him. "He protected me," Neil said lowly. He needed him to know. Needed him to know Neil knew. That he appreciated it... He knew Andrew wouldn't accept a thank you, so he hoped this was enough.

"Who did he protect you from?" she asked, then, almost alarmed. Neil was a little confused by her question. A dead body was business, but an attack wasn't? Did that mean she usually just... killed people for the sake of it?

"Not now," he said. It was the promise of an answer he didn't know yet. It was a promise to himself he'd find out.

"Could you hand the phone to him for a second?" she asked and Neil handed his mobile to Andrew, who picked it up, listened for a few seconds, and hung up. He didn't look at Neil when he handed the phone back, but something was different.

Him and Andrew had waited in the car in silence until his mother's contacts had arrived. Even though it was late, the chance of anyone spotting Neil drenched in blood was one neither of them was willing to take. Neil went through every negative emotion there was at different speeds, but he was sure he had covered all of them when the woman told him that she was done and that they should burn their clothes and destroy the weapon.

She left with her co-worker and Neil thanked her quickly, getting out of the car. He turned around into the direction of the Fox Tower and walked a few steps, until Andrew honked. "Get into the car," he said, but Neil just couldn't.

"Don't pretend to care for any of this. You're keeping a promise, but everything is fine. You can leave now. You've made it pretty clear that you couldn't care less about my company," Neil said, and it came out more bitter and hurt than it was intended to. This wasn't okay. Hadn't ever been okay. And he had the right to voice that. Neil wanted to walk home alone. To breathe, to think, to panic, to die because of what had almost happened again.

Andrew looked at Neil and he had the problem the other one tried to read him. It was weird. Weird because Andrew knew how to do just that so well.

"Get into the car. You can't walk home looking like this," he repeated and Neil bit his lip. Andrew was right. He opened the passenger door slowly and got in. Took the cigarette Andrew offered and looked out of the window.

"Why are you here?" Neil asked after a while. He couldn't phrase every question he had, but this
summed it up pretty well. How did he know where to look for him? Why did he look for him? Had he even been looking for him?

"Matt came looking for you and there’s only one place a junkie like you could be running," Andrew answered after taking a deep drag from his cigarette. It was close to comfortable, sitting in the car with Andrew, smoking, watching the streetlights pass bye.

"Who was that person?" Neil asked, not looking at Andrew but out of the window.

"No," Andrew answered. Neil swallowed a little and nodded.

"He talked about you," he told Andrew lowly.

"I said no," Andrew repeated and Neil sighed. He wanted to talk to him. About anything. Everything. He tried understanding the situation but Andrew wasn't helping.

"Why did he call you AJ?" Neil asked then, and Andrew’s jaw tensed when Neil shot him a look.

"For the same reason Kevin called you Four. Now stop," Andrew said lowly and Neil nodded. Andrew knew what that number was to him. A trap. A reminder of a person he had no choice but to be but had hated every step of the way. He wouldn't use that against him. Never.

"Andrew?" he asked lowly, looking at his cigarette slowly burning down.

"No," Andrew said very lowly and Neil let it go. He didn't want to argue and he thought killing someone couldn't have a positive effect on anyone. Andrew was probably only thinking. Neil threw the cigarette out of the window when it had burned down and looked out. Andrew drove for a little and Neil was glad Andrew didn't bring him to the Fox Tower directly.

The events kept playing in his head, and he couldn't figure out what exactly he'd done wrong. He should have reacted more quickly, sure, but that wasn't an active mistake. If a person stronger than you picks a fight, you don't have too much of a choice.

But Neil realised that he'd done a mistake. He could have been honest. If he had told Matt that he didn't feel like going out, maybe they'd have spent the evening on the sofa. Just the three of them, watching a movie.

Then again, that person had told Neil that Riko had payed him. He'd have found a way. The real mistake Neil had made was pissing Riko off. Running. Defending his friends. His brothers. He knew it had been worth it. Those weren't mistakes. Those were the most important things Neil had ever done right.

He noticed something, then. Neil himself hadn't been the problem. Riko was the mistake. And Neil decided right then, that he'd do everything he could do to make the Raven King fall.

Andrew stopped Neil's plans of revenge when he pulled the car into a parking lot.

"Stay here," he demanded, and Neil was too confused when Andrew got out of the car.

He nibbled his lip and played with his fingers when his phone lit up. He half expected his mother or Matt to write. He felt sick when he saw the actual text.

"Hope you liked your present, Four"

Neil deleted the message right away. He wasn't in for Riko's sick games. He wouldn't react to that.
Andrew got back from the building he had entered and only now did he realise it was a shop. Neil hadn't really looked at it before.

When Andrew was back inside the car, he handed a bag to Neil.

"What's that?" Neil asked with a frown. He looked at the plastic bag but didn't know if he was allowed to look inside.

"Your new clothes. Change," Andrew told him, but Neil frowned even more.

"Why did you do that?" Neil asked, and Andrew shot him a bored look.

"Didn't want Matt to die of a heart attack. Kevin would be unbearable because of the lineup," he said monotonously and kept his eyes on Neil for a second. His expression was almost empty, but Neil saw something else in it when Andrew looked at his shirt. The blood. The reminder. "Change into the other stuff," he demanded slowly.

"You didn't have to buy them. I have money," Neil argued, then.

"Congratulations," he answered dryly and Neil sighed.

"Where can I change?" he asked, and Andrew shrugged.

"In here," he said. Andrew was probably right. It was dark outside and the inner lights of the car were out. No one could see anything.

"Don't look," he said lowly and Andrew sighed.

"Stop whining," he said and got out of the car. Neil saw him leaning against the car and light a cigarette.

His hands shivered a little when he opened the bag and took out a shirt and trousers. The pants weren't fancy, just plain black material. The shirt seemed ripped just enough for it to look intended. It wouldn't show any scars, though, considering the thick material and the way there was a second layer of cloth under every rip in the fabric.

Neil looked out, but Andrew was smoking and didn't seem to have the intention of turning around anytime soon.

He started slowly getting out of his pants and getting the new ones on. It was a little tough, given the limited space he had, but they fit pretty well. He checked for Andrew again. His cigarette was gone already but he was still leaning against the car. Not looking.

Neil's hands shivered a little when he pulled the shirt over his head. The dried blood made the fabric cling to his body, almost hurting a little when he pulled it off. He was breathing too heavily and closed his eyes for a second. Fingers on his scars.

He shook his head a little and tried breathing normally again before pulling the shirt Andrew had bought over his head. It didn't cling to him but gave him the opportunity to breathe properly. He looked at the pile of clothes for a little before opening his door and getting out of the car.

"Thank you," he said and felt his voice scratch. This hurt. Everything did.

"Shut up," Andrew answered and turned to look at Neil.

"Can we get rid of the clothes somewhere?" he asked, then, and Andrew got back into the car.
Drove farther out of town until they were parking on a big lot, surrounded by nothing but ruins and abandoned houses.

Neil knew he should have been worried when Andrew took the clothes and threw them onto the floor some yards away from the car. When he drowned them in kerosine. Why would anyone carry around kerosine in their car? When Andrew took out matches and gave them to Neil.

He didn't know why exactly, but striking the match was a good feeling. Nothing compared to what setting the pile on fire felt like, but still good!

Neil watched, even though his eyes hurt. Took in the burning smell. Felt the heat. This was important.

"Thank you," he tried again, when his clothes were nothing but dirt on the floor anymore.

"You're repeating yourself," Andrew said, and Neil nodded.

"I am. But you're not answering so I have to try again," he explained lowly and played with his fingers.

"Don't thank me. We have a deal and you proved how far you'd go to keep it today. Get into the car," Andrew demanded and Neil sighed. He just wanted a normal conversation!

Andrew took the driver's seat again and Neil took a deep breath. Andrew was doing this with him. He wasn't abandoning him. This wasn't the past weeks, this was different. Neil got inside as well and looked at Andrew when he started the car.

"Can we talk?" Neil asked and Andrew glared at him.

"You're aggravating," he said, but actually looked at Neil for a moment before setting his eyes back on the street. "Tell me what happened," he demanded then.

Neil's breath hitched. He'd meant talking about school or Exy or Andrew, not about the incident he was trying to distract himself from.

"I'm taking my turn on this," Andrew said when Neil was silent for too long. He looked up and understood what Andrew meant when he saw the look on his face. Andrew knew he'd get this answer out of Neil anyways, eventually. He was giving Neil the opportunity to take a turn in return.

"I didn't want to spend time out with the guys so I made up an excuse to be alone. Ran into him. He asked for the time or something, and I… I don't know. We were on the floor," Neil mumbled. It had happened so fast. He remembered his hear hitting first the wall, then the floor.

Andrew remained silent and didn't comment on anything, so Neil took the hint and went on.

"He told me that Riko had payed him. I said I'd pay more. He..." Neil stopped and looked at Andrew. He didn't want to tell him. He didn't want to keep it either, though. "He said Riko had promised you as well. That someone might have told him about something. I didn't quite get that part," Neil mumbled. Andrew gripped the steering wheel harder and Neil wanted to be there for him, in a way.

"Go on," Andrew demanded, and Neil took a deep breath.

"That's about it," he said. He didn't want to tell Andrew about the next part. Didn't want to say it. Putting it into words would make it real.
"You're wasting my time with obvious lies. Put a little effort into concealing the truth or let it be," Andrew said and Neil took a shaking breath.

"You know what happened. Touches. Words. Lips. I don't... this is all I'm saying," Neil said lowly and breathed against the lump in his throat. Everything inside him was shaking. Andrew was satisfied by that, Neil guessed. He didn't push but left Neil space.

He looked out of the window and watched the stars. Neil had no clue where they were, but trusted Andrew enough that it didn't really matter.

"Who was that person?" Neil asked again. "My turn." He hated this. Hated making Andrew give answers just because he felt like he had to. But Andrew had basically granted him a turn and Neil wasn't stupid enough to throw that away.

"Used to be my foster brother. His name was Drake," Andrew said very lowly. Neil forced himself to not look at Andrew. He wouldn't push. Couldn't. But...

"Wait. Andrew, are you--" he started, but Andrew interrupted him.

"Shut up." It wasn't loud. Barely enough to get Neil to stop his sentence. Neil looked at him, now. He couldn't believe what Andrew had shared. What this meant.

"No. You mean he--" Neil started again. He couldn't believe it. Not Andrew. The fighter. Andrew, who took care of everyone around him.

"Neil, I'm serious, shut--" he interrupted Neil again, but Neil couldn't let this go. How was anyone okay with this? How did Neil not realise?

"Does anyone know?"

Andrew brought the car to an abrupt halt in the middle of the street, slamming the break so hard it pushed all the air out of Neil's lungs.

"Neil, for f**k's sake, shut up and stop talking about this. Deal with it. Don't ever mention this again. Not to me, not to anyone else. Understood?"

Neil looked at Andrew from big eyes. In that moment, he saw anger. Heard fear. Felt bottled up frustration radiating off him. That alone was enough of a reason to nod. If something could make Andrew feel anything at all, it was important.

"I'm sorry," Neil whispered. Andrew took a rattled breath and Neil could basically see him morphing back into his apathetic self. His shoulders lost the tension. His expression lost every emotion.

Neil was glad that they were far out of the town. No car to be seen. Just them in the middle of the street.

He reached for Andrew's hand, not touching him but leaving a few inches between them.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, looking into Andrew's eyes. Holding his gaze. "I won't talk about it. But I'm here."

He wasn't sure why he was like this, suddenly. Maybe he didn't want Andrew to be cold and apathetic after such an incident. After Neil caught glimpses of what Andrew was able to feel. To do. Andrew's fingertips brushed over the back of Neil's hand before pushing it back to the passenger
Neil held the look for as long as it took Andrew to turn away. Starting the car felt like starting time again. As if the moment before had lasted an eternity. It was almost unreal.

He leaned his head back and watched the stars. They didn't move. Stayed with them as Andrew drove through the night. Neil was glad they weren't heading home. He didn't know what exactly Andrew had confessed. He hoped it wasn't what he thought. He feared it was.

It was weird, but Andrew made this more bearable. He'd been there. Being with him made Neil feel as close to safe as he could. Closer than he ever thought he'd be capable of.

Neil closed his eyes and listened to his breath. To Andrew's. To the soft sounds of the car. The harsh sound of the wind. None of this changed. Remained the same. Always the same.

The same kind of comfort. The same kind of home.

Neil only realised he'd been drifting off when he opened his eyes and saw Andrew's eyes flicker to him for a second. He got ready for the inevitable panic that always settled in when he felt himself growing tired in unsafe spaces but was spared. He didn't feel unsafe. Andrew was there.

He drifted off many times. Actually fell asleep for almost an hour. He was okay… opened his eyes and saw Andrew. Caught his eyes ever so often. Caught Andrew checking.

The sky turned from black to a dark blue and when Neil awoke the next time, it was almost orange. He saw familiar houses and realised they were close to campus.

"We can go home. If you want to," Neil said. His voice scratched in his throat and sounded hoarse and raspy, considering that he hadn't said a word in hours.

Andrew nodded a little and Neil caught him squinting his eyes a little too often for it to be nothing.

Sure… Andrew must be incredibly tired. He'd spent the whole night driving because Neil hadn't wanted to go home.

Andrew pulled into the parking lot and sighed a little when he turned off the car. They climbed the stairs together and Neil waited in front of Andrew's room.

"What?" he asked and glared at Neil.

He took a deep breath and swallowed. "Thank you. I'm serious, I didn't take that for granted. You… just thank you," Neil said and ran his hand through his hair.

Andrew shrugged and unlocked the door to the Monsters' room.

"Good night," he said and went inside, closing the door behind him. Neil needed a moment before he was able to move again.

Heartless. A danger to anyone around him. Monster. Neil would personally pick every battle regarding this or anything else about Andrew. It was time for him to give something back.

Chapter End Notes
So…
Alright I'm so happy no one guessed it was Drake! Literally! I thought it was so obvious hahaha

Okay my thank yous for this go out to every one who commented on the last chapter! Especially, but not limited to Booksbreakhearts (only typing 'Book' for your name to autocorrect itself wow…) and Chocolate Hell Cookies Freedom 2481999!! Because wow! Seriously wow! I ADORED your comments!
Kiwi trash: Neil didn't die! As promised!
Frecklesandhaircuts and Avap23: More allison next chapter (too much, but sssh)
Gay wizards and foxes: may I just say thanks for sticking around? Sorry for spaming your comment, though xD
Same goes for thatfandomlife. I'm happy to see you here!
And Serris! Glad you stayed!

Opinions on the piece of shit drake? On Andrew feeling something? On Neil?

And I'm sure you're all wondering where the biggest thank you is! It was missing… until now! AsfaHan, you're so great I'm having troubles finding new words for it anymore… may I go for: "Saya… you're…," she typed but hesitated, realising how the words she intended to use couldn't ever carry the meaning she intended to put into them. "You're awesome and I'm happy to be in this with you!" While she wasn't exactly happy with the outcome, she hoped her friend and dearest (and only I'm sorry it's true) consultant would know what she meant.

This is too much so i'm gonna stop now…

****
REMEMBER TO MESSAGE ME ABOUT THE MEET UP IN GERMANY OR EUROPE IN GENERAL I'M @I-SHIP-IT-VERYMUCH ON TUMBLR MY BLOG IS ORANGE AND ITS CALLED NEIL MINYARD
****
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

THERE IS A MEET UP HAPPENING IN GERMANY
TWO ACTUALLY
PLEASE MESSAGE ME ON TUMBLR (@I-SHIP-IT-VERYMUCH) IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Okay, summary:
Uh…
There's a lot of Allison/Seth I guess.
What else? Foxes? Neil bonding with his friends? Neil learning that Ohana means Family (I wish I was kidding)
It's fucking long so maybe don't read this if you're on a schedule of something

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He went into his own room and almost smiled when he saw Matt and Seth sleeping. They looked so relaxed. He couldn't even be annoyed by the snoring at this point. It was odd, but seeing them this still made him feel like it was a different kind of reality. Not the attack, not Andrew, but his friends, totally calm and happy.

Neil went into the bathroom and the actual reality hit him like an ice cold hand slapping his face. Andrew had gotten him new clothes, but there was still blood on him. On his face, throat…

He felt cold. Sick. Unsteady.

Neil turned away from the mirror and took a deep breath before undressing and showering. It took him nearly an hour, with episodes of just standing there with his eyes closed, fighting the memories. His skin was almost pink in the end, from the hot water, the scratching, the rubbing off blood that wasn't there anymore.

He couldn't look at himself in the mirror. Couldn't stand the thought that someone had seen him like this. Touched him. Neil had tried to keep his body hidden from just about everyone. Hadn't let anyone see him like that. Even Riko had only abused that weakness in the worst moments. Everyone had always known that this was not okay.

In the end, Neil put the new clothes Andrew had bought into the washing machine and got into sweats and a tee. Covering his body calmed him a little. The ability to hide it. His muscles ached and he was glad to be able to lay down in bed.

Neil's head hurt and he was unbelievably tired, but when he laid down and closed his eyes, the memories became even more vividly. Whenever he fell asleep, Neil woke up flinching heavily. He swallowed hard and turned around. Opened the windows to let fresh morning air in. Pulled the covers over him and listened to the silence. He couldn't help getting up again. Went to lock the door of their room. Then the door of their bedroom. Closed the window again.
Laying down again, Neil felt a little more comfortable. Not enough to sleep more than fifteen consecutive minutes or to keep him from waking up with violent jerks, but enough.

The way he slept was almost exhausting. Neil got out of bed around eleven, and had probably gotten less than three hours of sleep, maybe five if he counted the time with Andrew. Neil got up after staring at the ceiling for thirty minutes and deciding he wouldn't get any more sleep that night.

Neil unlocked the bedroom door and went into the kitchen, preparing coffee for himself with the intention to go over to the Monsters right away, when he heard steps behind him. In a small moment of panic, Neil's heart started racing way too fast, but when he turned around and saw Seth approaching him, he relaxed instantly.

"Morning," he mumbled and Seth groaned something back. Neil made a coffee for him, too, and handed it over.

"Had a good night?" Neil asked and they sat down on the sofa in the living room.

Seth took his time to answer, drinking half his coffee first. "Yeah. Started late because of you, but whatever."

Neil remembered what Andrew had said. How Matt had been the one to realise something was wrong.

"Sorry about that," Neil mumbled and Seth just shook his head.

"Don't be. He overreacts all the time," Seth explained and Neil felt bad. Matt had been right. It wasn't fair of others to be like that. But he couldn't tell them, of course.

Neil thought of a way to phrase this when Seth's phone buzzed. He got it out of his pocket and Neil couldn't help looking for a while. Apparently it was someone called Julia.

"Who's that?" Neil asked. He hoped it was his sister or someone. He guessed it wasn't…

"Some Vixen. Shut up already," Seth answered and Neil sipped his coffee. He didn't want to push Seth, but saw what this did to Allison.

"Why do you see other girls when you could have Allison?" Neil asked lowly. It was only half an accusation. The other half was interest.

Seth sighed and put his phone away before answering.

"In case it slipped your notice, Allison and I aren't exactly on a sex-basis at the moment," Seth said and leaned back.

Neil overlooked the fact that Seth was making this about physical stuff. They both knew it wasn't. "Isn't she worth putting effort into, anyways?" Neil tried again.

Seth rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You weren't here yesterday. I told her I thought we should get back together and she screamed about drugs and girls. Whatever. Neil, I don't want to have this conversation," he said, but Neil couldn't help it.

"Don't you think she deserves more than 'it's time'? And I think when talking about a relationship, those things are quite valid," Neil argued. "I see that she's unhappy and so are you. Why would you do that when there's such an obvious solution?"
Neil didn't look at Seth but felt his eyes on him. He didn't want to push Seth into a relationship, but Allison's state was worrying.

"We're not in a relationship so I have every right to sleep with anyone. And the drugs are my personal concern, not hers," he said and Neil knew he wouldn't get any farther with this.

He hated to see Allison breaking while trying to conceal the jealousy and concern. The Foxes' girls had taught Neil just how strong women could be. He knew how hard this had to be on her if she was trembling.

"One last thing, Seth. Allison doesn't think she deserves better. She knows she doesn't deserve a cheating drug addict, but she also knows you can stop being one," Neil said and Seth looked at him for a long moment before getting up and preparing another cup of coffee.

Neil looked up when someone attempted to open the door and shook the handle a little violently when it didn't work. He got up at the knock that followed, and opened the door. Dan stood there in her pyjamas and looked ready to murder someone and fall asleep right on the spot.

"Morning," Neil said, and Dan smiled a little.

"Hey. Why was the door locked?" she asked and ran her hand through Neil's hair softly before going into the kitchen and getting coffee.

"I got home late and forgot we don't do that around here," Neil answered and sat down again. In the end, he was sandwiched between Seth and Dan.

He didn't want to tell her that he had basically had a panic attack last night, but the look on her face made him wish he had told the truth. Dan looked at him and seemed to interpret a lot into the 'around here'. Into the implication that Neil was too used to the locks and secrecy at the Nest.

Neil hadn't even realised he'd used the phrase and was a little concerned about the way it had slipped so naturally.

"Why are you awake already?" Neil asked to change the topic and Dan sighed a little.

"The Monster woke Renee and they're probably beating each other up at the moment. Couldn't sleep anymore," she mumbled and sipped her coffee. Neil bit his lip and just hoped that this was a routine meeting and not Andrew's attempt to deal with last night.

"So Allison is alone?" Seth asked right when Dan finished and she nodded a little.

"She's asleep, though. You might not… okay never mind," she answered when Seth got up. Neil couldn't help smiling a little, thinking he'd actually moved something inside Seth.

The thought didn't last long. Less than five minutes later, you could hear yelling from the room next to them. Neil sighed and closed his eyes for a second. How could they spend every waking minute arguing? He was impressed by how quickly Allison was in fight-mode, though.

Dan finished her cup of coffee and sighed a little. "They'll never learn… Neil? I'm still tired and if you're okay with it, I'm laying back down," she said and Neil just nodded. She didn't owe him company.

"Okay, great. Good night," she mumbled and Neil wondered how she was intending to sleep when Allison and Seth were screaming in the next room. He got the answer when she went into his bedroom and presumably cuddled with Matt.
Neil sighed a little and looked around for a second. He didn't want to spend time on his own with nothing but screaming in the room next to him, so Neil got up and knocked on the Monsters' door.

Kevin opened the door and Neil was gonna greet him when he pulled Neil against him.

Neil was almost confused for a second until he realised Kevin was only hugging him really tightly. That was almost more confusing. They had hugged when Neil had arrived from the Ravens in his worst shape ever and when they had made up after a huge argument. He hoped whatever this was about didn't qualify as anything even remotely as bad...

"Where were you?" Kevin asked and let go of Neil softly. Neil looked up at the taller boy and frowned slightly. "Yesterday, Neil, you didn't answer your phone, Andrew took off and came back around six am. What happened?"

Neil bit his lip. He hadn't checked his phone yet but Kevin must have written him a thousand times. "I was out. Running, nothing special. Andrew and I drove around," Neil explained and Kevin's shoulders sunk a little. Neil didn't know how, but he saw that Kevin sensed the lie.

"Okay, but I'm here. You know that," he said. It was no question. Neil knew he was able to talk to Kevin. Always was, always would be.

They got in and Nicky shot Neil a concerned look while Aaron seemed even more annoyed.

"You were out all night, driving around? We missed Columbia for that?" he asked and Neil crossed his arms when he sat down next to Nicky.

"Sorry," he mumbled and Nicky bit his lip before getting up.

"Neil and I are making breakfast. Does anyone want something?" he asked, but didn't wait for an answer before pulling Neil into the kitchen with him and closing the door behind them.

Neil looked at him from big eyes and Nicky seemed conflicted. Not as happy and cheerful as he usually was.

"Hey, Neil? Are you okay? Is Andrew?" Nicky asked and Neil bit his lip and looked around. He knew that Nicky was honestly concerned. That Nicky knew something was up.

"I'm fine. I think the both of us are. Why?" Neil asked cautiously and Nicky bit his lip for a second before shaking his head.

"It's just... we're worried when Andrew didn't show up. When you didn't answer your phone. And he came back and looked somewhat - I don't even know - different, in a way. I mean, he didn't talk more than he usually did, but when I asked what the matter was, he didn't tell me to shut up or threaten me. I know it's a silly thing to be happy about, but that's... sorry, I'm rambling," Nicky interrupted himself and sighed very deeply.

Neil looked at Nicky for a very long moment and fiddled with his finger before brushing the feeling off. This couldn't have anything to do with him, right? It wasn't as if anything had happened between him and Andrew last night. They'd spent the night driving.

"I'm sorry you worried. And I don't know where his mood came from. It was probably nothing," Neil answered and regretted it instantly. Nicky's shoulders fell a little and he nodded, seeming frustrated and even a little hurt.

"Yeah, probably. Sorry to bother you. But you seem a little sad today. Are you sure you're okay?"
Nicky asked then, smiling with his usual toothy grin and Neil couldn't help finding comfort in that.

"I told you I was fine, Nicky, don't worry!" Neil repeated, and Nicky rolled his eyes.

"You know, I thought we'd finally have a family member that's able to deal with his issues, but no, why would anyone here have a healthy relationship with his psyche?" he asked with a laugh while turning around and preparing coffee and actually taking out a pan, cooking some scrambled eggs.

Neil stood there frozen. Family member.

"Why would you say that?" Neil asked, when he had his voice back, and Nicky turned to look at him with a frown.

"Why would I say what?" he asked. Neil could see Nicky thinking about whether or not Neil was offended by the implication of a damaged psyche when a look of understanding replaced confused expression and he smiled brightly.

"Neil, you've been with us for a few months now. You can't seriously think that family has one last thing to do with blood, with the Foxes," Nicky said and grinned at him. "You were a Monster as soon as you got here because of Kevin. You're a part of the family since... well, it's usually the second trip to Columbia. That's when Andrew chooses to keep a person. But with you, it was the night we decided to stay here instead of partying elsewhere," Nicky explained, but Neil shook his head.

"We didn't talk for two or three weeks," Neil argued. He didn't know why, but the word 'family' wasn't one he was willing to assign to whatever they had. Maybe because to Neil, family meant abandonment. Business. Fear. He couldn't assign the same label to the Foxes as he did to his parents.

Then again, maybe the right decision wasn't pushing the Foxes away. Maybe it was taking the word away from the people who had raised him and letting his friends assign a new meaning to it instead.

"Neil, sorry for the honesty, but you were such a child. You didn't come over for meals, didn't spend time with us in the evenings, wouldn't drive to training with us. I'm glad that's over!" Nicky distributed the food evenly among five plates and smiled at Neil afterwards. "Glad to see that's over! Family means nobody gets left behind. Don't leave us behind, buddy." Nicky said and laughed a little when he saw the moved expression on Neil's face. "I forgot you and Kevin never got to see quality kids' movies!"

Neil frowned a little but honestly didn't care. Nicky had made a reference along the way, so what? That didn't change anything about what he'd said.

"You're serious, right?" Neil made sure, and Nicky laughed.

"You're a part of this, believe it or not. You're one of us," he repeated, and pushed two plates into Neil's hand. "Help me carry them out, would you?" he asked and Neil nodded, slightly overwhelmed by the words.

He gave one plate to Kevin and kept the other one, while Nicky supplied Aaron. They looked up when the lock on their door turned and Andrew walked in.

"Food is in the kitchen," Nicky announced, not commenting on the scratches and bruises all over Andrew's face.

Neil was a little worried for a second, but remembered that he'd been gone with Renee. He assumed she looked worse.
Andrew went into the kitchen and came back with a plate of scrambled eggs and a piece of toast that
definitely had more nutella than actual bread on it. He sat down in one of the bean bags and started
eating slowly.

Aaron raised an eyebrow at Andrew and shook his head a little.
"Neil told us what happened last night, Andrew. Are you serious?" Aaron asked in a really annoyed
voice and Neil felt cold, suddenly.

Andrew's jaw tensed and Neil could see his knuckles stick out in white from the way Andrew
clenched his fork.

"And you feel pressured to communicate your opinion for what reason exactly?" Andrew asked and
Neil could see that he wasn't as calm as he pretended to be. He wanted to tell Andrew that he hadn't
told them anything, that he shouldn't mistrust him this badly, but Aaron was faster.

"Because there are some people here who actually plan things and when 'driving around in a car all
night for no reason at all' gets into the plans, they might be pissed," Aaron scoffed and Andrew
looked at Neil for a split second. It was small. A little of the tension evaporating. A little trust
Andrew regained, maybe.

"Maybe your plans shouldn't rely on someone you call 'sociopath'. Those guys don't care too much
about other people," Andrew answered and Neil was almost sad that Aaron didn't get the irony in
that statement. How could anyone take Andrew for a sociopath when all he ever did was care for his
family?

Nicky bit his lip and shrugged a little. "We could go tonight," he suggested, and Kevin shrugged,
while Aaron shook his head.

"Today isn't working for me," he said, eyes flickering to Andrew for a second.

Andrew raised his eyebrow and ate his food slowly before looking at his twin for a long moment. "I
know you're screwing around with that cheerleader. Hope you're having the time of your life. The
thing is that she's definitely interpreting too much into your little meetings," Andrew said in the driest
tones you could have and went back to eating.

Aaron looked at Neil with anger radiating off him and Neil felt trapped. He hadn't told Andrew
about this!

"Don't look at Pinocchio that way, it's not his fault you're bad at keeping secrets," Andrew mumbled
in a bored way and Neil was glad his phone buzzed and he had a second to ignore all of them.

It was a text by Matt, asking how he was and if everything was okay. 'I'm fine. Thanks,' Neil
answered and received a laughing emoji and a thumbs up.

"It was no secret. You're right, it doesn't mean anything. I'm not breaking anything," Aaron said, and
Neil wondered if he was the only one hearing the trembling in his voice. This wasn't easy for him.
Neil didn't believe him for a second, but Andrew seemed satisfied.

"We could spend the day at court, practicing for the Ravens? There's only one game in between and
we are not ready to face them," Kevin explained, but Nicky shook his head violently.

"No! Just no, seriously! What do you think about a guys-night-in?" Nicky asked then, "I just found
out Neil doesn't know Lilo and Stitch, so there's probably a lot to catch up!"
He said that just the moment another text flashed up on Neil's phone. "Evening w/ S & me & some movies?" Matt asked and Neil bit his lip before looking back up.

Neil wanted to spend time with all of them after last night. Wanted them as close as possible.

"Matt just suggested the same thing," Neil told them and Nicky seemed genuinely surprised while Kevin looked at Andrew and Andrew frowned. "We could all watch movies together? If you wanted to," he suggested and Aaron shook his head.

"I'm just glad I'm not coming," he mumbled and Andrew shook his head a little at Neil.

"They're not coming here," he said and Neil nodded a little.

"There's space for five people, I think. We can take one bean bag with us? Or both of them?" Neil suggested and Andrew just shrugged. Sure, their room usually has six people in it, but that was only because Allison and Seth usually shared an armchair. Kevin seemed a little unhappy about the way this evening developed from a night to get drunk to a night featuring children's movies while Nicky was beaming.

Neil answered Matt a little later. "Would you be fine with the Monsters and Disney?"

Matt's answer was immediate. "Wtf… I mean sure but srsly wtf???" Neil couldn't help smiling at that.

They finished breakfast and Neil helped Nicky clean up the dishes. When they went on with their usual routine, Neil went over to his room and spent pretty much the rest of the day with Renee, Matt and Dan. Considering Andrew's physical state, Renee looked like she'd won the fight. There was a bruise on her cheek and her lip looked like another touch would make it split, but it was nothing compared to Andrew's bruises and the blood on his face.

Neil was able to enjoy their company again, and that was a great feeling. He felt almost guilty for his behaviour in the past weeks. Nicky had showed him how pretty much everyone had been waiting for Neil to cope enough with whatever he was dealing with to reach out. Judging from the look on Matt's face, he was more than happy about Neil's change.

In the evening, Seth came back from wherever he went after his argument with Allison. Judging from the diameter of his pupils, it had been a dealer. Neil couldn't even find the words to call him out on this.

Matt and Neil prepared the evening around Seth on the sofa. They even made popcorn, which was almost funny to Neil, who only learned today that the name came from the fact that this was literally corn popping open.

"So you've never seen Lilo and Stitch?" Matt asked, and Neil shrugged.

"So?"

Matt laughed a little and shook his head. "It's just that I always forget what you've been through. You're doing amazing," he said, and Neil couldn't keep the smile off his face. It was a weird thing to be told that you dealt well with your father selling you off to the Japanese mafia, but Matt seemed to mean something more significant and Neil couldn't put a finger on it, but he liked it a lot.

They brought bowls of popcorn and cans of beer and soda into the living room and the Monsters appeared late, after the fashionable thirty minutes Nicky always made them be late for… what reason, exactly?
They had brought two bean bags and Nicky and Kevin took them. Andrew sat down in the armchair on Neil's side of the sofa, Seth on the one closer to Matt.

It was silent for a few seconds until Nicky laughed and clapped his hands two times. "Wow, this is even more awkward than I thought it would be," he chuckled and placed one of the bowls of popcorn on the floor between Kevin and himself.

"The really awkward thing is that even Kevin has seen these movies by now and Neil is still oblivious to their existence," Matt argued with a laugh and nudged Neil's shoulder softly. He seemed so happy for a chance to break the silence and put the animated kids' movie on.

It was oddly comforting. Seth and Andrew were on their phones while the little, blue, psychotic monster was learning how to be a good family member. Neil couldn't help seeing the Foxes in the monster. Couldn't help seeing Wymack and Abby and even Dobson in Lilo and her older sister, trying their best to get them on the right path.

He laughed when he realised that this would make the ginger bully-child Riko. The sound came unexpected and was so honest Neil couldn't help smiling. No one else seemed to recognise his outburst, which made him realise it was probably nothing too special, but still… laughing felt big. Andrew seemed to notice, though, looking up and frowning at Neil for a little, looking at him from head to tow before turning back to his phone.

The first movie ended and for some reason, they decided to watch High School musical, even though none of them seemed to like the film.

Kevin complained about the male protagonist all the time, talking about how you should always pick a scholarship and sports, even if it was just basketball.

Nicky fought him about that, right away, telling him about 'true love', while Matt's arguments were about how Troy was too good at everything to decide for one thing.

They were in the middle of a song and an argument when Seth's phone rung and he went outside to pick up. Neil frowned a little, but trusted Seth to deal with whatever this was.

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Seth left the room right when he saw an incoming call from Allison. He'd spent the night texting Julia and had probably known Allison would call him sooner or later. He knew she was with the Vixens and knew how observant she was.

"Hey," he said, picking up. Music was playing loudly in the background.

"You are a cheating piece of shit," Allison greeted him, and Seth felt the corner of his mouth twitch.

"We're off. I told you it was time to get back together. Twice. It's not my problem you said no," he answered. He couldn't conceal the fact that this made him feel almost good. Tried pushing the thought off, though. He felt good because he'd seen this coming. Because he had known that Allison would come back, eventually.

Not because she cared, obviously. Not because she called when she was angry. Not because he loved her.

"You have to stop cheating and doing drugs before we get back together! And that stupid bitch thinks she's even remotely better for you than I am," Allison yelled, and Seth knew she screamed the words at Julia, not him.
"Yeah. Whatever," he mumbled. With her like this, he could almost find himself regretting the pill he'd swallowed. The liquid he'd injected into his veins. The chemicals he could still feel like acid in his blood. He had known that he shouldn't take both the drugs at the same time. Had known that the doses were too high for that. It hadn't mattered. In the end, a shot was a shot and an addiction was an addiction.

"You texted her. I saw what you wrote! Why would you do that?" she asked, and he sighed a little when he heard another voice on the phone.

"Hey, it's Renee. I don't think anyone who's this drunk should have access to their phone, so... yeah. Anything you want me to tell her?" Renee asked and then turned away from the phone. Seth could hear a muffled, "Not just paper, Dan. Antiseptics or alcohol. And something to cool it would be great. We don't want the cut to be bigger that it is already."

Seth frowned at that. "What kind of cut? Where are you?" he asked almost alarmed.

Renee sighed into the phone and Seth could basically see the way she must be looking at Allison. Looking out for her. It was almost comforting. "It's no big deal. I think it was nothing but a nail too deep in her skin," she explained before giving him their location. "Would you come pick her up?" she asked and Seth hung up. This meant that it had to be about Julia. He'd known this by the way Allison had greeted him, of course, but this just made it even more obvious.

He got back into his room and got ready to go out again, when Neil asked where he was going.

"Shut up," Seth answered and left them. He wasn't too fond of this meeting anyways.

The club Renee had told him about wasn't too far. Less than ten minutes by foot.

He saw Allison, Dan and Renee outside, Al sitting on the sidewalk and the girls standing by her side.

"Hey," he said, not getting too close. He knew how Allison could react in this state of hers.

Dan relaxed instantly when she saw him and Renee seemed less tense as well.

"Can you take her home?" Dan asked. Seth knew she'd do it herself if he wasn't there, but he'd heard the girls going on and off about this evening for weeks. He wouldn't let them throw this away.

"Sure. Al?" he asked and Allison looked up. He reached out and felt the corner of his mouth twitch when she took his hand and let him pull her upright.

She looked miserable. Her makeup was smudged and she actually had a bloody streak along her cheek. She seemed furious.

"I can walk," she mumbled and pulled her hand away from him. Seth didn't care. He knew she'd let him pick her up from the floor. That was enough. "You're on something. You would have asked about the fight, otherwise. Or given your jacket to me," she added after a time and Seth shrugged a little. Everything mattered a little less to him on these pills. That was his most desired side effect. He shrugged out of his jacket anyways, and Allison cuddled into it.

"So?" he asked, even though he wasn't too interested in this. He could imagine it pretty well.

Allison sighed and shook her head, which lead her to stop. She held on to Seth's shoulder for a second before regaining her balance slowly.

"She's a bitch. Talks about you in front of me. I know she's lying about some stuff," Allison
mumbled and actually took his hand. This was going better than he had expected.

"About what?" he asked. Even when he wouldn't admit it, he enjoy the way she talked when she was drunk. A little mumbling with a side of a lot of honestly.

"She says you talk about me. I know you wouldn't do that. You love me too much for that. Then again, you don't love me enough to stop seeing her, so there's that," she said and interlaced her fingers with his. Allison was quiet for a while before sighing. "You take the skinniest ones on purpose, right?" she asked. Allison wasn't looking at him but at the floor.

Seth tensed a little at the question. While she was always focused on her own body and the ones of other girls, this was a dangerous thought. He knew it. Almost enough to care. Almost.

"Sure. Only criterium for girls I'm sleeping with is that they're skinnier than you are," he answered with a shrug. That was bullshit and Allison knew it, somewhere. Seth still knew that he shouldn't feed her bulimic thoughts that way, but he could not find it in him to care too much.

She became silent for a little and held on to his hand. "Why did you pick me up? Julia is still there somewhere," Allison explained and Seth sighed.

"Because you called. Shut up, Allison, you're being weird," he told her, but she shook her head.

"Seth? It's yes. As soon as you're off the pills and don't sleep with other girls anymore, it's yes," she mumbled and pressed his hand. "I don't deserve better. I want you in my life. Don't make me regret that," she mumbled and Seth swallowed a little. He knew he could. But making the decision? Stopping? That was a different story.

"You know what? I deserve better than this. Than to wait for someone to choose between drugs and cheating and me. This isn't fair," she almost whispered, and it moved something in him. He hated to see her hurting. Drug induced apathy or not.

"Then go look for someone else. For someone your parents would approve of. That's the reason you're with me in the first place, isn't it? To show them how different you are. You play Exy, you're with an addict. Go ahead, show them," he mumbled. The words could hurt, if anyone else said them. Seth knew it was bullshit. At least he knew, most days.

"You know that's not true, right?" Allison asked in a small voice and turned to look at him. That was too much for her, apparently, considering how she would have collapsed on the sidewalk if Seth hadn't steadied her shoulders right away. He hated seeing her body convulse when she threw up. Hated the plain fact that she did.

He held the hair out of her face and ran a hand over her back slowly when she was done.

Seth was ready to pick her up and carry her home from then on, but Allison leaned against him on the floor.

"I had too much. See what you're doing to me? This happens when I'm more focused on your bitches than on how much I drink," she mumbled and Seth sighed but couldn't help smiling.

"Fine. Won't happen again," he mumbled into her ear before kissing her temple softly. She probably wouldn't remember tomorrow, but he made the decision. He had to stop doing this if this was the result. Not the drugs, but the girls. Then again, the girls were a side effect of the drugs. Allison mattered. The others came with the highs, with the effects of whatever he had injected, swallowed or smoked. Allison was there when he came down from them. Allison was a constant.
"I didn't mean to," she whispered after a while, and Seth nodded. He pulled her up really slowly and wrapped an arm around her under her shoulders, supporting most of the weight.

"I know. It's okay. Don't drink that much," Seth answered and Allison nodded. He knew that this was only alcohol. That she hadn't made herself throw up. But it felt dangerously close anyways.

Allison nodded and leaned her head against him, closing her eyes. "Carry me home?" she asked softly and Seth couldn't help smiling a little. He liked how she relied on him.

He was almost worried when she jumped onto his back and wrapped her arms and legs around him, unsure whether to support her knees or wrists. He settled for her knees, while leaning forward a little and supporting her weight that way. Allison would be able to hold on, anyways. She almost always was.

Allison hid her face in his neck and started talking. About her night, her day, practice, classes, how her mother had called earlier that week. He appreciated her rambling. Found comfort in the way they finally talked again.

"Seth?" she asked, for the fifth or sixth time that night. He ran one hand over hers and the smile on his face almost brightened. He knew this wasn't the usual Allison. That she was drunk and wouldn't ever actually talk like this at the moment.

"What is it?" he asked and could barely stand her level of cuteness right then. Though Seth wouldn't use these words, obviously.

"I love you," she mumbled in an earnest voice and held onto him even harder. He bit his lip for a little and sighed.

"You know I love you, too," he said. He didn't give these words often. It was easier with her in this state. She wouldn't remember for too long.

"I know. I just wish that was enough," she mumbled and Seth swallowed hard. He wished, too.

He carried her home and got into the elevator, then went into her room with her. This was almost more of a routine than it should have been, making sure she brushes her teeth and helping her into pyjamas. Seth was a little pleased to see that the latter consisted of one of his shirts she looked adorably lost in. Again, he wouldn't use these words in his state of mind, but they were true anyways.

"Night, Allison. We'll talk tomorrow," he said, but she took his hand and refused to lie down.

"We could sleep in your bed. I don't want to be alone," she mumbled and Seth sighed. Dan and Renee would take some hours to get back and he didn't exactly want her to be alone in this state. Then again, Seth knew this wasn't going to end well tomorrow, should she wake up with no recollection of the night.

"Sure, no problem," he mumbled. Thanks to his pills, Seth couldn't care less about possible negative outcomes at this point.

He helped her into his room and was glad to see that the Monsters had left already. Kevin's sheer physical presence in the room infuriated him.

Matt was still watching TV, while Neil was slumped against him, head resting on Matt's shoulder, and dosing a little. Seth raised an eyebrow. Neil usually had some difficulties with sleeping. Napping on the sofa against Matt wasn't exactly like him.
"Everything fine?" Matt asked lowly and Seth shrugged.

"Shut up, Matt," Seth mumbled but wasn't as rough as he could have been. Allison smiled brightly at the scene.

"He's so small next to you, Matt, seriously! Take care of him, will you?" she asked and Matt suppressed a laugh at that.

Seth was bothered by this, for some reason. He knew Allison and Neil spent a lot of time together, lately. Knew that Allison didn't look at Neil that way. That she saw him as more of a younger brother than anything else. It bothered him anyways.

"Night," Seth mumbled and went into their bedroom with Allison. Even in his drugged state, he still appreciated Allison. The way she cuddled into his bed. Against him. Mumbled when she was falling asleep. She was his and that wouldn't change.

****

Neil had fallen asleep some time into the third movie and with the only person gluing the group together, the Monsters left. Matt hadn't had a problem with this, of course. He usually ended up as someone's pillow at some point during a movie night.

Matt almost yelped in surprise when Neil jerked awake next to him.

Neil's breath went fast and he lost track of where he was. Not his bed. Not alone. Back on the street. Back with his head hitting the floor. Back with these hands on him. His heart started racing and his breath became shallower for… some time. Until Matt shook Neil's shoulders.

"Come on. Neil, please, what's up?"

Neil blinked at Matt when he was able to see him again and took one deep breath. Closed his eyes. Counted to ten. Dan, Kevin, Andrew, Matt, Aaron, Seth, Allison, Renee, Neil. Screw everything else associated with the numbers. He wasn't number four anymore. He was a Fox. They were there for him. Would be there.

"Sorry, I just kinda… I don't know," Neil mumbled and felt his pulse fall back to a normal level. He was fine.

Matt relaxed and sighed gladly. "Shit, Neil! What the hell?" he asked loudly, but wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Neil couldn't tell him to let go. Maybe even found some comfort in Matt being there. "It's over, yeah? Just a nightmare. You're with us now," Matt said with a very small smile, and while he jumped to wrong conclusions, Neil wasn't mad. It was comforting anyways.

"So… want to go to bed?" Matt asked and smiled warmly. Neil bit his lip and checked the time. They should. But he didn't want to be alone in the dark, with nothing to fight off the memories.

"We could watch another movie if you feel like it," Neil suggested a little hesitantly and Matt smiled.

"Yeah, sure. Okay, know which one? Peter Pan! You look like him!" Matt exclaimed and put on another DVD.

Neil knew what he was doing wasn't okay. He shouldn't keep his friends up all night because he wanted company. But somehow, this made him feel safe. Andrew, Matt, the Foxes.

He didn't want to, but in his exhausted state, he couldn't help it. Neil found himself dozing off all the
time. He didn't even attempt to follow the movie, and when Wendy left Neverland and Peter couldn't, neither of them were awake.

Matt had felt Neil fall asleep but didn't have it in him to wake him up again. He didn't know what exactly Neil was dealing with, but he knew it was a lot of shit. So when Neil was snoring softly, Matt decided to ignore the way his neck would ache tomorrow and leaned back carefully, not disturbing Neil. He left the movie on and the both of them were sound asleep.

Chapter End Notes

MEET UP GERMANY: MESSAGE @I-SHIP-IT-VERYMUCH (me) ON TUMBLR

okay I'm done

Can I… can I just be the most unthankful person ever? But… sorry for whining but i was slightly concerned by the lack of response on the last chapter. Please remember that you don't have to have a positive opinion on everything to comment. I take criticism! Just… like it'd be really nice to get comments just to know what you're thinking…

I'm done whining

THANK YOU GUYS FOR THE COMMENTS AND FOR READING THATS AMAZING YOU GUYS ARE 12/10 WOULD RECOMMEND BUT WON'T ACTUALLY DO THAT BECAUSE I WANNA KEEP ALL OF YOU

Booksbreakhearts, may i just thank you for adding me on tumblr???? Because?????? You're amazing???

GayWizardsAndFoxes I love your username and you're amazing and I love that you're still around <3

Avap23 no Allison/Neil but a ton of Allison/Seth, I hope you approve ;*

AsfaHan please tell me you're asleep because I'd die if you were still up. I feel bad already!! Because you're so great and amazing and just urgh!!! I CANT believe you're still here and seriously you're the best person ever and I love you so much and URGH!!!!!
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

So… uh… a game? There's something else going on I suppose

Ah right, Allison
And a little Columbia/Andreil
So… yeah…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The week was tough. Dan and Kevin didn't have problems pushing their Foxes anymore, since the reality of the Raven game in less than a month had hit all of them by now. The game against the Scorpions didn't really cross anyone's mind, even though that one was scheduled for the coming Friday already.

Panic came and went, but Exy was a great coping mechanism. Neil spent most evenings on court with Kevin, training until his muscles ached and he could barely walk anymore. He felt good there. Steady. And Matt always stayed up at home, waiting for him with kids' movies and hot chocolate, which was a great way to spend the nights.

Allison and Seth weren't any better. The morning after their night cuddled together, she was even more furious for him abusing her state so unfairly. They didn't talk anymore for some days.

He was asleep after morning practice on Wednesday, and it was nice to actually wake up because you were comfortable with opening your eyes after some hours and not because a nightmare made you jerk awake violently. Neil showered quickly and checked the time when he had settled on the sofa.

Neil frowned at his phone and looked at the door. Allison should have been there half an hour ago. She'd never been this late.

He got up slowly and bit his lip. Should he go looking for her? She was probably sleeping or wanted time for herself…

Still, a feeling of unease wouldn't leave him, so Neil left his room and straight into the girls'. Living here really screwed with your manners, which was why he didn't even think of knocking.

Neil didn't see her, but could make out sobbing from the bathroom.

He knocked the door softly and couldn't keep a concerned expression off his face. Everyone else was in class and Allison was in there on her own, crying. He should have gone looking for her earlier!

"Allison, it's me. Can I come in?" Neil asked and heard a rattling inside. The sobs silenced and Allison called back.

"I'm fine, Neil, just leave me alone, please," she said. Neil finally understood everyone's problem
with the line. You could tell 'I'm fine' was a lie when the person who said it was breaking.

He opened the door very slowly and when she didn't protest further, Neil went inside. He swallowed hard when he saw her sitting on the floor next to the toilet, hair pulled back into a ponytail and looking as broken as her voice sounded.

"Hey…," he whispered and frowned a little when he saw her flush the toilet. She'd been sick?

"Don't tell anyone," she said, but when Neil offered her a hand, she took it and let him pull her up.

Neil looked up at her and really, she looked miserable. He wondered how this was possible, considering how nice she'd looked during training yesterday afternoon.

"What's wrong? I'm just gonna call Abby, yeah? She'll know what to do," Neil assured her, but when he moved to get his phone from his pocket, Allison grabbed his wrist tightly and looked at him from big eyes, shaking her head rapidly.

"Neil, I am serious, don't call anyone. I got sick, no big deal. I'm coming down with something, I'll go see Abby… after the game, yeah? Can't have the Foxes play with only one dealer," she said, and Neil frowned. In the end, she was right. They couldn't afford to loose. This was a good season so far.

"And there's nothing else you want to talk about?" he asked, and Allison actually smiled at Neil very brightly.

"No. Really, don't worry, love, it's fine," she assured again and Neil couldn't even mistrust her when her smile was so genuine.

"Okay. I'll be there," he said and she smiled even more brightly. Neil left her to brush her teeth and shower, waiting on the sofa while doing some homework. When she got back with her hair done and makeup on, she looked more like Allison again, which was a relief.

There weren't really any other incidents before the game. Neil and Andrew spent more afternoons on the roof again and Neil finally considered the Fox Tower "home" again.

The day of their game against the Scorpions wasn't as enthusiastic as it should have been. The Ravens-game was a lot more present in each of their heads, so the Scorpions were more of a minor inconvenience. On the other side, there was a problem. The Foxes had spent the past week studying the Ravens, their players, their strategies. Neil gave lectures on pretty much everything he knew, while Kevin seemed a lot more hesitant to give information away. That mean that they hadn't put too much effort into studying the Scorpions, who'd actually won against them last year.

Neil was on the roof after mathematics and looked over campus. He loved seeing the orange sea. Hoodies, sweatpants, jackets. Some went as far as wearing the school flag as capes. It was really nice. School spirit was something he had only learned to appreciate at Palmetto.

He bit his lip and swallowed hard, thinking of the game tonight. Neil had trained so hard, he knew he'd be able to do it. The thought was frightening anyways.

Neil looked up when he heard the door open and smiled when he saw Andrew sit down next to him on the edge of the roof.

"Hey," Neil mumbled and Andrew looked at him for a short moment before lighting two cigarettes.

He liked the weather this time of the year. Autumn, when you could wear long sleeves, see nature slowly drift from it's high to a more peaceful state. It reminded him of his childhood, of rainy days he
always used to slip out of the house and hide somewhere else. His mother always made sure he got the punishment he deserved, while his father was usually too caught up with work to care. The memories weren't painful, though. They were small moments of peace, spiced with hoodies and nature.

"You're silent," Andrew remarked and Neil couldn't help smiling.

"Didn't you say you wanted me to shut up?" he asked and Andrew sighed very softly.

"I do. It's just that you don't usually do what you're supposed to," he said slightly annoyed, and looked over campus.

"Maybe if you asked nicely, I would," Neil mumbled and his smile widened when Andrew scoffed. He watched the cigarette burn down and laid back, closing his eyes.

"You're a really good goalkeeper," Neil said, opening his eyes again to look up at Andrew, and actually meeting his eyes for once.

"Is that supposed to mean anything, considering that you're talking about something without any meaning at all?" he asked, and Neil shrugged.

"It means something to the rest of us, and I know some of the Foxes mean something to you, so yeah. And—," Neil stopped himself, thinking of a way to phrase the next words. Andrew looked at him with a raised eyebrow and Neil took a deep breath. "You closed the goal last year. It looked like a miracle from the outside. We didn't concentrate much on the Scorpions, and I think we might loose if you don't do it that again."

Andrew rolled his eyes and lit another cigarette. "Coach sent you to ask." It wasn't a question as much as a statement, though it was no more than an assumption.

"Why would Wymack ask me to talk to you?" Neil asked and Andrew looked at him for a really long minute.

"Give me a number," he said, and Neil frowned. He'd been confused before, but this was weird. He thought a little and didn't quite get what this had to do with anything at all.

"Three," he said with a frown and Andrew raised his eyebrows.

"You chose that because it's Jean's number," Andrew pointed out, and Neil frowned. There as so much wrong with these seven words.

"I chose it because it's yours. But could you not say something like that anymore? Because these numbers aren't ours anymore. Kevin might have a different view on this, but I don't associate the numbers with us anymore," Neil explained and Andrew nodded slightly, studying Neil's face for a little longer than usually. "Why do you and Aaron have a deal regarding girls? Or friends? Connections with meaning?" Neil asked then.

"Is that your turn?" Andrew asked, and Neil watched him as Andrew studied his face.

"You know it's not. You can pretend it is if you feel like answering, so it's your turn next, but it's not my turn," Neil answered and felt a little weird by the way Andrew watched his expressions so intensely.

"Aaron didn't have the best friends in high school," Andrew answered and Neil bit his lip.
"So you made a deal about being his only friend?" he asked further, and Andrew shrugged. It wasn't a real answer, but it was close enough.

"For how long?" Neil asked after a while. Aaron was breaking the deal, and Andrew was oblivious to the fact...

"College. Now stop. You've reached your contingent of words an hour ago," he answered and Neil bit his lip. He'd come back to this.

"How was your day?" Neil asked after a while. He didn't like the silence right then. Neil wanted to talk to Andrew.

"Stop talking," Andrew mumbled and Neil sighed. He couldn't feel offended.

"I don't know what we're gonna do about the game today. I didn't train enough for the Scorpions. I think I'll screw this up," he muttered. Neil didn't know what it was about Andrew, which made him be so honest. It was mainly him as a person, probably.

"You trained every day. Stop whining," Andrew shot back and stubbed out his cigarette. Neil bit his lip and nodded. He was probably right. Still, Neil felt unsure. He wasn't entirely ready to face the Scorpions.

Neil looked up at Andrew and tried smiling, while Andrew studied his expression again.

"You're smiling a lot today. And staring," he remarked, and Neil almost chuckled.

"You're staring as well. That's not a bad thing," he mumbled and Andrew glared, but Neil couldn't keep the smile off his face.

Andrew sighed softly and Neil closed his eyes when he felt Andrew lay down next to him.

"Yes or no?" Andrew asked then, and Neil bit his lip when he looked at Andrew again, their noses barely inches apart. His heart started racing again, and his mouth was dry, suddenly.

He thought of the last kiss, and bit his lip. Neil didn't want this to end up being the same kind of disaster again. He doubted the recent events had done anything to improve their state.

"Can I… we can…", Neil sighed when he realised that there wouldn't be a real sentence coming out of his mouth, so he simply raised his hand between them and nodded. "It's yes."

Andrew eyed Neil's hand before taking it and pushing Neil over until he laid flat on his back again. It was no bad feeling, to be pushed down by Andrew. For some reason, holding his hand and looking into his eyes while it happened made this really manageable.

Of course, Neil didn't keep his eyes open for too long when Andrew's lips had touched his. When his breath became shallower and he sunk into the steady rhythm. When the acrid taste of burnt nicotine and cold smoke became an entirely good one.

Whenever Neil felt even the slightest bit of unease well up, he grabbed Andrew's hand a little harder or intertwined their fingers and everything was good.

The feelings were a little overwhelming at times. The steady touch of their lips, Andrew's other hand mapping out his features, holding him in place or touching his throat so lightly Neil almost shivered against it.
It was far from gentle, but even farther from violent, and that alone was enough.

The weather got colder and colder, and Neil took a very deep breath when Andrew pulled away abruptly.

The loss of contact was so sudden, Neil needed a moment to realise that Andrew was almost sitting straight again, safe for the hand Neil was still clutching. He needed another moment to let go of Andrew and a third one to sit up and realise that it was starting to rain.

"Come," Andrew said and attempted to get up, but Neil needed a second to catch his breath.

"We still have at least an hour before we have to head for the stadium," Neil mumbled, and Andrew sat back down when he realised that Neil had no intention of getting up.

Neil looked at him and Andrew raised his eyebrows. He didn't get how Andrew could look so unimpressed when Neil felt like something had shifted entirely. When he could barely find his voice. When he thought he could have gotten lost in the situation.

"Why do you do that?" Neil asked very lowly and Andrew looked away, lighting a cigarette and giving a second one to Neil.

"I didn't do anything," Andrew said and took a deep drag of the cigarette. The slight drizzle didn't bother either of them, and the smoke of their cigarettes was blown away instantly by a little bit of wind.

Neil bit his lip and nodded, looking at his cigarette, blowing against it so it wouldn't stop burning. "But," he started after a while, and Andrew interrupted him right away.

"No 'but'. This was nothing and if you have a problem with accepting that, we're not doing it again," Andrew said and finished the last quarter of his cigarette in a single drag, chest widening visibly.

Neil looked at him when he blew the smoke out very slowly and nodded.

"Okay…," he answered and they stubbed out their cigarettes before throwing them off the building.

Neil didn't get Andrew's problem all the way. Something had happened and even if feelings didn't play a role, it didn't qualify as 'nothing'. Neil had too much experience with being nothing to take this for the same level of insignificant.

Still, how could this be anything? Neil guessed it was something along the line between nothing and anything, which was a weird thought in itself. Shouldn't there be a clear border between existing and not existing?

They went inside and Andrew left for his own room without another word, which was usually how their time on the roof ended.

Neil went into his and saw no one there, so he turned right around and went into the girls' room. All the Upperclassmen were there, even Seth, who shared a sofa with Matt, while all the girls were sitting on armchairs or beanbags.

"What happened to you?" Dan asked slightly concerned and Neil ran a hand through his slightly wet hair.

"It's raining," he mumbled and took a seat on one chair.

Dan laughed a little at that and shook her head. "At least you came in."
They spent a little time together before Matt checked the time and announced that it was time for them to leave. Every one of them was nervous regarding the game, and Neil really hoped this would work. It should. It had to.

Neil left the Upperclassmen and joined the Monsters in Andrew's car. The passenger seat was a weird place to be, but Neil appreciated the way Andrew allowed him to sit there. It was some kind of proof that this wasn't nothing.

Arriving at the stadium felt good. Neil could never suppress the high he felt every time they entered Wymack's office on gamedays and he sure as hell didn't want to.

"So, this is the Scorpions' lineup, I'll give ours out in a second, so—" Wymack started, but Andrew interrupted him.

"Renee isn't playing tonight," he said, and all eyes were on him. Renee frowned at that for a second before smiling brightly.

"You're helping?" she asked, and Andrew shrugged. Wymack raised his eyebrows.

"Which of you was stupid enough to… Josten, he made you choose a number, right?" he asked, and Neil flinched away for a second before reminding him that this was just Wymack. It was all good.

Neil looked at Andrew before nodding. "So?" What did this have to do with anything?

"Wait, you didn't… Josten, seriously, what number did you choose?" he asked, and Neil looked at Andrew, who shook his head.

"I think we should let him freak out over this a little," he said and Renee smiled brightly, while Neil was a little confused by the way Wymack pulled his own hair.

"Andrew, are you saying this is worth freaking out about?" he asked, and Andrew shrugged while their coach seemed ready to pull the trigger.

"Okay… get dressed. Abby can give you a pep talk but I really have to hand in the lineup now," he said and left. Abby was leaning against the desk and smiled at them brightly.

"I doubt you need encouragements because all of you are amazing and trained so hard this year. You'll do great, and all of us know that. Please try to stay safe, I don't want to patch any of you up today. Then again, you know I'll do that! Have a nice time!" Abby smiled at all of them so genuinely and except for the twins, everyone smiled back.

The Foxes started leaving, then. They changed into their gear and uniforms, and went to the stadium. The other team was there already, running laps in their mint-green jerseys. The Vixens were warming up there as well, and while Aaron actually smiled over for a few seconds before stretching with the others, Allison's jaw tensed and she looked over with a death stare. Seth seemed all too pleased by this, but the Foxes went on stretching and running laps before all of them were ordered back inside.

The fans were let in and the stadium filled. Wymack told them he wouldn't coach them anymore if they lost and Seth's biggest concern was that Kevin would probably start coaching them again in that case, which brought an acted look of terror to almost all of their faces, but resulted in laughter right after that. Wymack told Renee to be ready, should Andrew just stop playing — which wasn't too unlikely, apparently — or should any other position need another substitute player. She said she could try being a defensive player but wouldn't be too comfortable with being a striker or offensive dealer, but since she was a goalkeeper, no one had anything to say against that.
Seth started playing with Kevin in the first half, while Allison, Matt and Aaron started as their defense. Neil loved watching the game from this perspective. Loved screaming his lungs out. Neil also really enjoyed being outside with Dan and listening to her cheering on Matt.

There was a really offensive dealer on court, that constantly tried hurting Allison, which resulted in more than one small fight. Kevin scored twice, Seth did, too, when Neil started paying attention to Andrew. Since he had let every shot at the goal pass without attempting to work, Neil had just figured he'd decided to not grant Neil the wish, but the Scorpions were starting to be faster and push harder, when Andrew started moving. It was impossible. Neil couldn't help smiling when he saw the way Andrew deflected shots. He only saw that during practice, sometimes, to annoy the others, but had never seen Andrew put as much effort into something live and real.

Neil watched Andrew as he didn't let any further goal in. It was almost miraculous and he looked as if he was putting so little effort into this when it was such an amazing play that should definitely be exhausting.

His attention shifted from Andrew leaning against his goal — having nothing to do while Kevin headed towards the other goal — when all heads turned to the middle of their court. Allison had passed the ball to Kevin, Neil could recall that. He had not seen the Scorpion dealer smash against Allison with his whole weight. He hadn't even slowed down when she had clearly passed the ball. She hit the ground and even though she stood up and made a sign to Wymack, he pulled her, probably not convinced by her wobbly legs or the way she held on to the wall. Dan and her swapped, and Abby was right there when Allison left the court.

Wymack was next to Neil a second later, making him look up in surprise. Renee had gone straight for Allison while Nicky was watching the game again.

"Get ready, Josten," Wymack said, and Neil frowned. He wasn't supposed to get in there for at least another ten minutes. But Wymack just nodded towards the game. "With Allison injured, Seth is gonna… yeah, thought so. Alright, get out there!"

Nicky nudged Neil's shoulder and Neil needed a moment to look at the scene. The game had went on right away and Seth had picked a fight with that dealer. They were insulting and hitting each other on an irritating level, and Neil sighed. How could Seth defend her like this on court, yet be the reason for her pain in the real world?

The referees announced that Seth wouldn't be allowed to play in this half time anymore, which wasn't too bad. Neil thought he deserved a harder punishment, considering the blood running from that dealers nose, but he wouldn't complain. Seth left the court when Neil entered, and checked the score. 4:3 in the Foxes favour. Pretty good so far.

The game went on and by half time, they lead 6:3. They met in their lockers and Kevin looked extremely exhausted, which was normal, considering that he'd played for the whole first half of the game. Wymack told them to step it up and yelled at Seth, but didn't manage to keep the smile off his face. This was a good season and the game went fantastic. Their coach looked at Andrew with so much fascination it made Neil smile, even though he was exhausted as hell and despite the way his jersey was clinging to his sweaty body already.

Allison wasn't allowed to play anymore and Wymack considered letting Renee substitute for her about a second before deciding this wouldn't do them any good. Renee had said she was more of a backliner, if it came down to it, and no one was willing to push her even further.

The next half started with Seth and Neil playing side by side. It was good, in a way. While Allison hadn't acknowledged Seth at all during their talk, the fact that he wanted to protect her was important.
to Neil.

Relying on Nicky, Matt and Dan to have his back was another really important aspect. He didn't worry about the defense. Knew they had his back. And Andrew was doing great. He hadn't let the Scorpions score a single time during the second half. Neil was amazed by the game. The dynamics. The fans around them, chanting. This was what it was supposed to be like. Feel like. It was incredible.

He scored a total of three times. The Foxes left the game with a solid 11:3, which made Neil almost drown in excitement.

Neil could barely move when he was trapped in a huge hug, in which even Nicky and Kevin participated, as well as the Upperclassmen, obviously. The twins left their court and when Neil came down from his euphoria and looked after them, he saw the both of them walking past the Vixens with tense shoulders, and while Aaron stared straight ahead, pretending not to notice them, Andrew actually looked over for a second and stared a girl down. It was almost painful to watch, but when Matt hugged Neil another time, he had to smile. This had been too good!

The Foxes left and Abby looked at a few scratches and bruises while Wymack told them to skip Monday morning practice. Kevin disagreed, telling them they didn't really have any time to calm down before the Raven game in exactly two weeks. Nobody cared.

Neil actually wanted to leave with the Monsters when Wymack told him to stop. He shivered softly before taking a deep breath. No need for fear, he reminded himself.

"Thanks, Josten. For asking Andrew about the goal. You should have chosen zero, just to see what happens," he said, and Neil frowned for a second before understanding the whole conversation he'd had with Andrew. Neil had chosen the number three when Andrew had asked him to pick one. The Scorpions had scored three times before Andrew had closed the goal completely.

Neil went home with the Monsters and couldn't help smiling. Andrew had done him a favour. His smile brightened when Nicky went on and on about how amazing Neil had been. About how awesome three goals were, considering everything. They started talking about the night and Neil just decided it was time to go to Columbia with them again. He'd missed that.

The Upperclassmen had left already, and Neil recalled them saying something about a bar they wanted to drink at. He didn't care too much when he changed into rather appropriate clothes but still flinched a little when there was a knock on the door. He had to work on this, quite seriously. It was getting annoying.

"Come in," he yelled, and saw Nicky getting into the room, not looking ready to party at all. "I'm ready," Neil promised and went for the door, but Nicky shook his head and swallowed hard.

That was when Neil realised his shoulders were tense. When he saw Nicky without a smile on his face for one of the first times.

"Nicky?" he asked uncertainly, and Nicky sighed.

"Alright, I wanted to let this slide, okay?" Nicky asked and Neil frowned, crossing his arms and taking a step back. He knew somewhere that this couldn't end in a painful way, but the events made him a little too cautious, sometimes. "You asked Andrew to close the goal tonight. And he did it."

It wasn't a question, so Neil didn't answer, and Nicky sighed, seeming very insecure about the whole thing.
"Neil, I haven't seen my parents in years. They haven't spoken to me. Haven't answered letters or calls. And… this is so stupid," he mumbled, and Neil looked up at him. He didn't know a lot about Nicky's past. Bad relationship to his parents because of his sexuality. That was about it.

"What's up?" Neil asked slowly and unwrapped his arms. He didn't want Nicky to feel worse than he did to begin with. In addition to that, he wanted to find out what Andrew's talent as a goalkeeper had to do with Nicky's parents.

Nicky took a deep breath and nodded. "So… my mother called. Wants the twins and me over for Thanksgiving. Catch up. That sort of thing. But I didn't think there was any possibility to get Andrew to do it, except… you kinda made him do something he didn't want," Nicky explained slowly, and Neil frowned. That wasn't true.

"I didn't make Andrew do anything. I asked and he agreed. I don't force him to do anything," he argued, and Nicky rolled his eyes.

"If you say so. That's not the point. Can you try to do it again?"

Neil took a deep breath and looked at Nicky. There was no point in being this defensive if Nicky wasn't trying to argue at all. He looked so hopeful and insecure at the same time, with his whole posture radiating the impressions.

"I'll ask, yeah? But I can't promise anything. It's his choice," Neil muttered, and patted Nicky's back when he hugged Neil tightly.

"This is important to me," he whispered and Neil felt like Nicky was rather clinging to the idea of what might happen than to Neil himself. It was okay, though.

Nicky sighed deeply and let go of Neil, straightening his shirt and turning around. "I need another twenty minutes. We'll leave for Columbia as soon as everyone's ready," he announced, and left. Neil couldn't believe that guy sometimes.

Driving to Columbia was great. Music playing in the background and everyone minding their own business gave Neil the chance to lean back and close his eyes. His legs were sore and every muscle in his body was aching, but he had a smile on his face and was happy about the game. The peaceful silence lasted for about twenty minutes before Nicky was rested enough to start chatting again. Neil didn't mind too much because this was just how things went with them.

Andrew followed the usual route, starting at Sweetie's and then driving to Eden's Twilight. Neil didn't get how anyone could stand the music's volume, the abundance of sweaty bodies, the lack of oxygen or the flashing lights. Then again, drugs probably helped with that.

The evening went the way it usually did. Nicky and Aaron went dancing while Kevin got drunk and Andrew sat in a corner to watch everything that was going on around him. After a while, Kevin went to go somewhere and left Neil and Andrew alone.

Neil sighed and looked at Andrew, whose eyes were constantly moving across the room. He knew Andrew wouldn't ever admit it, but Neil suspected that he was making sure Aaron and Nicky were fine and not in trouble. Then again, he might have simply been looking around.

Andrew finished whatever he was drinking, and looked at Neil. "Staring," he said lowly, and Neil shrugged. Whatever.

"You were pretty great today. Really, they didn't score once in the second half time," Neil said, and Andrew rolled his eyes.
"Shut up, honestly. Another word about Exy and it will be your last," Andrew threatened and Neil suppressed a smile. Death threats usually meant that Andrew cared about something enough to be annoyed by it.

"Okay… then how about a different topic? Nicky's parents invited you guys over for Thanksgiving," Neil said lowly, and Andrew eyed him. Neil knew that he wouldn't get too far by trying to conceal his intentions, so he talked about this openly.

He looked at Andrew for a little before he realised that the other one wouldn't answer, so Neil sighed and went on. "Would you do it? It would make Nicky very happy and he'd appreciate it a lot," Neil said lowly and Andrew looked around the room a little before his eyes settled on Nicky dancing somewhere close to the middle, still clearly distinguishable because of his height.

"I wouldn't," Andrew answered and Neil bit his lip, taken aback by the finality of this statement.

"Why not?" Neil asked after a moment, and Andrew glared again.

"They're not our family. I won't spend the holiday with them, pretending they are," Andrew answered, and Neil thought about that for a little. This was important to Nicky. Like, really, really important.

"What if they have it on another day? The weekend before or after?" Neil suggested, but Andrew shook his head again.

"No. Same problem," he answered and Neil sighed softly. There had to be a way to make this work for Nicky and Andrew. But family was a touchy subject for all of the Foxes, Nicky had explained that already. Andrew's family were the Monsters and pretending to be fine with other people wasn't like him.

"What if Kevin came? That way you'd be with the people you care about," Neil suggested and Andrew shook his head again.

"I don't care about you guys. We have deals," he disagreed, and Neil grew a little frustrated, even though Andrew had just included him into their group as if it was the most obvious thing to do.

"Okay, then see it as a way to piss them off. I don't care, but Nicky really wants to be there," Neil said, and Andrew raised his eyebrows.

Kevin came back, then, so they dropped the conversation. He'd have to pick up where they left off soon. Neil didn't want Andrew to do something he was uncomfortable with but he didn't exactly mind pushing him a little.

Nicky and Aaron got back for drinks after a while and sat down to cool off a little, when Andrew looked at Neil again.

"This costs you two turns," he said so lowly that only Neil could hear him, and turned back to the others. "Nicky, tell your mother we're having lunch with them next weekend. Kevin and Neil are coming," he announced, and Nicky's mouth dropped open. Aaron frowned a little and Kevin was pretty oblivious to the situation, with a small drunk smile on his mouth.

Neil swallowed. He hadn't intended to come. Didn't want to. But he couldn't take this away from Nicky, when this was everything to him. Neil wasn't that selfish.

Nicky looked from him to Andrew and back to him before the brightest smile appeared on his face.
"Thanks for selling your soul," he said cheerfully, and Neil smiled slightly, drinking a sip of his coke and trying his best to be pleased by pushing Andrew into something he clearly wasn't comfortable with.

Chapter End Notes

HEY
I'm currently in Appledore (it's tiny, but quite close to Exeter) (which isn't too big either, I suppose) (So I'm in England at the moment!)

This chapter happened in a bit of a rush so I hope you don't mind that ❤️

The HUGEST thank you to Saya! You're great and I can't believe you read this piece of shit today (sorry for swearing but it's midnight but I still wanna post)
Like… seriously, are you an angel?! You're like the perfect mixture of Renee and Jeremy! (And Aaron because of the med student stuff) (but I wanna concentrate on the unproblematic favourites, sorry) (yes I called Renee unproblematisch and I'm ready to fight you on this)

So… just please be aware that I love you with my whole heart. This thing wouldn't exist without you!

PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT YOUR OPINION ON ALLISON AND ANDREIL AND THANKSGIVING AND… that's about it, feel free to talk about other stuff, though! All the love! Lovely holidays to everyone who's on them now! Kisses!!

I chose the most stupid time to post and I'm so tired! (This is a small update because I forgot writing this when I posted the chapter.)
Huge thanks goes to Booksbreakhearts obviously, because you're amazing!
Thanks to Chocolate hell cookies freedom for keeping me updated on your life! I hope you're having a grand time!
GayWizardsAndFoxes you're so lovely and I appreciate you so much like, seriously.
Avap23 I love that we agree on Allison and Seth haha
Neil didn’t quite get what exactly had shifted, but something was different. Andrew and him spent most evenings on the roof while his afternoons usually belonged to the Upperclassmen. Matt was updating him on every kids' movie he had missed and stupid as that might sound, Neil actually felt like this meant something. He wasn't getting his lost past back, obviously, but this felt like catching up a little.

He was spending a little time with the Monsters. Usually a meal a day, sometimes more, and the drives to and from training.

It was Wednesday morning and Neil was waiting for Allison again. She didn't show up for quite a while, so Neil wanted to check on her again. Al seemed to have a cold or some kind of food poisoning and she wasn't getting better, apparently.

He wanted to go and get her, when she left the girls' room with her keys and flinched a little when she saw Neil.

"Hey, you're not coming over?" Neil asked, and Allison shook her head a little.

"We don't have any more food at our room and the girls are gonna kill me if I don't replace everything," Allison said with a smile and shrugged.

"Want me to come?" Neil asked lowly. He didn't want her to be alone. Allison has been giving him a bad feeling, lately. He was relieved when she nodded, and put his shoes on quickly.

Neil took the passenger seat and looked at her for a long moment. She looked exhausted and Neil felt bad. Allison took a sip from her plastic bottle, grimaced a little at the taste, and smiled at Neil brightly a second later. "So, is everything alright?" she asked, and Neil frowned.

"Sure, I'm fine. What are you drinking?" he asked, and she rolled her eyes.

"It's for your metabolism. Nothing negative. It's lemon, syrup, some pepper and water, no reason to be like that," she bit at him and Neil decided to let it slide. If she was bitching right away, he
wouldn't have the conversation.

She drove to the store with an annoyed expression and Neil wished he hadn't joined her. "Can I help you with something? You seem a little off and I'm worried," Neil said after a moment, when she parked in front of a shop.

Allison took a deep breath and Neil knew he'd made a mistake. "Neil, listen to me. Seth is being a pain in the ass and I'm trying to think of other stuff. All you and the girls ever do is ask how I feel. I'm not fine, okay? I feel like shit. But that's not your problem. Now do me a favour and shut up."

She turned away at that, and left the car. Neil looked after her and decided to use until she got back. He wasn't okay with the way she talked to him, obviously, but he could understand her reaction and would try and be a friend anyways. Neil still wanted to get out of the car, so he left it and went to a cigarette machine across the street, getting another pack of Andrew's favourite brand. He walked around for a few minutes before returning to the car.

Allison took a long time and came back with an incredible amount of food. She put it in the backseat and took a deep breath before letting them both into the car.

Neil looked at her with a blank expression when Allison took a sip of that weird drink of hers. She brushed through her hair with her fingers and bit her lip, before looking at him.

"Sorry," she mumbled and Neil sighed. He was so worried about her, but he really didn't understand what her problem was. He might ask Seth about this one time.

They got back home and Allison brought the groceries into her room while Neil got ready for class.

The week passed and for some reasons, arguments with Allison became more frequent. Neil didn't want that, and he hated the mood. To avoid these situations, he avoided talking altogether, and their time was spent in silence more than with anything else.

When the weekend got closer, Nicky became a louder version of himself, though nobody had even considered that a possibility.

Saturday came and Nicky spent two hours in the bathroom while the others were having breakfast on the sofa. Nicky's mom hadn't been too pleased about changing the date and had been even less keen on having two strangers in her house, but the fact that she'd agreed probably meant that this was important to her and her husband.

Neil was eating cereals and felt weird coming along. Andrew only wanted him there to piss Nicky's parents off and Neil didn't exactly feel like having any more arguments around him.

When Nicky was done, all of them seemed ready to leave. Except Nicky, some way. He checked the door every two minutes and decided they'd leave in another hour, so he could still change into a new outfit.

Aaron sighed at that and Andrew glared, but Neil understood. If he'd known his mother had been coming, that day, he'd have put effort into everything as well.

Andrew got up and went to the door of their room, and Neil followed him quickly. A little time would be just what he needed today. He wouldn't feel good at the house of strangers.

Climbing the stairs to the roof behind Andrew felt so familiar that Neil's shoulders relaxed instantly, and sitting down next to him by the edge felt even better.
Neil took the cigarette Andrew offered and sighed. "Today is gonna be weird, isn't it?" he asked lowly, and Andrew shrugged.

"They're assholes. Nicky will be disappointed anyways," he said and Neil fiddled with the cigarette. Why would he let Nicky run into this?

"Why don't you like them? And don't look like that, you know I'm not taking a turn," he said, and Andrew shrugged, looking over campus.

"She's a weak excuse for a mother and he's as intolerant as he is cruel," he explained very slowly, with a voice almost too silent for him to understand, and Neil had the feeling he hesitated. He wouldn't ask, anyways. Andrew had given something he found was an adequate answer and it wasn't Neil's place to push.

Andrew finished his cigarette and Neil caught him measuring his own pulse again. Andrew seemed to be doing that a lot.

"I still have two extra turns from agreeing to this. And it's my turn anyway, so that's three in a row," he explained and Neil shrugged. He wasn't stupid. He knew that. And it wasn't as if he was hiding anything at all. Except for his past and his body…

"What's your worst memory?" Andrew asked, and Neil frowned. He didn't know what exactly, but he had the feeling that Andrew was behaving a little off and he couldn't shake the feeling that it had something to do with the family meeting today.

"I don't know. There's… I can't decide," Neil mumbled honestly. He figured Andrew needed this, but he didn't know what to give.

"Top three," Andrew demanded, and Neil sighed. He didn't want this.

"Not the last night at the Nest. I think it should have been, but it's too blurred to be a memory," Neil mumbled. He didn't know why, but he felt the need to explain himself. "Worst real memories…" he repeated then and thought about it. "Waking up with a knife pressed against my throat because my father wanted to find out where my mother was. He thought I knew something but that's how I found out. The other ones are more specific, I guess. Listening to the sound of the bones in Kevin's hand breaking and seeing Jean almost bleed to death, the night Renee took him," he mumbled. Neil got quiet and looked over the view. He didn't know why he was this honest. Maybe he needed to say this out loud. Maybe he just wanted Andrew to know.

"You're screwed up," Andrew said and shook his head. "Happiest," he demanded, then, and Neil had to take a deep breath before even thinking. That was, until he realised there was nothing to think about.

"Scoring for the first time ever. And the Foxes. Sitting on the roof with you," Neil said and was happy to talk about this. If he'd thought about it longer, he would have probably included leaving the Nest or seeing Jean again for the first time, but this was true either way.

Andrew rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I can't believe Exy is your happiest memory, Junkie," he remarked, and Neil couldn't help smiling at the almost-insult.

"You're mad because you come in third? Shouldn't you be used to that number by now?" Neil asked and couldn't keep a grin off his face. Andrew glared at him, apparently calculating Neil.

Neil bit his lip. He'd talked about his worst memories just like that, and he'd felt bad about it. Now he talked about happy situations and felt good instantly. How could Andrew just make the bad
memories fade into the back of his mind like that?

Neil placed his hand on the small area between them and didn't quite know what he was going for when he asked Andrew "Yes or no?" for the first time ever. He remembered Andrew using the phrase and it seemed like he needed distraction at the moment. With these dark memories welling up, so did Neil.

Andrew frowned at him and seemed taken off guard a little, but placed his hand in Neil's anyways. "You're messed up on so many levels," Andrew announced, but he leaned in and nothing else mattered.

Andrew’s kisses weren't what you saw in the movies. Not gentle, not sweet. They tasted like acid, felt like a fight, and the longer they did it, the more Neil felt like giving up. Letting his guard down. Letting Andrew win.

Words couldn't begin to explain what the plain fact that Andrew held his hand meant to Neil. That Andrew cared enough about whatever they had to make sure Neil felt comfortable. It was always tough for him, but Andrew made it okay and Neil wouldn't let go. Not when this felt like home. Not when Andrew’s teeth were almost gently biting into his lip. Not when…

"Stop," Neil said, before he fully understood what had happened. They had laid back again, hands locked, eyes dark, and Andrew was upright, bringing space between him and Neil, crossing his arms and watching Neil from a small distance as if to show that he had, in fact, stopped.

"Stop what?" Andrew asked when Neil sat up slowly and pulled a knee to his chest, looking away, biting his lip.

"Not everything, sorry, I just…," Neil mumbled. He didn't know how to articulate this in a way that didn't make Andrew leave right away.

"Spit it out," Andrew said impatiently and Neil took a deep breath.

"Not there," he almost whispered, burying his hands in the hem of his shirt, almost clawing at the fabric, pulling it down. Andrew had barely touched the seam of Neil's pullover. He was overreacting and Andrew would make fun of it. He felt bad.

But when he looked up again, Andrew considered Neil for a long moment, eyes moving so quickly from his head to his toes and back, Neil was almost not able to focus on them. "Okay," he said, then, and lit two more cigarettes.

Neil took it and stared at the burning end when he blew against it. He was sorting his thoughts for a moment and looked back up at Andrew after another minute.

"Are you angry?" Neil asked hesitantly, looking away again. He couldn't face Andrew right then.

"No," Andrew answered right away, and after a second, he added "Are you?"

Neil shook his head. He didn't have any right to be. Andrew didn't have any way of knowing that Neil would rather die than have anybody know what he looked like. He was extremely relieved that Andrew wasn't mad at him. He knew that whatever they had was just as tough on him as it was on Neil.

Their phones buzzed at the same time and Neil left it to Andrew to check what Nicky had texted. There was no way anyone else would text the both of them.
"Nicky is ready," Andrew announced, stubbed out his cigarette and got up when he'd thrown it down the building. Neil did the same and followed him inside.

"Are we okay?" Neil asked and Andrew sighed, leading the way. Neil didn't know why exactly this felt wrong, but it did. Andrew nodded sharply and in a way, that felt better. They went to the car directly and when the five of them were seated, Andrew started driving.

Nicky became more silent and Neil felt bad for him. He was so excited but Andrew didn't have any hopes for today.

The drive lasted for an eternity when nobody talked, and Neil sighed. He wasn't comfortable with coming along.

He felt even worse when Andrew pulled into a parking lot next to the most perfect house he'd ever seen. The lawn was mowed perfectly, the trees looked like you'd just cut them out of a magazine and the house itself was beautiful.

They got out of the car and Nicky brushed through his hair a few times before climbing the stairs and standing in front of the house. Neil saw the twins standing next to each other, probably, when they waited in front of the stairs. Him and Kevin stayed back a little, knowing they'd disturb the situation in general.

It took ages for Nicky to get the courage to ring the doorbell, but when he did, the twins took the place right behind him, probably offering support in a way.

A woman that looked undeniably like Nicky opened the door and looked at the five Foxes with a fake smile.

"Why did you ring?" she asked instead of greeting her only son, and Nicky sighed. Neil disliked him being so… non-Nicky-ish.

"I don't live here anymore," Nicky explained, and Neil bit his lip when she didn't argue but stepped to the side to let them in.

The inside of the house looked like Nicky's parents had simply bought a finished IKEA-room and added religious quotes here and there.

"I'm Maria," Nicky's mom greeted Kevin and Neil, shaking both of their hands and nodding when they told her their names. "You look good, Andrew," she told Aaron, who simply shook his head slightly, and she sighed. "Well, no one can tell these two apart, right?" she asks Kevin and Neil in a lazy attempt to get rid of the tension.

"We can," Neil said lowly, and Kevin elbowed him, but Aaron actually smiled at that a little.

"Well, I'll check on the food. You can sit down already," she said, and vanished after not even looking at Nicky anymore.

A second later, a man entered the living room they stood in from the balcony and looked at all of them for a little before shaking everyone's hand. Except for Andrew's, who turned away, apparently oblivious to the gesture. Neil remembered Andrew saying Nicky's father was a bad person. He wondered if they had some kind of history.

The man introduced himself as Luther and looked at Nicky for a few long moments before greeting him as well.
The whole scene felt so unreal, Neil didn't understand how Nicky could have been so excited yet be so distant now.

Luther led them outside and told them to sit down. Andrew ended up between Kevin and Neil, some way, while Nicky and Aaron sat on the opposite side. Nicky's parents brought the food out and each took a table on the far end. It felt so surreal and Neil didn't feel good, being there.

Nicky's parents started praying and while Neil knew neither Kevin nor Aaron were religious, the three of them joined in, tilting their heads and pretending, at least. Andrew didn't, but he only started eating when they were done, so that was something.

Luther looked at Neil for a moment before asking "Are you religious?" Neil considered lying for a moment before deciding it wouldn't make a difference.

"No. Is that a problem?" he asked and Luther looked at him as if he was personally offended. It was then that Neil remembered that Luther was some kind of religious figure. He didn't know what exactly.

"It's not my place to judge you for your sins," he said, and Neil frowned. He wouldn't let anyone judge him for anything, especially not for not believing in a "loving God" that had abandoned all the Foxes at some part of the way.

Andrew next to Neil scoffed and raised his glass. "Yeah, totally unlike you. Why would you judge literally anyone for not practicing their religion the way you do?" he asked and Nicky pressed his lips together. Neil was almost glad Andrew called Nicky's dad out on that shit.

"So, Aaron, still studying to be a doctor?" Luther asked quickly, ending a discussion that hadn't even started yet and actually addressed the right twin. Aaron nodded a little and played with his food. He seemed uncomfortable with being addressed instead of Nicky. Neil found himself sympathise with Aaron for the first time ever, probably.

"And all of you play that… Lacrosse thing?" Maria asked after a few moments. Kevin's mouth dropped open for a second before he could remind himself to be polite, but it was enough to make Nicky and Neil smile. The way Kevin was personally offended by the comparison was just too funny.

"We all play Exy, yes," Nicky answered, and Maria nodded, getting back to her food again. They became silent again and Neil couldn't believe that this was what family meetings were like. He was almost glad he hadn't had a real family growing up.

Luther's shoulders were tense and Maria took a sip of her wine, seeming uncomfortable. "And what are you planning to do after school?" she asked into the round, and when nobody answered, she turned to Kevin, who was sitting next to her.

Kevin was used to this question, and the Ravens had taught them how to respond to practically anything. "I'm considering an Exy-career, to be honest. The US national court is my current goal," Kevin explained, and Maria smiled at that.

"That's so interesting! Nicky, are you planning to do that as well?" she asked, and for the first time, she seemed close to what a mom should be like. Neil thought it was cruel that Kevin had induced that feeling.

Nicky bit his lip and looked at her with a frown. Then he took a deep breath and shook his head, smiling slightly. "I don't think I'll keep playing after uni. It's not as big of a deal in Germany and I
think I'm gonna have other things to do," he explained, and Maria's face fell. Luther dropped his fork and looked at his son and Neil saw how Andrew held on to his knife a little tighter.

"What do you mean, Nicholas?" he asked, and Nicky raised his eyebrow.

"I'm moving back to Germany after university. I wouldn't have come back here if it hadn't been for the twins, and I'm leaving to be with Erik as soon as all of us are done," he explained patiently and his mother pressed a hand on her mouth.

Luther cleared his throat. "So you're still confused. Nicholas, if it's what you need, we can always send you to a summer camp again. The path is right there," he explained, and Neil frowned while Nicky froze. It took less than a second for Neil to understand the implications.

"You sent your only child to a camp which everyone suspects of being violent and when he gets back and verifies these statements, you threaten to do it again? And I thought my father was cruel," Neil said, and Luther raised his eyebrows.

"I don't need little boys to tell me how to raise my child," Luther said calmly, and in a way, it made Neil even madder.

Apparently you do, since you abandoned him! Nicky is no child anymore, and you…"

"Neil, please, let it go," Nicky said lowly, and Neil swallowed when he looked up and saw the conflict on Nicky's face so clearly. He kept his mouth shut and looked at Luther.

"Sorry," he muttered, and felt bad for even attempting the lie. He was about as far from sorry as it could get, but he wouldn't screw this up for Nicky. He had hopes for the dinner and Neil wouldn't be the reason this failed. Not when Nicky asked him to take a step back. Not when there was even a tiny chance Nicky would walk out of this house as their son and not an abandoned stranger.

Luther shook his head firmly and ignored Neil, turning to Andrew instead. "How are you holding up? With everything going on? Cass asked about you," he said, and Andrew tensed. Every muscle in his shoulders seemed to flex and he looked at Luther.

"What's going on?" he asked, and the others exchanged confused glances. Aaron seemed to know who they were talking about, but the others didn't.

"Didn't you hear? Her real son went missing and all the foster children are helping the police to look for him," he explained, and Andrew's jaw tensed even more. Neil remembered the guy. Drake. Andrew's former foster brother. So Cass was probably the closest thing Andrew has ever had to a mother.

"All the foster children? She had others?" Andrew asked. Neil frowned and Aaron seemed surprised by the way his twin actually showed emotions. Even though it was just anger.

"Andrew, your brother went missing, and you're jealous of her taking in other children? That's not how you treat family," Luther practically rebuked Andrew.

Andrew's grip on his knife tightened and Neil wanted to do something. He knew he couldn't. "That bastard is not my brother. Aaron is. I told you I didn't want her to have other children for a reason. And you, Luther, are the last person to tell anyone how to treat their family," Andrew said with a dangerously low tone, and Nicky crossed his arms, hugging himself a little. He didn't want to say something, apparently.

"I talked to you about that. He was trying to be a good brother, but you misunderstood. If you'd been
on your medication back then, it would have made sense. Your childish behaviour… Andrew, where are you going?"

All eyes were on Andrew when he'd gotten up and Neil felt sick. Andrew had told Luther about having a rapist as a foster brother and he'd been brushed off. Neil couldn't believe Andrew was even present at this dinner.

The Monsters looked confused, but when Andrew just left the balcony and shut the door behind him, all of them were on their feet.

Nicky's parents looked at their son, who was already following his cousin inside.

"Nicholas, you can't support him in these childish behaviours. You have to choose your family," Maria said, and Nicky scoffed bitterly.

He shook his head a little and looked around for a second. "Believe me, Mom, I am," he said, and walked after Andrew. Kevin followed him quickly, and Neil saw Aaron looking at his family members. The only ones he had left, Neil reminded himself. His uncle and the wife. Everyone else was unknown or dead.

"Goodbye, Uncle Luther… Aunt Maria," he said lowly, and like that, Neil and Aaron followed the others. Andrew was sitting in his car already, engine running.

"Nicky is sitting in the front," he announced, and Neil didn't have a problem with taking the backseat. He understood this, in a way.

Driving back was even worse than driving there, with a few weak attempts to start a conversation by Nicky and Aaron. No one really felt like talking, so they let it slide.

They arrived at the Fox Tower a little later, and Kevin took a deep breath. "I'm getting booze," he announced, and Aaron nodded.

"I'm joining you," he mumbled, and Nicky sighed.

"I'll call Erik," he said and him, Andrew and Neil entered the building. Nicky went into their room while Andrew went for the staircase to the roof.

"I want to be alone," he said, and Neil just nodded. He hadn't thought Andrew would want company. Instead, Neil went into his room and sat down on the sofa with Seth and Matt.

Matt frowned at Neil, who just shrugged. "Nicky's parents are shitheads," he explained, and Matt sighed.

"Sorry about that," he mumbled and put an arm around Neil, the way he had one around Seth as well, watching TV. He almost liked that. Matt's closeness was comforting.

"How was your day?" he asked them, then, not interested in the movie at all.

"Great. Dan and I went out," Matt said, while Seth sighed.

"Crappy. Ran into Allison in the hallway. Is something wrong with her? Because she was super rude," Seth answered, obviously annoyed by the way he had to ask Neil about this.

Neil pulled his knees onto the sofa and hugged them while shrugging. "She's unwell, I think. Coming down with something, probably. She doesn't want Abby to pull her before the game,
though, so she doesn't want to tell her. But she's moody, lately. I doubt this is about you," Neil explained. The day had been exhausting and he didn't feel like lying.

Seth sat up straight at that, looking into Neil's face. "She's ill? As in 'feeling cold' or as in 'throwing up'?"] he asked and the look on his face was unmistakably caused by his real feelings pushing through the drug induced apathy. Neil couldn't believe he'd been taking drugs.

"I guess she's sick sometimes, but that's not really…" Neil started, but Seth was on his feet already.

*Allison was leaning against Renee on the sofa, half asleep. She'd been shopping and honestly, her feet were killing her.

She looked up when the door was ripped open and rolled her eyes when she saw Seth. Couldn't he back off?!

"I want to talk to you," he announced, and Allison sighed.

"Seth, I don't feel like talking about us right now," she said lowly and he shrugged.

"Fine, me neither. I'm talking about you, with or without others present. And I have some things to say you wouldn't want everyone to hear," he said and crossed his arms. She hated Seth, sometimes.

But Allison got up and pulled the door closed behind them, looking up at Seth in the hallway.

"Why are you threatening me?" she asked, and Seth just shook his head.

"You're stupid, Allison. I knew that already, but this? You know better," he said, and Allison crossed her arms in defense. He couldn't know. Wasn't allowed to know about any of this. But Seth wasn't usually this soft. Especially not on his drugs. And when he looked into her eyes, there was no denying. He knew.

Allison took a deep breath and shook her head. She pushed her shoulders bad and flexed her jaw.

"Bullshit. What's your problem? That your stupid Vixen put on weight? That I look better when I'm not with you?" she asked, and Seth closed his eyes for a few moments. She was exhausting, and Allison wanted this. She wanted him to be exhausted by her. To leave her alone.

"Neil told me you're throwing up, Al. I'm not as stupid as he is," Seth said, and Allison took a step back, feeling the wall in her back. Trapped. She felt trapped.

"I'm not your project. I'm not your beautiful, shattered princess in need of a hero," Allison said lowly. She wasn't fragile. Not breaking. Seth was.

He took a step closer, looking into her eyes. She hated his hazed eyes. Hated knowing that she was looking at a drugged version of him. "You're not. And if you were, I wouldn't be the hero. Yet here we are," he said, and Allison didn't flinch when he placed his hands on her hips. She knew that he wasn't trying anything. Allison was familiar with the way he checked her weight. Her body couldn't lie as easily as her mouth. A small frown appeared on his face when he brought his hands up and felt her ribs.

"Stop," she said with a breathy voice, but Seth shook his head. She knew where he'd go. Up her back, to her neck, down her arms to her wrists. He did what he always did, and took her hands, looking into her eyes.

"I want you to see Dobson," he said very slowly, and Allison swallowed hard, shaking her head.

"You know what therapists do when you relapse. They put you into hospital or a clinic," she
whispered. He knew that as well as she did. She didn't want to go back. Supervised 24/7. But she pressed his hands and held his gaze until he leaned his forehead against hers. This was too familiar. Him coming to take care of her when she was falling apart. She felt bad. Whenever she found drugs, she pushed him away. She didn't help him. Couldn't. Yet here he was.

"We can go together. Or you try. We're eating together, you stay with me, I see you and can make sure you're okay," he whispered and Allison intertwined their fingers. She was okay. She was aware of what she was doing. Sick people didn't know. She wasn't sick.

But Seth was there. Right there, in front of her, worrying. "Stop using drugs. Drugs are worse than what I do," she mumbled, and Seth let go of her hands, hugging her closer to his chest.

"I'll stop. And I want you to talk to someone. Abby, Dobson. Wymack, if you feel like it. Call your former therapist, I don't care. But you're talking to someone," he said, and Allison leaned against him, shaking her head. She couldn't. Hospitals were small and distrusting and depressing. "Allison. I know it's unfair, but you said this thing was a choice. You have to make the choice each and every single step of the way. You decide to recover before you start. Do yourself a favour and talk to someone," he mumbled and laid his chin on her head when she hid her face in his throat.

Drugs in his system or not, he felt something in him break when she sniffed a few times, keeping the tears at bay. He held her up, pulled her close, and was glad. This was the most important thing ever. Tears meant she let it in.

"I'll call him," she promised, and he exhaled audibly, pulling her even closer. Allison felt protected, in a way.

Seth wasn't her personal cure for Bulimia, obviously. But he was an anchor and a crutch and he was there to love her when she couldn't.

He was messed up on so many levels, but that didn't change anything about the fact that he was there for her.

"We're not on again," she said, and Seth shook his head. They both knew it wasn't the time. Not with him getting off the drugs and her trying to get her life together. But Seth pressed his lips to hers and it felt like a promise. She ran a hand through his hair and wiped the tears from her cheek almost aggressively when he let go.

"We're messed up," she mumbled, and Seth shrugged with something close to a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Alright i'm super insecure about the ending of this because… like, I don't make this a secret but fuck. Eating disorders suck. Writing this felt weird so i'd really really really appreciate feedback on this

ALSO CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT A PIECE OF SHIT LUTHER IS?!

Alright sorry i'm okay

I HAVE ANOTHER AFTG FIC

I REPEAT
I HAVE ANOTHER AFTG FIC

It's called Crossing Lines (thanks saya) and is centered around Aaron and katelyn. PLEASE CHECK IT OUT

Now the most important part

SAYA I LOVE YOU WITH ALL MY HEART AND YOU'RE AMAZING AND I CANNOT EVER THANK YOU ENOUGH, YOU LITTLE DEMON! SERIOUSLY THANK YOU SO MUCH!! THIS WOULD BE A HUGE MESS WITHOUT YOU

Special thanks to my lil family of commenters, GayW1zardsAndF0xes (I only recently realised there was a 0 and not a o I'm sorry for misspelling your name), Booksbreakhearts (thanks for the snaps <3), Avap23 (Allison and Seth, especially For you), and definitely Chocolate_Hell_Cookies_Freedom2481999 (hope you're having a great time!!)

Love all of you! Thanks for 4.3K hits ❤️
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The Ravens-game

Chapter Notes

The chapter was A LOT longer originally, and it was supposed to be a…

Well no one knows how it was supposed to be but BE PREPARED because there's ONE MORE CHAPTER UNTIL CHRISTMAS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They could never do it.

The Foxes' team spirit peaked in the week leading up to the Ravens-game. Seth's and Allison's reunion brought the Upperclassmen closer together, and with Renee and Neil to mend the team and Nicky putting effort into that as well, they had something close to good dynamics.

Still, Neil and Kevin shot each other glances through pretty much all of training. They'd loose pathetically. The Foxes had gained confidence after having lost no more than a single game so far, but they were far from ready to play against the Ravens.

Wednesday morning was finally the way it used to be again. Neil left his room after a shower and saw Allison sitting on the sofa already, doing homework. He was so glad they weren't arguing anymore.

"Hey," he mumbled, and she smiled at him. He'd missed that look on her face. Neil sat down next to her with a cup of coffee and Allison brushed through her hair.

"I wanted to apologise for the past few weeks. I was terrible," she said, and Neil just shrugged. He wasn't mad anymore, considering how her behaviour made sense now, at least.

"You were struggling. It's fine," he said, but judging from the way she bit her lip, he'd said the wrong thing.

"I put a lot of pressure on you because of the way I behaved. That wasn't fair," Allison said, and Neil sensed that this was important to her. He decided to not brush it off.

"But everything turned out okay. Don't worry about it, it's over. Seth and you are okay again and the Foxes are finally working as a team," he said, choosing his words carefully. Allison sighed softly and nodded, but returned to her book again. Neil took his homework after a while, and they worked in silence.

Neil learned that there wasn't much he didn't like, regarding the Foxes. Silence and conversations were both okay for him, which was almost weird, considering how chatter used to make his head
ache and how silence usually gave him the creeps.

He was learning that it was okay to rely on people, as well. He didn't feel bad anymore, when he woke up on the sofa or an armchair in the girls' room or in one of the Monsters' bean bags. He knew that nothing bad could happen with the Foxes around. It was probably foolish, but the week leading to the Raven game showed him how much they had his back.

The only place he didn't want to fall asleep at was the roof. His moments with Andrew were too precious to be wasted away like that. Neil didn't want to miss a single second of their time. Not when he felt Andrew slowly opening up to him. Not when their kisses became so much more meaningful, the longer they happened. Not when every touch felt like a promise.

Friday came faster than anyone had expected, and Neil woke up to a call by Nicky. He rolled his eyes, wondering what a valid reason for the call could be, but picked up despite his annoyance, hoping it wouldn't be a trivial reason.

"Morning," he started with a raspy voice, clearing his throat. Matt sighed in the bed under him and Allison groaned, cuddling against Seth and hiding her face under the blanket. She'd been spending more and more time in their room and sneaked over pretty much every night. Not that anyone minded, when all they did was cuddle and sleep.

"I need you to come over, it's important," Nicky started, and Neil frowned. He sat up slowly and yawned, leaving the room so he wouldn't disturb the others too much.

"How important? Should I change or can I brush my teeth before…" he started, but Nicky interrupted him again.

"It's extremely important, Neil. Please just come over," he said, and Neil hung up before walking over quickly. What in the world couldn't wait for him to change into regular clothes or take a shower?

He got the answer when he went over and found the door open already. Nicky took him by the hand and pulled him into their bedroom. Neil raised an eyebrow when he saw Aaron leaning against the wall, facing the bed. Neil turned and saw Andrew and Kevin sitting there. Andrew was only looking at Kevin, arms and legs crossed and with his back against the wall. Kevin was clenching his arms, knuckles sticking out white and a layer of sweat on his forehead.

"What's wrong?" he asked lowly, and Nicky shrugged helplessly.

"He's not—I don't even know. I think he's panicking," Nicky answered, and Neil looked at Andrew next to Kevin. He didn't doubt that Andrew had tried helping Kevin, the way he usually helped Neil through this. But Neil didn't know what he was supposed to do.

"I don't know—," Neil started, and Andrew glared at him.

"Be there. The both of you are screwed up because of the Ravens, so you'd probably understand his feelings regarding this evening," he said, and Neil scratched the back of his neck uncertainly. This was about tonight? The game?

"Could you guys leave us alone for a second?" he asked the cousins, and Aaron and Nicky left the room while Andrew remained sitting on the bed, looking at Kevin.

Neil squatted down in front of Kevin and tried catching his eyes. "Hey, Kevin. What's wrong? Should we call Jean? Thea?" he asked lowly, and released a breath when Kevin shook his head slowly, gripping his arms even harder. At least he heard him.
He sighed softly and somehow, he remembered this. Neil had never seen Kevin panic at the Nest, but he was used to Jean's attacks. This wasn't unusual. It was a first for Kevin, but

"I'm gonna touch your hands," Neil said in order to prepare Kevin for it. He brushed over Kevin's knuckles for a second before forcing his hands away from his arms. Neil pressed one of Kevin's hands to his chest and started breathing very slowly and deeply. "Try breathing along, okay? We're fine. We're here, away from Riko. Together," he promised, and was incredibly relieved when he heard Kevin taking shallow breaths that became deeper and deeper.

"But he will be here, tonight. And we'll fail. He was right, Nathaniel. We're not even a challenge for Riko. He's One for a reason," Kevin whispered, clenching Neil's shirt now, but at least breathing again.

Neil couldn't care about the name when Kevin was so lost in his past. He closed his arms around Kevin's shoulders when he allowed it, and sat down next to him. Jean always appreciated hugs when he was calming down, and Kevin did too, apparently.

"That's not true, Kevin. We'll loose because you only started coaching this team last year. Give it another six months and we'd destroy the Ravens with everything we have. And he's One because he decided to be. Screw him. You deserve to be One and he broke your hand because he knew," Neil said, and Kevin pulled him closer. Neil was glad that Kevin let him in and held on as long as Kevin needed to let him go.

"And now look at us. We're nothing but a cripple and a runaway with a bunch of fucked up teammates," Kevin mumbled, and leaned against the wall behind his bed, closing his eyes.

Neil sighed and looked at Andrew, who hadn't said a word. He just sat there and watched the two of them. Now, however, he stretched out his leg and shoved against Kevin with his foot.

"Stop saying stupid shit. You're whining and that makes me wanna puke," he said, and Kevin brought a few more inches between him and Andrew.

*

Neil didn't think too much about the game. If Riko had wanted to hurt him, he'd have done it already. An Exy game wasn't the best situation for something like that. But the Upperclassmen were all over him anyways. Matt kept asking if he was okay, Dan ran her hand through his hair whenever she walked past him and even Seth looked at him with a frown more often. Allison gave less snappy answers than she usually would have.

The only one actually helping was Renee. She brought a cup of tea for Neil and made sure he had both breakfast and lunch before leaving for the stadium. She even sticked around after school to walk home with Neil, when their whole uni went crazy and basically glued itself to the Exy players.

Neil didn't know how to thank her for being comforting in general, but Renee didn't make him feel the need to look for words, so he gave her a smile and she filled the silence.

He was grateful for the way she was there, even when her presence itself made him slightly uncomfortable. Renee was helping to ease a negative feeling he had been trying to shut down for all day.

Wymack had told them to come early in order to keep his Foxes from meeting anyone on campus, so they left the Fox Tower a few hours early to waste time at the stadium.

It was way too tense. Wymack encouraged all of them for a change, but it felt like screaming into the
void. They knew they had lost as soon as EAU had transferred to their district, so this couldn't lift the spirit. Matt and Nicky tried, but no one was even remotely in the mood.

Neil looked around the room and saw Kevin fiddling with his fingers, while his eyes were moving way too rapidly, but he couldn't bring himself to walk over. He was dealing with his own memories.

"Josten, where do you think you're going?" Wymack barked at him, and Neil flinched more heavily than he had in a long time. It was still tough when Wymack caught him off guard like this. When Neil turned around, all eyes were on him and he felt small. He hated the look on Matt's face, when he was pitying him so obviously.

"I just wanted to have a minute for myself, sir. Sorry," he said, and straightened his shoulders in a weak attempt to regain his posture.

Wymack sighed and nodded, making a gesture with his hand that suggested Neil could leave. He was glad to be out of his office. These cramped spaces full of people were too exhausting.

Neil found himself on court a minute later, walking inside and leaning against the plexiglass wall. This felt great, surrounded by orange and white, he was able to breathe again.

Kevin had been the reason for Neil to come here. He'd been the only thing keeping Neil at the Fox Tower for a long time. It had been Riko or Kevin, and Neil had made the decision.

But right now, Neil realised that it was way more than that. This wasn't about Riko anymore. Not even about Kevin. It was about the Foxes.

Additionally, Neil realised that it wasn't Ravens or Foxes the way it had been Riko or Kevin. There was no decision to be made. This was plain and simple. The Foxes. He'd choose them over the world. Had - in fact - chosen them over safety, over his mother, over every principle he'd grown up with.

And he'd choose them all over again.

"Neil?"

He looked up and saw Renee at the door of their court, through the plexiglass wall. She opened the door and went over, sitting down a foot away from him.

"Coach sent me looking for you. Is everything okay?" she asked and smiled warmly. Why was Renee always so nice?

"I'm fine. The game is just a little unnerving," he said. Something about her just made you talk to her. Renee nodded and made a face that suggested she felt bad for him. Somehow, she managed to not look pitying.

"Everybody knows we're gonna loose, but I believe that we can win many other things tonight. See what you have already; a team, friends, a family. This is something the Ravens won't ever have. And you'll show everyone how much you deserve your place on that Perfect Court, but how little Riko does, without the other numbers to back him up," Renee said, and when Neil looked at her, he saw the girl that could beat Andrew up and get out of there with merely a scratch. He could see the Fox in her.

"Should we go back inside?" Neil asked, and Renee smiled warmly, nodding. She got up and offered Neil a hand. This might not be much to everyone else, but when he took it and let her pull
him up, Renee understood how much this meant to Neil.

She smiled when they reentered Wymack's office, and Andrew raised an eyebrow when he looked at the two of them, but no one said anything when Neil took the seat between Nicky and Andrew while Renee sat down on Andrew's other side.

Wymack left the office when he got the call and came back with an annoyed expression.

"They'll be late because of traffic, so at least we won't have to get ready with them, but the first time we'll see any of they will be on court. The lineup is exactly what we expected, does anyone feel the need to discuss it?" Wymack asked, passing around sheets of paper. They all eyed it quickly before shrugging. This was exactly what they'd been discussing for weeks, so no one felt like talking about it. They knew their opponents better than their own team, at this point.

"I won't play the first and last quarter," Kevin said into the silence, and Seth and Neil looked at each other. They'd have to play a lot if Kevin refused to participate in half the game, but no one would make Kevin play with Riko if they didn't have to. And they had lost already, so what was the point in trying to win?

Time went by and Neil found himself dissociate. He barely acknowledged anything at all when they got ready for the game, but putting the orange jersey with his number on it on felt like waking up. Neil would play for the whole first half and the last quarter, Seth for the first quarter and the second half. Kevin would only be on court for the middle half of their game and Neil was pretty sure he'd be dead by halftime.

He was almost glad he didn't hear the Ravens. Didn't see them. Didn't talk to them. No Fox bothered saying a word about these people and Neil appreciated it. He didn't want to deal with the game. He wanted to play for the Foxes and leave as more than the "Former Raven".

It felt unreal. The chanting, the shouts, the black mixed into the orange in their audience. The Ravens being on the Foxhole Court. It felt wrong.

What felt even more surreal was when the announcer read out the Foxes' line up and they were greeted by loud cheering and unbelievable support. PSU believed in them. Neil swallowed and looked behind him for a second. Seth was next to him, Dan between them, Andrew in the goal and Aaron and Matt right behind the strikers. Neil hoped Matt would be a challenge for Riko. He wasn't too sure, though.

His world started spinning again when Riko's name was announced and the Ravens' captain entered their court with his people behind him. Neil clenched his racquet and felt his jaw tense when Riko walked over. Why in God's name did he start feeling again as his greatest demon approached him?

Neil knew it was a publicity stunt when Riko opened his arms, and he knew the Foxes couldn't afford the consequences of Neil turning away, so he hugged Riko back for a millisecond. It felt like waking up. Riko pressed him way too tightly and Neil fought hard not to push him away. He saw Kevin over Riko's shoulder, behind the plexiglass wall, face whitening and eyes widened. Neil found some comfort in the way Kevin felt for him.

"We'll show you just how well you fit into this bunch of fuck-ups," he whispered into Neil's ear, breaking uncomfortably on his skin, and Neil swallowed before Riko finally let him go again. The Ravens were on their court and a buzzer announced the start of the game. Pathetic didn't begin to cover it. Not when Andrew tried to shut the goal and the Ravens scored two times in the first ten minutes. The look on Andrew's face changed after that, and something shifted.
Neil thought he was insulting the backliners for letting the others close in as often, but from the look on Matt's face and the way he ran, Neil figured Andrew had given some orders.

The fact that the Ravens had scored wasn't all bad. Andrew was in possession of the ball and somehow, Neil knew he'd pass it to him. Andrew did, and Neil tried getting past his backliner Johnson, but was bodychecked so hard his vision went blurry and he lost the ball. That was until Matt was there, slamming his body against Johnson before the Raven had any chance to pass, and Neil realised just in time that this was his chance.

He got the ball back and ran like his life depended on it, passed to Seth, got the ball back, ran on and scored.

That first goal did miraculous things to the Foxes, and soon, it was 4-2 in the Ravens' favour. Still, the Ravens didn't play in halftimes but in quarters, and when they faced an entirely different and non-exhausted team, the Foxes lost a little hope. Neil played with Kevin in the second quarter, but he was too exhausted to do much good. Entering half-time with 6-3 didn't feel like much of a failure, but it felt like even less of a success.

After 45 minutes of running, being checked and trying to break a defense that seemed to know Neil's moves even better than he did, himself, he collapsed onto a chair in Wymack's office and honestly couldn't listen to the discussion about what they could improve. He was gonna die.

"Look at Neil! Just because you don't want to face Riko, you make them play full halves and a quarter!"

Neil looked up at the mention of his name and saw Matt almost yelling at Kevin. He had his arms crossed and looked at Neil for a second, and Kevin's shoulders sank.

After emptying half his water bottle, Neil sat a little straighter and shook his head. "It's fine. I wouldn't want you to play against him," Neil argued, and Kevin nodded. The thing was that Neil knew exactly that Kevin would, if Neil couldn't. If Neil said he couldn't bear it. They might never talk about it, but Neil knew Kevin was working on being the brother Neil would have needed. He wouldn't ever want Kevin to get out of his own comfort zone for him.

"Didn't we all play full games in high school? This isn't too different, really," Seth chimed in, actually taking Neil's side.

"Yeah, but those were two halves of twenty five minutes, not forty five," Dan argued, and Seth shrugged.

"And we're only playing three quarters, not a whole game. Now shut up and mind your own business instead of telling the strikers how to play," Seth said with a finality in his voice that made Neil uncomfortable. He didn't want the others to feel bad about attempting to help!

The second half was worse, in away. Neil couldn't play for the first half of it, which was frustrating but necessary. He yelled his lungs out while cheering on his teammates, and when Riko was on court again and Kevin swapped with Neil, there wasn't much they could do. It was 10-5 and they had twenty minutes left. Seth had played for the entire half and Neil was still exhausted from the first one.

It was almost okay when they only lost 13-9. Almost. Everyone felt like shit and they barely knew what to do with themselves. It was the second loss for Neil, but all too familiar to the rest of the team. They were strangely reminded of the last seasons, and the fact that these had been the Ravens didn't do too much to make them feel better.
Wymack didn't say anything about the game, just that they'd deserved to get Monday off training and that he'd feel personally attacked if they weren't all hung over tomorrow from celebrating their performance. It was almost a praise, but none of them felt like they deserved it.

Renee went over to the Monsters when they were already approaching Andrew's car and smiled brightly when she talked. "The Vixens are planning a party. Just them and us again, I think they wanna cheer us up. All of you are invited. You'd save me a lot of money if you came, I bet way too much on your appearance," she said and Nicky chuckled.

Andrew looked at his group, seeming to wait for their feedback on this, when he knew that no one would go if he decided not to. Neil smiled and shrugged. Kevin seemed dead inside and wouldn't care about where to get drunk, Nicky nodded enthusiastically and Aaron pretended it didn't matter to him, while everyone knew he was looking forward to seeing his Vixen.

"We're splitting the win," Andrew told Renee, and her smile got even brighter. How was she even human?

She went back over to the Upperclassmen and the Monsters drove back. Neil felt every muscle in his legs and arms and honestly wanted to sleep. He never especially liked parties.

This one was almost okay, though. The twelve girls and ten Foxes were not too big of a group and even less when Aaron left the room after half an hour, followed by a blonde Vixen about ten minutes later. Andrew looked after her and his jaw tensed.

"What's your problem with them?" Neil asked after a few moments. They were sitting on a sofa in one of the rooms that were meant for studying, surrounded by a few Vixens that were currently talking to Nicky about how great eyeliner would look on him.

"The problem is that she doesn't understand it's nothing," Andrew said lowly. Neil frowned and bit his lip. Was that his problem with Neil as well? That Neil didn't think what they had was insignificant enough to be meaningless?

"Why would it be bad if it was something?" Neil asked, and Andrew shot him a death stare.

"I told you we have a deal," he answered, and Neil bit his lip, dropping the subject. Andrew didn't have to talk about it further if he didn't want to.

Neil looked around and smiled when he saw Seth and Allison next to each other, holding hands just a little. Neil liked to see her happy again, finally.

Matt was apparently playing drinking games with Kevin, which was weird in itself, and Renee was everywhere, talking to pretty much every person from time to time, while Dan chatted with some Vixens she seemed to know from earlier.

It was too peaceful, and Neil braced himself for the inevitable catastrophe.

Chapter End Notes

I HAVE A NEW FIC PLEASE CHECK IT OUT
Crossing Lines, centered around Aaron and Katelyn, started in their Freshman year ❤

I hope you liked it!! I wrote half of it today, so… I'm hoping it's okay?
Special thanks to Serris and Avap23 for making me feel good about Allison❤
To Gavroche for at least attempting to leave a ton of kudos xD
GayW1zardsAndF0xes because I love you and you've been here so long and I always look forward to your comments and you make me happy❤❤
And very special thanks to Booksbreakhearts for keeping up with stupid spams AND sneaks of weird scenes haha❤  You're great

AND YOU THOUGHT I FORGOT BUT I DIDN'T BUT IN GERMANY WE SAY "THE BEST ALWAYS COMES LAST" SO HERE WE HAVE A HUGE CAPITAL-LETTER THANK YOU TO ASFAHAN!!! I love you with all my heard and couldn't be more grateful that you're taking care of our children with me❤
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Stuff and the Banquet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weekend wasn’t as bad as they had expected. Sure, the press made fun of them, but what else was new? People talked about how crappy their performance was and how right the Ravens had been to kick Kevin and Neil out. The press quoted the official statement from the beginning of the season, about how Neil was unreliable and not disciplined enough to be a Raven.

The other ten percent of the press talked about how great the Foxes did, playing against one of the Big Three. How good their chances of making it far were, this season.

The first semester came to an end slowly, and the Foxes really needed the other three games for their egos. There was one home game against the Cowboys, and two away games against the Dragons and the Hurricanes and honestly, these three wins were exactly what they needed. Andrew was shutting the goal like a professional goalkeeper and Seth, Kevin and Neil were working as more of a union. Monsters and Upperclassmen collaborated up to the point where Aaron participated in the hug after games and Matt patted Nicky's shoulder.

It was a miracle, but Neil couldn't help thinking that he was too happy. There had never been this much positivity in Neil's life and he refused to believe that this came without a price.

Or maybe, just maybe, Neil had finally deserved happiness.

It sure felt like it, when he spent hours on the roof with Andrew. When Andrew talked to him and they had actual conversations. When rain couldn't do anything to either of them, because kisses spent warmth and that was enough.

Except, maybe it wasn't. Maybe the small amount of sleep and four hours of training a day and his choice of food in addition to constantly getting soaked in rain on the roof weren't too good on Andrew. Maybe the extra layer of black shirts he wore were the first sign that they should go inside.

And Neil saw the way Andrew's skin looked several shades lighter. Or the way the bags under his eyes stuck out darker. He just figured Andrew had it under control. That didn't mean he just ignored it.

They were sitting on the roof, and the sun was shining, which didn't do a lot good in the middle of December. Neil looked into Andrew’s eyes and couldn't help smiling because of the way his pale hair made it look like Andrew was glowing. In a way, that was true. He was radiating warmth and Neil felt home. Even more when Andrew kissed him, even more when he was able to intertwine their fingers and put one hand onto his shoulder.

They were learning to work this out, to make things work, and every kiss felt like Andrew was giving Neil a tiny bit more of himself.
But when the wind blew softly, Andrew shivered and sat up, wrapping himself in his coat more tightly, and Neil saw how red the tip of his nose was.

"Are you okay? You seem to be coming down with something," Neil muttered, and Andrew shook his head, whispering "Bullshit."

The problem was that neither of them was willing to put too much thought into it. Neil was foolish enough to think Andrew would tell him if he felt bad and Andrew's will to stay alive too small to care.

That was, until Abby was at the Monsters' one afternoon, because Nicky had managed to fall down the stairs while texting Erik and his foot didn't look too good. She looked at Andrew once Nicky was taken care of, and raised an eyebrow.

"You're sick," she said, matter of factly, and Andrew crossed his arms.

"I'm sure there are more polite ways to say that," he answered, but Abby sighed and pointed to his bed.

"Sit down, Andrew. I'm taking a look at that," she said, and to Neil's surprise, Andrew did as she said. Aaron had left when he heard Abby was gonna come over, and Kevin had joined him somewhere.

Neil sat down next to Nicky and looked over as Abby took stuff from her purse, checking Andrew's throat, temperature and blood pressure before listening to the sounds his lungs made while breathing.

She shook her head in the end and looked at him. "You're wearing a turtleneck and about five layers of clothing, Andrew. You're freezing and ill and you know my only job is to make sure all of you are healthy," she said, sounding like Neil's mother whenever he was being stupid, but not quite enough to deserve physical punishment.

"And?" Andrew asked, crossing his arms again and looking at her challengingly.

"And we're gonna take care of that, Andrew," she said, smiling softly at him. Andrew raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"You won't train for the rest of this term, and I'm getting you medicine. You'll be better in no time at all," she said, and packed up her stuff.

Neil saw Andrew tense even across the room, and wanted to comfort him in some way. "I'm not taking anything," he said, and Abby stopped packing to look at him. She frowned at Andrew for a long moment before nodding a little.

"I get what this sounds like, Andrew, I really do, but you'll get better with them. Really quickly. The pills are not addictive, they're just… they'll make you feel better," she said softly, and Neil felt bad. He understood Andrew too well. When he'd spent years of his life forced to take medicine he didn't need, Neil was sure this wouldn't work.

"No," he said, and Abby let out a frustrated sigh. She looked at Neil and Nicky, but they wouldn't be too helpful, either. Neil couldn't take her side when he could tell how Andrew felt.

Abby checked her phone and shook her head softly. "This is the last week of classes before Christmas break, right? You won't attend class like this, and I'm making sure you're okay," she said, and Andrew frowned at her, implying the question clearly enough for her to get it. "You're staying with me. If you won't take medicine, I'm making sure you're warm and get soup instead of ice cream.
and nutella-toasts," she added, and Andrew looked up at her for a long moment.

"You make me choose between drugs and your place?" he asked, and Abby nodded.

"You can decide. But I won't be there 24/7, so you'll have to spend a few afternoons alone," she prepared, and Andrew shrugged. When the decision was anything at all or pills, he would always take the other thing.

Andrew scoffed and shook his head, but stood up and started packing a rucksack. Neil couldn't believe that he collaborated with Abby so willingly, when everyone else had to fight for even a single word from him.

Aaron got back with Kevin and a few bags, and looked at the scene of Andrew leaving the room with clothes and Abby.

"Where are you taking him?" he asked and sounded alarmed. Neil had never seen Aaron this worried about anything at all.

"Andrew is staying with me until he's better," she said, and Kevin frowned at Andrew.

Neil wondered how they hadn't realised how ill the twin looked when they could easily compare his appearance to Aaron's anytime.

Nicky drove the Monsters to training, now that Andrew couldn't, and it was different. Music played loudly and Nicky talked non-stop, which Neil really liked. Training without Andrew felt wrong, though, and Neil realised that Abby's place was only a ten-minute-run from the stadium.

Abby usually stayed for quite a while after training, and Andrew didn't seem pleased to see Neil when he opened the door, but Neil didn't care. It had felt bad and Neil wouldn't accept any negativity he didn't need in his live.

"Hey," he said, and Andrew rolled his eyes. Neil followed him inside and looked around. He hadn't been to Abby's place in months, and he hadn't seen the room Andrew used. It was quite small but nicer than student dorms, so no one could really complain.

"How are you feeling?" Neil asked, when Andrew got back into bed with the blanked wrapped around his shoulders. He sat down on the chair next to Andrew and tried to read the boy. He didn't look better.

"Like crap. Why are you here?" Andrew asked, and leaned against the wall.

"Training without you is weird. Are you gonna be at the banquet?" Neil liked the single-sentence answers better than the turns they used to take. This was more direct and less forceful.

"She won't let me. You'll take care of Kevin," Andrew said, and Neil nodded. Even the thought of facing Riko without Andrew there felt weird. He couldn't imagine attending the winter banquet without Andrew by his side.

"I will," Neil promised again, and Andrew turned on the TV in his room after a while.

The next afternoon was more productive, because Neil started writing a Spanish essay while Andrew read a book. On Wednesday, he did Math exercises and on Thursday, Abby understood that he'd be there every day and cooked for him as well.

When Neil got home on Thursday afternoon, Renee caught him in the hallway on her way outside,
"Hey, I was gonna talk to you today. Would you mind joining me for a walk to the store?" she asked, and Neil frowned a little but shrugged.

Unsurprisingly, Renee initiated the conversation.

"How's Andrew?" she asked, and they went outside together.

"Worse than when he left, but he'll live," Neil said, and Renee nodded.

"I usually go to these banquets with him, but he won't be there this time and Matt said you don't have a date yet," she went on. "I thought perhaps we could go together. You don't have to say yes, but I figured it'd be less stressful."

Neil looked at her when she said that and shrugged. Him and Renee didn't talk too much, so his opinion of her was neither good nor bad, and he hadn't even thought about a date for that banquet yet.

"Sure. We can go there together," he said, and Renee smiled.

"Oh, a warning before you get to your room, Allison went through your stuff to see if you had appropriate clothes, so it'll be a bit messy. And she got you a suit," she explained, and Neil frowned deeply. There was nothing he hid in his wardrobe, except for a few knives she must have stumbled across. Still, he could have had private stuff in there. This was wrong.

"I told her it wasn't okay, but there are things you just won't get a person to leave behind, and she doesn't know borders when it comes to clothes," Renee added, and Neil tried understanding her. He didn't succeed, but decided to go and talk to Al soon.

Renee and him went shopping for some groceries and headed back, and for once Neil didn't find the silence uncomfortable.

They went into their rooms and Neil was surprised to see Kevin and Nicky here, together with the Upperclassmen.

"Where's Aaron?" he asked out of curiosity, and Nicky smiled.

"On a date with that cheerleader," he explained. Apparently, they weren't as much of a secret as Neil had expected.

"Neil?" Allison started, getting up from the armchair, and walking towards the bedroom already. He sighed, realising that this would be about the suit.

"Renee told me you went trough my stuff," he said, closing the bedroom door behind them, and Allison looked at him as if she expected more to come. As if this wasn't entirely clear and enough of a problem.

She got the hint and shrugged. "I did. So? Don't worry, there was an abundance of oddly disturbing knives, I didn't find any porn magazines or love letters," she said, and Neil raised an eyebrow.

"I don't want you to do that again," he said, keeping his voice calm. He didn't want to argue, but he had a point.

"Neil, those are just clothes, what's your problem? I bought a suit for you!" she protested, and he
took a deep breath. Allison wasn’t trying to be rude, she wanted to be a friend.

"My problem is that I never had anything to myself at the Nest and really appreciated this bit of privacy," he said. It wasn't entirely true. Sure, he didn't have anything to hide, and he hadn't had anything to hide at the Nest, but still. Riko had crossed his borders as if they were non-existent and Allison invaded his privacy by going through his things without his permission.

She looked at him for a long moment before sighing and shrugging. Neil knew this was as close to Sorry as Allison usually got, and it wasn't important enough to him to demand more.

Allison handed him a bag that was laying on Neil's bed and tilted her head towards the bathroom.

"I want to see how perfect I was at guessing your measurements," she said with a laugh, and Neil sighed.

"You had that thing custom-tailored? When did you check my closet?" he asked and was honestly astonished.

"Monday. They took extra money for the quick production but my dad's secretary still gives money to me whenever I call her, so this is nothing to thank me for, Neil," she said, and nudged him softly, before pointing at the bathroom door again.

Neil sighed and locked himself in there, before taking a look at the suit. The pants and jacket were the same shade of bluish-grey, just light enough to not be mistaken for black. He was glad about that, considering how the Ravens never attended any official occasion in clothes that weren't jet black.

He even smiled when he saw the shirt and tie in a bright orange. Neil was almost glad she bought this for him. Allison made him feel like a Fox.

Neil changed into the clothes and was relieved to see that the shirt's fabric was thick enough to conceal his scars all the way. The jacket and trousers fitted as perfectly as was physically possible, and Neil was surprised to find himself actually comfortable in the clothes.

"How long are you gonna take, Neil?" Allison called, and he sighed. He didn't want to have her eyes on him, but it was probably rude to not let her see the thing she'd payed for.

He left the room slowly and Allison's smile lit up when she examined him closely, taking the tie and helping him into it.

"You look great! I see what Nicky means when he says he'd… whatever," she interrupted herself and took his appearance in again. "You look like a Fox, Neil! Everyone will see!"

He was glad she didn't make him show the thing to the others, even though Nicky seemed genuinely upset about it.

The evening went on, and Renee came over as soon as she finished putting the groceries away. Aaron joined them after an hour or something, and if anyone saw the small smile that didn't seem able to leave his face, at least nobody commented on it.

Someway, these became Neil's days. Practice, classes, more practice, afternoons with Andrew and evenings with the Foxes.

The banquet would be fine, too. All teams from their districts would be there, and the Foxes would stick together. Matt had told Neil that he wouldn't leave his side and they'd be there as a team. There was nothing to worry about. Facing Riko was something he'd have to get used to.
Neil went to Abby's before they'd leave for Beckenridge. He knocked and she let him in, smiling brightly. She didn't even comment on his presence in her house anymore, only accepted that he'd spend Andrew company as long as he could.

He went to Andrew's room and knocked softly before coming in. Andrew was reading on his bed, with a blanket around his shoulders and a cup of tea in his hand.

"Shouldn't you be on the bus by now?" he asked, and Neil sat down on the chair next to his bed.

"We're leaving in an hour," he said, and Andrew glared at him.

Neil knew he wouldn't get too much of a conversation today. Not when Andrew was annoyed by not being allowed to care for Kevin. Not when Neil himself was a little on edge because of the event.

"You look worse," Neil remarked, and Andrew sighed in annoyance before he closed his book and looked at Neil, apparently realising that he wouldn't get out of this interaction.

"That's what happens when you don't take the medication you're supposed to take," Andrew remarked, and Neil bit his lip. He hated seeing Andrew like this. He'd lost weight and his face was almost ghostly white. Andrew looked tired and Neil knew that he must be cold. It almost hurt him.

"I'm assuming that you won't change your mind about that?" Neil said, but it sounded like a question. He wanted Andrew to get better but he knew what this meant to him.

"No," he answered, voice raspy from the sore throat he had.

Neil nodded and leaned back in the chair, pulling something out of his coat pocket and putting it on the bed next to Andrew.

"You said Abby took your cigarettes, but she'll be gone with us. We're back by three am earliest, and I thought you might want these," Neil explained, and Andrew looked at the pack for a short moment before taking it and hiding it in the pocket of his sweatpants.

"Make sure Kevin doesn't choke on his vomit when he gets drunk tonight," Andrew said instead of 'Thank you', and Neil was okay with that.

"Make sure you won't starve or freeze to death when Abby isn't here," Neil answered, and Andrew scoffed.

"Don't preoccupy your Exy mind with that," Andrew mumbled, and leaned his head against the wall behind his bed, closing his eyes. Neil realised that Andrew didn't even take painkillers to dull his headache and felt even worse for him.

He sighed softly and checked his watch again. Neil still had to shower and get dressed, and Allison wanted to do something to his hair, so he wouldn't get to stay here for much longer.

"I should go," he said lowly, not really wanting to. Neil almost felt bad about coming. He had wanted to check on Andrew but he hated leaving him behind.

"Then go," Andrew said, looking at him again. Neil sighed softly and bit his lip before hiding his hands in his pockets, careful not to do anything stupid, when he really wanted to reach out. Comfort Andrew in any way at all.

"See you later," Neil mumbled, and Andrew shrugged. He looked back and felt bad for not being able to help. He wanted to make sure Andrew was feeling okay, but he knew that he couldn't exactly
do that. It made Neil feel a little colder inside.

Neil made a mental note to come and visit Andrew as soon as they got back. He knew Andrew wouldn't admit it, but the boy worried about Kevin and Neil would try to make sure Andrew was fine.

He got back, changed, and tried not to feel anything. This was a dinner, nothing else. The Ravens would be there, as well as every other team. Nothing to worry about.

The drive to Beckenridge wasn't too long, with empty streets and his teammates to keep him company. Six and a half hours should feel like an eternity, but they didn't. Kevin and Nicky had been supposed to bring dates, but Kevin had a girlfriend that lived too far away and Nicky refused to take anyone but Erik. He managed to be mad at Wymack when he said he couldn't pay for him to come.

Neil saw Katelyn and Aaron properly together for the first time. The girl had big, blonde curls and looked like a more chill version of Allison. Katelyn didn't use her looks for anything. She barely looked at anyone but Aaron, though she seemed to like talking to the girls. Allison, on the other hand, was beautiful and she knew it. Knew what she was capable of.

The Foxes sat in a big group in the front of the bus. Without Andrew there to make Neil decide, he let himself drown in the atmosphere.

Wymack pulled into the parking lot and left the bus first, with Abby by his side. He looked at every Fox for a long moment before declaring they'd be allowed to go inside like that. Renee wore an orange dress, matching Neil's vest and tie. They really looked like a cute couple, in a way. At least that was what Matt said with a laugh, before ruffling Neil's hair for a second, which resulted in a choked scream by Allison. She made sure Neil's hair looked good again, and smiled when she was okay with the result.

It felt weird, to walk over the parking lot as a group. Weird, because this wasn't a very Foxish event. Because they didn't feel like they should be here.

A security guard led them inside and showed them their seats. Neil looked at the card showing who was sitting across from them when Kevin pressed a hand to his mouth and whispered "This can't be happening."

Neil closed his eyes for a second, cursing the person responsible for seating them across the Ravens, when Nicky started laughing.

"Kevin is having a fanboy attack!"

Neil's shoulders lost their tension and he was glad when he saw the Trojans arrive. The huge room was almost full already, and he saw Jeremy Knox smile when he saw the Foxes standing by their table already.

Almost every other team was seated already, but the Ravens weren't there yet. Neil was glad about that, considering that he really wanted to take the moment in. He hadn't seen Jean since Kathy's show, but seeing him talking to one of his teammates now felt great. As if it had been only yesterday.

Jean looked better than he had, before. He seemed to be even taller, and Neil realised that this must be something about his posture. Jean was finally allowed to be himself.

Kevin started a conversation with Dan and Jeremy, and the Trojans' co-captain joined it. The teams sat down, but Neil wasn't willing to pretend this didn't mean anything to him. The press was there,
occasionally taking pictures or videos, but mostly, they stood in corners and chatted.

Jean wasn't sitting yet, either. He looked up from the conversation and scanned the Foxes, eyes lingering on Kevin for a second before going on and seeing Neil a split second later. He smiled. And when he made his way around the table, so did Neil.

He loved how Jean hugged him. Neil had grown up in the same room, they had been each other's everything.

"It's good to see you again," Jean said, and Neil nodded, slowly letting go. They sat down, with Neil between Kevin and Renee and Jean right across from him.

The Trojans were angels. A bunch of Hufflepuffs, almost too nice to even exist in a sport like Exy. They were great company and Neil understood why Jean chose to stay with them. They were the literal personification of happiness.

Kevin tensed next to him, when the Ravens arrived, all black, looking like a cult.

"See, Neil? I'm better at picking stuff for you than these people would have been! You'd be so pale in black, seriously. Orange suits you better," Allison said, and it broke the tension a little.

The banquet was alright, probably. They had food, music was played, Kevin got a little drunk, nothing really happened.

The announcement that the Foxes were second ranked in their district came as a tiny bit of a surprise, but wasn't really news. Their season was going amazing.

After the official stuff was over, the music became louder and suddenly, the girls were gone, dancing and having a great time. Nicky, Aaron and Kateyn went as well, but Neil remained there, because Kevin chose to be more interested in free alcohol than music and Neil had made a promise to Andrew.

Matt and Seth went looking for their girlfriends, making sure everything was okay, when Neil saw Jean tense across the table.

"What's up?" Neil asked cautiously slow, but he felt a hand on his shoulder a second later. Riko had approached them from behind, standing between Kevin's and Neil's chair now.

Neil looked at Kevin and could see his knuckles sticking out white from his tight grip on the glass.

"You can decide whether you want to talk to me alone or if you want Kevin and Jean with you," Riko said, just low enough for no one but them to understand. Neil sighed very softly and got up. He'd made a promise to Andrew.

"Stay here, yeah? I'll be back," he said, and neither of them seemed ready to protest. It felt like more of a betrayal than Neil would ever admit.

Him and Riko turned around, walking through the crowd until Allison stopped them with a frown.

"First of all, leave Neil alone. Second of all, have you seen Seth? Matt told me he came looking for me but we can't seem to find him," she said, looking stressed. Neil looked around for a second before shrugging.

"I'll tell him you're looking for him," he said, and she nodded, leaving them alone again. Riko leaned against the wall in a corner, while Neil stood in front of him with his arms crossed.
"I'll make this quick. You're transferring back to EAU," Riko started, and Neil scoffed. Really?

"Are you done? Because you know the answer and you know you can't threaten me with anything," Neil said, turning to leave. Riko had tried manipulating Neil by threatening his father, until he'd realised that family was nothing but a word to him.

"That's what I thought for the longest time. You're lying and I don't even know if you realise it," Riko answered, and Neil turned back. He cursed himself for giving in as easily, but he was curious.

"What am I lying about?" he asked. Sure, he was lying about almost everything, but he really wanted to know what Riko meant in particular.

"About my inability to threaten you. I can threaten your Foxes, Nathaniel. You should know what I'm capable of," Riko said very lowly, and Neil tensed, looking around for a second, but realising that no camera was close enough to pick up on their conversation.

"They don't have anything to do with this. Leave them out of whatever you're planning," he said, but felt cold, suddenly. Cold, because he knew Riko would do that.

"Say yes and I might," he answered, and the boys looked into each other's eyes, until Riko's face turned into a twisted smile. "Okay, you got me. That was a lie. Gordon is the first piece of collateral damage I demand. You can decide if you want anyone to follow him. Tell the blonde bitch to check the bathrooms," Riko said, and Neil turned around, leaving quickly.

Everything turned to ice. He was dying. Drowning. This wasn't happening. There hadn't been any chance to get to Seth. He'd been with Matt, looking for his girlfriend.

Neil ran. Collided with Allison. He felt panic, but told himself to stay calm. They had just talked. Riko couldn't have done anything yet, right?

"Have you checked the toilets?" Neil asked, and Allison frowned.

"Are you okay, Neil? You're pale," she mumbled, but took his hand and went to the bathroom. Matt saw them from halfway across the room and joined them.

It happened too fast. Allison didn't have issues with these things, so she entered the bathroom after knocking, and asked in front of each stall. Neil felt sick.

"Hey, what's wrong? What did Riko say?" Matt asked, and put an arm around Neil's shoulder, practically holding him up. Neil was glad Matt made sure he wouldn't collapse, even if it was only for a few moments.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and Matt frowned. That's when they heard the choked "Oh my God" from inside.

He lost track of the events. Allison screamed. An ambulance pulled up. The Foxes were pushed onto the bus. Allison joined Seth to the hospital. The doctors were doing what they could, and the nurses on the ambulance said they would do everything in their power to make sure he'd be okay.

The banquet ended in a matter of minutes. Neil didn't get to say goodbye to Jean. He was shivering when they were on the bus.

Wymack kept talking, about how they were bringing Seth to the closest hospital before making sure he'd be back at Palmetto as soon as possible.
Renee kept saying that they couldn't leave Allison there alone. That the girl needed someone to hold her. That her team should be there for her. Kevin was too drunk to do anything but sleep in the last bunk. Nicky sat next to Neil, texting Erik for some reason.

And Neil looked at his phone. He was surprised how little convincing it took.

Surprised that "Boyd is the next one" was enough to convince him. Though what happened to Seth had actually been enough to make him go. He wouldn't endanger them. Never again.

"I'll say goodbye," he responded to Riko's text, and the answer contained nothing but his flight details tomorrow afternoon. He turned his phone off.

*Overdose.*

The word echoed in his mind. Seth had been putting Allison first for weeks. Making sure she could deal with her relapse. Making sure she was okay. Seth wouldn't have taken drugs, yet now he was at the hospital fighting to survive. He went beyond himself, and even if Neil hadn't been told that Riko was responsible, he'd have known.

Under any other circumstances, Neil wouldn't have taken the chance. He'd have left with the Ravens without hesitation.

But he'd promised Andrew to be back, and he figured he'd at least deserve a goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

*UPDATE*
SETH IS NOT DEAD, HE IS UNCONSCIOUS AND HE IS AT THE HOSPITAL
*UPDATE END*

So…

I don't know what to say. Christmas is ahead, guys. But I guess you know that already

Thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! Seriously, I can name every single person who ever commented (which probably means that this isn't as big of a story as it feels?) and you make me smile. You make the sun shine brighter. You guys even make chocolate taste a little better

Sorry to avap23 and Serris for Allison and Seth… I guess we saw that coming, though GayF0xesAndW1zards TOTALLY saw this coming, though, and I couldn't believe it haha

Sorry to Booksbreakhearts for accidentally spoilering something, hope you enjoyed it anyways ❤

And AsfaHan, I hope you're feeling better! Andrew is ill so you can't really do that! He needs you to get better! And thanks for not abandoning me for Merlin. Thanks for being the best step-mom R2F could wish for! You're amazing.
#1, Dan Wilds, Dealer

Chapter Summary

Bye bye

Chapter Notes

You might wanna listen to 5 seconds of Summer's "Invisible" on repeat for this chapter

Or any other sad song

That's what I did while writing

---

Neil had always counted to ten in every language he knew when he was anxious. He did it on the way home, staring out of the window and fiddling with his fingers. English, German, French, Spanish. When there were no numbers left, he counted Foxes. 1. Dan, 2. Kevin, 3. Andrew… he stopped at 9. Renee. Couldn't bring himself to lie. Because 10. Neil would have been nothing but that. A lie.

Matt looked pale when they arrived at the Fox Tower and left the bus. No one said anything, they only looked at each other.

It was Neil who spoke first, turning to Abby.

"Can I drive to your house with you?" he asked lowly, and she nodded.

Matt would probably stay at the girls' room, with Neil and Seth both absent, but Neil couldn't bring himself to feel pity right now. He would say goodbye to all of them and leave.

It felt odd. He hadn't felt this empty during his stay here even once, and the nothingness inside made him feel like he'd left already. But Seth was at the hospital, Allison was probably a wreck, and the Foxes were shaking. He couldn't make them go through this again. Couldn't bear to think they could loose hope. And he would never let this happen to his family willingly.

"I'll see you guys later," he mumbled, and Matt hugged him goodbye tightly. Neil hoped he wouldn't fall apart. Not now and not when Neil left.

Abby and him drove to her house, and he saw her shattering inside. "Is Seth going to make it?" Neil asked very softly, and hugged his legs to his chest on the passenger seat.

She took a deep breath and didn't look at him for even a second, eyes glued to the street. "It depends, Neil. If he didn't want to kill himself, he should be able to get past this. In that case he just..." Abby stopped and inhaled very deeply again. "He might have just taken a little too much. But Seth has a history with overdosing and I'm afraid that... if it came down to it..."
She stopped again and shook her head slightly. "We shouldn't talk of this," she mumbled, and Neil looked out of his window, into the night.

"He didn't try. Him and Allison are too tight for him to be unhappy or do drugs again," Neil argued. He wanted her to know, when he was gone. Wanted Abby to tell Allison the truth. But he couldn't tell it entirely.

"You might be right, but Seth and Allison always break up because he starts again. It always looks perfect before it's over. You didn't live with them for long enough to know that this is almost a part of the regular cycle. But I wouldn't… I really thought he had it under control," she whispered, and Neil nodded. He knew she probably wanted to get these words out just as badly as he did, even if they shouldn't be said.

She pulled into the parking lot in front of her house and they went inside, Abby going straight for the kitchen while Neil went to Andrew's room, knocking softly. Just a quick conversation, that was what he allowed himself before leaving. Nothing deep, simply something so he'd memorise the other boy even more clearly.

"Hey," he said lowly, entering the room after Andrew had allowed him to.

Andrew looked up from the book and crossed his arms. It was weird to see him wrapped in multiple blankets with the lights on and a cup of tea, at three in the morning. "What happened?" he asked, and Neil figured he must be looking like a ghost.

"Kevin is fine, don't worry. It's… Seth. Seth overdosed and Allison is at the hospital with him, and…" Neil's voice trailed off and he sighed, approaching Andrew. "Can I sit on the bed?" Neil asked, and Andrew made space for him. They were sitting next to each other, and Neil swallowed deeply. He couldn't believe he was gonna do this.

"But there's more," Andrew said, unimpressed by the news. Apparently, Seth's overdoses weren't really new to the team.

"My mother asked if I wanted to come over for the holidays," Neil said, voice barely louder than a whisper. He didn't want to lie, but he could not tell the truth.

"So?" Andrew asked, looking disinterested for some reason.

"My plane leaves tomorrow. I was hoping you and I could spend some time together over the holidays, but…" Neil stopped himself. But. But he'd leave.

"Stop that. This is nothing, Neil. Accept it," Andrew said, and Neil nodded. He had accepted it. That he was nothing and that this couldn't mean anything to either of them if he wanted to leave.

"I know. Sorry. Just… it's nice, even though it's meaningless," Neil said, and Andrew shrugged. He was probably glad Neil didn't argue for once in his life.

"Any Riko-incidences?" Andrew asked then, and Neil shrugged. He couldn't.

"Nothing tragic. I don't want to waste time with it," Neil said, and Andrew seemed to disapprove, simply because he wasn't getting all the information.

"You should leave. The virus will kill the both of us, otherwise," Andrew said, and when Neil heard his scratchy voice, he felt bad for keeping him up at night. Andrew needed sleep.

But Neil didn't want to let go. He needed to hold on to something. To this. To Andrew.
"Yes or no?" Neil asked, putting his hand on the bed between them. One last time. Nothing but
Andrew and him and their personal nothingness. Only Andrew.

He looked at Andrew. At his blond hair that was a little greasy. The pale skin. His eyes. The way he
looked tired and ill and Neil just wanted to be there for him. Andrew had always been there. Since
day one, he'd been holding Neil up and making sure he was safe. It was time for Neil to return the
favour. To make sure Andrew was okay.

It was odd. Neil had never wished for anything like this, yet it was the one thing that he had gotten.
Neil had wanted to hold on to this. But the Foxes were in danger and he wasn't ready to risk their
safety. Still, Andrew deserved this. Neil couldn't have lived on without a goodbye.

"Neil, I'm contagious, that's suicide," Andrew answered, and Neil's hand between them dropped.
Ice. He felt his heart freeze. He'd allowed this last kiss to himself, and Andrew chose to keep it from
him. But Neil knew he couldn't make demands. Still, this cut deeper than a knife ever could have.

"Okay," he answered, but his voice was barely audible.

Andrew looks at him and frowned, taking Neil in for a few moments before shaking his head
slightly. "What's wrong, Abram?"

He shattered. Felt his heart break into a thousand pieces. Felt the sharp edges of the bits cut into his
insides. He was never gonna heal. Not when he knew Andrew cared. Neil couldn't believe his last
words to Andrew were a lie because they were supposed to be a truth. Abram was supposed to be a
truth and now here he was, breaking every unspoken promise ever made between them.

Neil got up from the bed and shook his head. "Nothing. I just… Tonight I realised how much
pressure I put on you. Thank you, Andrew. I'm sorry about the inconveniences," he said.

Andrew raised an eyebrow and looked at Neil, who was standing in front of him now. "I promised,
so don't thank me. And you should leave if you don't want to die of the virus," Andrew said harshly,
and Neil nodded, taking a deep breath. He didn't have a choice.

"Goodnight, Andrew," Neil said, turning to the door.

"See you," Andrew answered, and Neil hesitated. His hand on the door handle, he considered
turning back. Telling the truth. But he knew he couldn't.

"Yeah… See you," Neil answered, and his voice gave up. He couldn't look at Andrew. Just left the
room and closed the door behind him. Left Abby's house. He was breathing heavily and glad to be in
the open air. He couldn't get any oxygen to his lungs. He was choking on everything he had been
pretending to be.

That was the worst part.

Sure, he was leaving. But he didn't regret that. He was keeping the Foxes, his family, safe. There
was nothing that could make him regret that.

But his lies came crashing down to him when he choked on every piece of untruth that had ever left
his lips.

Neil Josten was leaving, and that was okay.

What wasn't, was that he was leaving a lie.

~
Dan was laying with her head on Matt's chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. She knew he was over the drugs, but she also knew that this was tough on him. The overdose. Seth's absence in general. But she'd be there to hold him up.

She heard a knock on the door and frowned, before getting up, careful not to disturb Matt, and opened the door. She saw Neil, obviously tired, hair damp from a shower he must have taken just minutes ago.

"Can I sleep here? The room is empty, and…" he started, fiddling with his fingers. Dan smiled a little and pulled him in an embrace. The poor boy looked terrible.

"Of course, Neil. How is Andrew?" she asked, and saw Neil's shoulders tense. Dan sighed and cursed Andrew internally for making Neil sad.

"He's… okay, I guess," Neil mumbled, and Dan nodded, walking back into the girls' room with him. Renee slept in the bed above Dan's and Neil took the one they weren't using, over Allison's.

"What about you? Are you okay, Neil?" she asked in a whisper, and worried when he curled up in the bed.

"I'm fine," he said, and wrapped himself in the blanket. "Goodnight, Dan," he added, and she shook her head a little.

The poor kid had been so happy lately, and now he seemed to be falling apart all over again.

She went to bed again and found comfort in the way Matt wrapped his arms around her.

A few hours later, Dan woke up to Matt pressing a kiss onto her forehead, pulling her tighter against him. She closed her eyes and cuddled closer to him.

"Morning," he whispered, and she smiled when he ran a hand through her hair softly, waking her up very carefully.

The moment of peace was interrupted by a knock on the door. Dan looked up and saw Neil jerking awake across the room. He looked like a scared deer caught in the headlights of a car, ready to run. But after a second, he looked around and caught Dan's eyes. Neil's shoulders relaxed instantly and he leaned his head against the wall behind his bed.

"I'll answer," she mumbled, and got up. Matt did, too, and went to the bathroom while Dan went to get the door.

She frowned when she saw Nicky with a big brown bag, a very annoyed Aaron beside him, followed by a version of Kevin that looked like he hadn't slept the hangover off all the way.

"Good morning! We're having breakfast together," he announced, and pushes past Dan into the room.

She stepped to the side, making sure both of the others could come in, and tried to not look too confused.

"Why's that?" she asked then, and ran a hand over her face.

"Well, Andrew is ill, Seth is unconscious and Allison is barely keeping it together, so we thought the rest of us seven Foxes should use the opportunity to not isolate ourselves but actually be a team for a change," he announced, heading straight for the kitchen and turning on the coffee maker.
Renee left the bedroom with her hair messy but in appropriate clothes, joining Nicky in the kitchen to help him prepare everything. Kevin crashed on an armchair and seemed to doze off when Neil entered the living room and frowned at the Monsters. He didn't comment on Nicky carrying a tray of food, though. Just took a seat at the table and looked around, seeming too tense for the situation.

His two groups of friends didn't collide too often, though, so Dan brushed it off. He would be okay.

She sat down on the sofa with Matt when he finally joined them, and looked at the group of people. Her team. It was too early to be happy about the gathering, but she felt a rush of positivity anyways.

That was until all of them had eaten, and Renee received a text.

"It's Allison. They'll be back in Palmetto this afternoon. The doctors are working on Seth but he's not entirely stable yet," she announced, and the Foxes grew silent.

"But the fact that they allow him to fly on a plane means that they think he's strong enough for that, and that's good, right?" Nicky tried, and received a muttered agreement by all the Foxes.

They grew silent again, until Matt next to Dan tried to change the topic. She knew that Seth was practically eating him up.

"So, what are your plans for the holidays?"

Everyone knew he wasn't actually curious, just wanted to get rid of the tension, but they couldn't consider Seth's condition.

"Glad you're asking! Erik and I wanted to spend the holidays together, but Abby says I can't take Andrew on a long journey at the moment and I'm not going without them, so he'll come right after Christmas and all of you are meeting him," Nicky announced, answering the question for himself, the twins, and Kevin.

"That's nice!" Renee answered, smiling brightly. Dan appreciated the extra-positivity. "I'm staying here. I called Stephanie last night and cancelled the flights. I thought Allison might not wanna spend the holidays at the hospital on her own," she answered then, and Dan bit her lip, looking at Matt.

They had planned a road trip, just the two of them, because his mum was too far away to make it over the holidays, but they wouldn't leave their friends alone.

"So all of us are staying here, then?" Matt asked, actually managing to smile. There were moments when Dan wondered if she loved him too much. If what they had was wrong, because they depended on each other entirely. If perhaps they were a bad influence on each other.

But there were situations like these, when she realised that was crap. That Matt was the perfect boy for her. That his smile had the ability to light up her personal world. That there was no way something that felt so right could ever be wrong.

To everyone's surprise, Neil was the exception.

"I'm staying in England with my mother. I don't quite know when I'll be back," he answered, and Dan saw that he felt bad. The poor kid probably regretted not being able to be there for Seth.

"Oh, really? You didn't tell us! When are you leaving?" Nicky asked right away, and Neil shrugged.

"She only called the day before yesterday," he explained, and crossed his arms, leaning back against the back of his chair almost defensively. "And the flight leaves this afternoon. Sorry I won't be here,"
he said and Matt shook his head.

"Neil, it's fine! Family comes first, buddy," he argued, and somehow, Neil's posture changed. He straightened his shoulders and nodded, looking somewhat determined. "Want me to drop you off at the airport?" he asked then, and Neil considered it for a moment before nodding.

"That would be great if it's okay for you," Neil answered, and Matt nodded, smiling brightly.

It was almost comfortable, when the Foxes spent time together. The Monsters and Upperclassmen felt like a union for once, and Dan thought this might actually mean something. That they might take their chance at a good season and get farther than ever.

When they were done eating, the Monsters stayed, and Dan couldn't help smiling. Even Kevin was starting to warm up as soon as he was more awake and less hung over.

They all looked at Renee when her phone rang and she picked up quickly.

"Hey? Hey! Should I put you on speaker? Okay…," she mumbled and her face lost some colour. "Okay, Allison, we can hear you now. How are you? How is Seth?" she asked, and all of them leaned closer. Even Aaron listened with a frown.

"Hey guys. I'm okay. We're flying over in about an hour. Seth… I don't know. They won't give me too much information because we're neither related nor married, but his heart is beating and apparently, that's good news. I don't know, but it feels like the fact that it's good is terrible, and… whatever," Allison answered. Dan and Matt took each other's hands at the same time and Dan pressed her teeth together tightly. Allison's voice was thin and she sounded devastated when she talked about the lack of information. Dan wanted to hug her, hold her close, help her stay strong.

"So you'll be back at Palmetto in a few hours, right? We can come and bring everything you need. A charger, clothes. We can be there for you," Renee said, and Dan wondered how she could answer like this. She looked up and saw Renee holding on to her cross necklace tightly. Dan admired her for her strength. She couldn't have said a single word herself.

Allison sighed heavily and took a few deep breaths. Dan could practically see her pacing up and down the room or hallway. "That would be amazing, to be honest. Can you bring some food as well? And a book?" Allison asked, and Renee nodded.

"Of course," she assured, and Allison released a relieved breath.

"You're amazing. I'm… I'm texting you when we're starting, yeah? Thank you! All of you, you guys are great," she said, before hanging up. Dan looked up when all they heard was beeping, and she saw Neil staring at the phone, looking as pale as it'd get.

"Neil?" Nicky asked, after clearing his throat. All of them had a lump in their throats, probably.

Neil shook his head a little before getting up. "I'm packing. I'll be back in a second!" he exclaimed, before leaving the room. They looked after him, but didn't quite know what to do.

"Tell her our best wishes," Nicky said, after a while, and Renee looked up. She tried smiling, and Dan admired the way she could be so calm when everything around her seemed to shatter.

"I think she'd appreciate it a lot if you came," she said, and Nicky, Kevin and Aaron exchanged looks. Then Nicky nodded and played with his fingers.

"Yeah… yeah, we're coming," he said, and they went back to normal. As normal as they'd get. The
Monsters helped them cleaning the table, and when Neil got back an hour later, he smelled like smoke and had a red face. Dan assumed he'd been outside, but he had his bag with him and bit his lip, looking at Matt, who smiled.

"Ready?" he asked, and Neil swallowed and nodded.

"Sure… I'll see you!" Neil said, and hugged Kevin first, then Nicky, then Renee.

He closed his arms around Dan and she pulled him in. The poor thing was probably afraid of flying or had issues with leaving them behind.

"Don't worry! We'll update you on Seth," Dan whispered, and Neil nodded.

"You're an amazing captain, Dan. Thanks," he whispered back, and she almost laughed. He was so adorable, sometimes. Dan ran a hand through his hair before nodding.

"Thank you, Neil! Have a good flight," she said, and he let go. Him and Aaron looked at each other for a long moment and Neil stretched out his hand. Aaron actually shook it.

"Goodbye, guys," Neil said again, and then he and Matt left the room.

Dan looked after them and couldn't believe it. Them and the Monsters were here together. They'd visit Allison together. It felt unreal. Unreal because they felt like a real team for the first time ever.

Unreal, because that broken child had managed to bring them together, just like she'd asked him to when he first got here.

Chapter End Notes

So… I'm trying a different format with these Christmas Chapters and I hope you agree???(Pls don't hate me)

Shoutout to Elfo98 for binging through this thing IN ONE DAY
And as always, I LOVE LOVE LOVE to GayW1zardsAndF0xes! To Avap23!!! To Booksbreakhearts!!!!!

Thanks to Saya, as always! I love you! You're amazing and you're the best mum these babies could ever hope for! ❤
Neil couldn't believe he was on the plane. He couldn't believe he'd said 'Goodbye' to Matt. He felt physical pain because he'd left them – all of them – to be a Raven.

Neil had never wanted to be a Fox. As soon as the team existed, the Moriyamas had made sure he'd hate it. *Fuck ups*. Nothing but a bunch of broken children insulting the sport their life consisted of.

But now, when he was looking out of the window and saw the city getting smaller and smaller, Neil realised that being a Fox was the best thing that could have happened to him.

Neil didn't quite know what would happen. He would be back at the Nest and he knew Riko wanted to sign him. He knew he didn't want to be a Raven, but that didn't matter. Not when Riko had threatened Matt's life, or any Foxes' life. Not when Seth was in hospital because of Neil.

He hadn't even been able to talk to Matt on the way to the airport and the guilt was eating him up.

Matt had told him that Seth was gonna be fine and that he shouldn't worry. Neil couldn't believe he hadn't said a single word, even though Matt had been there at all times. Whenever nightmares kept Neil up at night, he'd been there for him. Neil had been breaking and some days, Matt had been the only thing holding him together.

And now Neil didn't have anything but a single *Thanks, Matt. See you* for him.

He wondered who'd take it worst. Neil doubted Kevin would. He'd probably be the only one to understand. Andrew… Neil wasn't entirely sure if this would matter to him. Seth would probably take it worst, with his twisted views of loyalty. If he couldn't stand Neil switching between the Upperclassmen and Monsters, he would hate him if he woke up and found out about Neil's transfer.

Neil swallowed hard and pressed his teeth together. *When*, not *if*. When he woke up, Riko wouldn't have known about Seth's history with these drugs, only that he used to take them. He'd have underestimated the amount he'd need and Seth would wake up and him and Allison would be happy together.

So would all the others be. Neil didn't allow himself to doubt that. Not when he was throwing away his life for their happiness.

The flight was over too soon. He hugged his duffle bag closer to his chest and went to get his luggage, while his knees were turning weaker and weaker.

This felt too mundane to be the ending. He'd expected something enormous. Being kidnapped, being threatened, being taken with a knife pressed to his throat… but no. Here he was, walking into hell on his own. Making the decision to end life as he knew it. It felt way less forceful than he cared to
Neil was doing this because he chose to put someone else first for a change. He wasn't entirely sure if that was a good or a bad thing when he saw people in black suits and followed them into a car, knowing the look of men who were working for the Moriyamas.

He hoped it was good. But Neil had never been the type to hope and because of the way his stomach turned into a stone as they started driving without saying a single word, he found himself hating the taste of hope. It was bitter and cold if you mixed it with something as sour as the knowledge that you'd just left both your home and family behind for good.

Kevin was glad Neil was visiting his family, when he himself didn't have one. Being close to your father didn't mean a lot if he didn't know about you and with Neil gone, looking forward to something like Christmas felt wrong.

But he'd be there with the cousins and Abby and Wymack, and that would be enough. More than enough. He would be happy to be with them.

Still, Andrew was getting sicker and sicker and Kevin just didn't get why he wouldn't take the pills. They weren't the ones he'd taken before, and Kevin didn't understand why anyone would destroy their body so willingly. Why would Andrew choose to be so vulnerable when the solution to the problem was so obvious and simple?

In addition to the obvious health reasons, Andrew was getting behind in training, and that was terrible, now that he finally made an effort from time to time. If only he'd eaten healthy food instead of all the industrial sugars, Kevin was sure Andrew would still be fine.

"Can I see Andrew with you before we're going to the hospital?" Renee asked a while after Matt returned.

Aaron looked mildly annoyed, but Nicky tried smiling.

"Sure! I'm sure he'll be… well, not happy, but he won't… he…” Nicky tried, but stopped himself when he realised he wouldn't get any full sentences out.

"Great!" Renee answered, and Dan looked up.

"So we're meeting at the hospital?" she made sure, and Renee nodded with a bright smile. Kevin didn't get how anyone could be so entirely positive.

Nicky got up and checked his phone for the time. "Okay, we can go see him now, and we'll meet with Allison in an hour, maybe?" he suggested, and everyone seemed to agree.

Kevin and Aaron exchanged looks and both of them sighed softly. Kevin was anxious because Andrew was sick, and while fear was probably not the best feeling to have when your best friend was ill, it was the most prominent one.

Aaron, on the other hand, was frustrated by Andrew's way of dealing with the disease. As a biochemistry-student with plans of becoming a doctor, the fact that Andrew declined medication was not comprehensible. Aaron thought Andrew was throwing his health away, and that was not only frustrating but also infuriating to him.

Kevin felt almost guilty, considering that his emotions were mainly about Andrew's inability to protect him at that moment, but couldn't quite feel bad about it.
They left the Tower and took Andrew's car to Abby's, with Nicky driving and Aaron on the passenger seat. Abby seemed happy to see them, and was practically enthusiastic to see Renee there.

The four of them entered Andrew's room, and the pale boy looked at each of them, eyes seeming almost alive when he let his gaze wander, but the ember faded and he seemed displeased with what he saw and turned back to the book in his lap.

"Hello, Renee," he greeted absently, and the girl managed to smile warmly. She took the chair next to his bed and crossed her arms, leaning back.

"What are you reading?" she asked, and Andrew held up his book for a second, showing the cover to her rather than opening his mouth.

Kevin didn't understand how she could even try to talk to him. She should know that Andrew was better at being silent than at making conversation.

"We're visiting Allison and Seth now," Renee went on, and Andrew looked up at her.

"You're driving the car," he said, and Nicky raised his eyebrows. Aaron wasn't allowed to, Kevin wasn't either, unless it was the middle of the night and he wanted to train, and Nicky only had the right to because Andrew hadn't been able to drive his car on the pills he was on last year.

"Don't you wanna know about Seth?" Renee asked then, voice warm and soft, not acknowledging the privilege he'd granted.

"There's nothing to tell, otherwise you would have done it," he answered, and Renee smiled while shrugging.

"You're right. They flew him back here just a second ago. We're visiting him now, I'll update you on him!" she promised, though Andrew didn't seem to be interested at all.

"We?" Andrew asked, and Renee smiled even more brightly at his participation. Nicky and Aaron just looked at the scene and Kevin saw that they were as unsure as him whether to leave the two of them alone or not.

"The remaining Foxes, except for Neil. He just left. Andrew? You look terrible," Renee added after a short pause, and Andrew looked up from his book, actually closing it this time. He didn't say anything, and Kevin always turned cold when he was looked at that way. "Are you feeling any better?" she asked, after a while.

Andrew leaned against the wall behind his bed and swallowed, then looked at the three other Monsters by the door. Kevin felt uneasy, suddenly, as if he was not wanted in the room, and the look he exchanged with Nicky suggested that he felt the same way.

Aaron, however, didn't agree. "That's assuming he has feelings in the first place," he said, before opening the door and leaving. Nicky and Kevin followed and closed the door behind them, leaving Renee and Andrew to themselves for the twenty five minutes it took for her to follow them.

"You might not wanna say goodbye. He's trying to sleep," she said, voice still a little low from the way she must have whispered with him inside.

No one seemed to have a problem with that, so they said goodbye to Abby and left for the car. Renee took the driver's seat, as Andrew had demanded, and Nicky sat down next to her. She started the car and drove to the hospital so slowly, Kevin thought something was wrong with the car until he realised that she was only driving properly, other than Nicky and Andrew, to whom things such as
speed-limits were nothing but a number.

Nicky filled the silence, as always.

"Erik just texted! He'll be here next week, the flight arrives on Saturday," he exclaimed, and Renee smiled brightly.

"Where are you staying with him? Columbia?" she asked, and Nicky shrugged.

"Only if Andrew is better by then. We won't leave him here, so we might actually have to stay at the Tower," he answered, and Renee laughed.

Kevin thought it was odd, how well Nicky got along with the Upperclassmen. He could only talk to Dan and sometimes Matt, because their passion for the sport was something he could relate to.

Renee pulled into the parking lot in front of the hospital and they got out of the car, walking towards the hospital slowly, while she checked her phone again.

"They're inside already. Second floor," she explained, and they went inside. Kevin always thought it was odd that you could just walk in like that. It seemed dangerous and naïve to just let anyone into a place so many weak and defenceless people stayed at.

The four of them took the elevator, even though Kevin pointed out that all of them should take the stairs, since the holidays would leave them without training or practice for two weeks. Nobody cared.

Kevin missed Neil already, knowing that he would have taken the stairs with him. He missed a lot more about him, of course. Andrew protected him from Riko with the apathy he always showed. Neil was different. He did everything because he cared from his heart. That didn't mean Kevin didn't appreciate Andrew's protection. It just meant that they had different ways for expressing that they were by his side.

They saw Allison and Dan as soon as the elevator's doors opened, and Kevin hadn't ever seen either of them look so small.

"It's good to see you," Renee greeted her, and they hugged for longer than Kevin thought was necessary.

Nicky, Aaron and Kevin looked at each other when the girls let go, and Nicky was the only one to find words.

"We're sorry, Allison. I'm sure he's gonna be alright! I mean, this isn't the first time he's fighting this off. No need to worry," he said, and Kevin thought this was the most stupid thing ever. Apparently Allison found comfort in it anyways. All of them knew that she was about as far from okay as it got, and while Kevin thought it was incredibly strong of her to pretend to smile, anyways, Allison looked even more exhausted and tired like this.

"Thank you," she mumbled, and looked uneasy. "So… Neil is staying with Andrew, I guess," she went on, probably wanting to change the topic before they'd become silent.

"He's in England with his mother over the holidays. He wished Seth all the best," Kevin answered, and Allison swallowed thickly before nodding. "Where is he, actually?" Kevin asked then, and Allison took a deep breath.

"Down the hallway. Matt is in the room at the moment, so no one else is allowed in for now," she
explained lowly, and played with her fingers. Dan ran a hand over Allison's shoulder and Kevin sighed. She was usually so perfect. Allison was beautiful and strong and tall and wore that mask of perfection like an omnipresent layer over her face so confidently, it made you wonder if perhaps it was no mask to begin with. Now she looked small and had lost some of the light she usually radiated. It was almost painful to look at.

Matt exited a room then, and took a few steps towards them. He looked almost as bad as Allison had, and Kevin couldn't believe that someone like Matt could look this small.

"What did the doctors say? When will he wake up?" Matt asked, and the Monsters exchanged looks at that. 'When', as if it was a matter of time, not one out of two possible outcomes.

Allison ran her hand through her hair and took a deep breath. "The doctors keep telling me that they can't talk about these things, and that they're trying to contact his brothers or mom, but I know they won't pick up. One assistant said that the fact that his heart is beating on it's own is good, and that they're hoping he'll wake up this week. But he also said that his chances of making it were reducing drastically and that the probability of him waking up after seven days or more were pretty close to zero," she answered, voice thin, looking as if the words were exhausting and as if she might break at any given moment.

Kevin was glad Renee took her hand because he thought Allison deserved comfort and he wouldn't have been sure how to provide it.

"Allison? Seth is too stubborn to let this win, really. He wouldn't want to die in hospital, don't worry! He'll make sure he won't," Nicky said, and while the laughter that followed was faked, it was still important.

"You're right. And I promised to make pancakes for him on Christmas, so he has four days. He wouldn't just let go of pancakes like that," she answered, and that tiny smile Allison showed was enough to give all of them hope.

Kevin didn't particularly like hope. How could he, when Riko had crushed every dream and wish he'd ever dared to have? But there were some situations he had allowed himself to hope.

When Riko had broken his hand, Kevin had hoped he'd be able to play. When he left the Ravens, Kevin had hoped he'd find a place with the Foxes. He had hoped to find a piece of himself in the man that was his father but wasn't. When he was safe, he'd hoped Jean and Neil would follow into safety.

And now, he hoped for Seth to get better. Not because he liked Seth and definitely not because he liked hoping. But this team meant something to him and he realised that he would always hope for their happiness.

Not only because they played Exy and were around him all the time, but because these people had grown to be a union in the past year, and Kevin hoped nothing would ever disrupt them.
god I can't believe it!

And GayW1zardsAndF0xes because I just love you as a person! And that paragraph was amazing, I couldn't have been happier!

And hiraethia for the compliment, that was nice!!

Booksbreakhearts, thanks for CapsLock Comments and snaps I couldn't live without.

And ASFAHAN FOR MAKING THIS THING A LIVING HELL. I'd die if it weren't for you and you're the strict Mom R2F needs. Otherwise he'd probably run off and have an emo-phase (It's not a phase, mom, this is who I really am)
Neil's stomach muscles clenched when he saw the Nest from the car's window. When he was led down the stairs, as if he didn't know the way. When he was treated as if he might run at any given opportunity, as if he wasn't here voluntarily. As if he could ever leave, knowing the consequences.

He was led down the hallway and found himself in his own room, unsurprisingly. It was surprising that it was still that. His and Jean's room. He saw the walls and books and clothes he and Jean had left in there. His bed looked like he'd left it, but the room smelled fresh, so Neil suspected that someone had cleaned it in the past week.

"Dinner was twenty minutes ago," one of the men announced, before shutting the door behind him after he'd left the room. Neil forced himself to stay calm when he heard someone lock his door. He set his suitcase and the duffle bag down, and got his shoes off, when the lights turned off all of a sudden. He wanted to tell himself that this was no need to panic. Lights turned off after curfew. But when he sat down on the edge of his bed, trying to breathe, he couldn't think straight.

His breath was shaking and his hands were shivering, and Neil was sure he was dying. He needed something to hold on to. Matt, Andrew, Jean. Anyone to help him. But he was alone, and all he had was a memory.

Neil tried thinking about just that now. How Andrew had helped him through the first time. "Not everything," he'd said. These thoughts were never everything. And somehow, when he thought of the blond hair shining in the sun, of the omnipresent frown, of the acrid nicotine Neil hadn't smoked but still tasted, he thought perhaps he could survive. Maybe now that he didn't consist of darkness entirely, he could make it through this hell for his friends.

Andrew couldn't sleep. It was nothing new, but managed to annoy him either way. The bed stood in the middle of the room and Abby was loud when she went to get a cup of tea in the middle of the night. His head was aching and he could barely feel his legs.

Usually, he'd have gone to the roof, knowing the idiot would follow him. Usually, he'd waste an hour or two looking over campus, exchanging three or four sentences and some other things with Neil, and go back to bed.

Here, he was alone. No roof, no idiotic conversations, no cigarettes except for the ones Neil had brought.

Andrew rolled his eyes. Why did that name appear all over again? Sure, he had thought of Roland when they had started the thing, and it was nothing special that his thoughts ran to Neil a little more...
often, but this was just annoying. Every other thought found a way to twist itself into that direction and Andrew was tired of it. He just wanted to sleep.

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Minutes. Hours. Neil didn't lay down. He even got his shoes back on in the jet black room. The fear of being woken in the middle of the night was nearly paralysing. He couldn't afford facing Riko unguarded. Couldn't afford being caught unprotected.

Neil was tired. He could barely keep his eyes open. When he laid against the wall, Neil almost shivered. He couldn't do this. He wanted to go home.

And when he managed to breathe for longer than a second, Neil went there. He didn't have nightmares for the first time in months. Instead, he was home. Matt and him were on the sofa, Allison smiled, Nicky chatted, Renee radiated calmness, Andrew looked almost happy, Kevin was sober, Aaron had his girlfriend with him, Seth was awake and Dan looked proud of her team.

The door was ripped open and Neil jerked up from his bed, staring up anxiously. He was on edge from the night and wished for nothing more than for Matt to come and tell him they'd watch a movie.

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Andrew woke up by coughing his lungs out. At least it felt as if his body attempted to. He was barely able to breathe, but he couldn't show how much his limbs were hurting. He couldn't allow himself to show weakness this openly.

Renee had called yesterday to talk about her meeting with Allison and the look she got at Seth. Andrew didn't understand why you'd visit comatose people, when you couldn't change anything about the situation and they wouldn't know you were there.

He didn't really want to see anyone and Abby didn't care about that. This meant that she usually found an even grumpier version of Andrew when she tried being nice.

Right now, late in the afternoon, she knocked the door softly, while saying "Knock knock," in a muffled voice. Andrew didn't know why she did that all the time, but he didn't care enough to find out.

"Come in," he said, and Abby opened the door with her elbow, balancing a plate of soup in one hand and a small bottle in the other one. She set the bowl down on the bedside table and took the chair next to the bed.

"Could we talk for a second, Andrew? I got you a little something," she announced, and Andrew sat up a little straighter, looking at her face. He wanted to know what she had to say, but he couldn't quite find it in him to ask. She'd done this frequently; coming into his room and proposing other pills. It always resulted in a short discussion before Andrew told her he was done talking and Abby became frustrated because he didn't answer.

"Okay," he responded, and Abby smiled, a little too pleased in Andrew's opinion.

"So, I know you don't want the pills I got you, and I totally understand. The thing is, I really want you to get better and this will take ages if you won't let me help you," she answered slowly, and looked into his eyes. Andrew raised an eyebrow. He'd said no, and Abby knew he didn't like repeating himself. Still, she was pushing and if Abby became this concerned, there was probably something really wrong. But Andrew wouldn't take pills. Not if there was any way around it.

"And?" he asked because she had stopped talking and was looking at him. Andrew didn't like to
give reactions just like that, but he also knew Abby wouldn't keep talking if she thought you didn't want her to.

"And so I brought something else. Try considering the idea, okay? These are the same chemicals as in the pills, but the concentration is lower and they're quite bitter, but…" she started, holding the bottle and waiting for him to take it.

Andrew took a look at it and even unscrewed the cap, looking at the small opening that suggested you'd have to pour some drops onto a tablespoon or something.

"I will not take anything, Abby," Andrew repeated yet again, before closing the bottle and giving it back.

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He wasn't lucky enough for a Fox to come and rescue him. "Training started five minutes ago. The master will not be pleased with your timing."

Under any other circumstances, Neil would have thought of this as a joke, but here? He would be punished for being late, no matter if it wasn't his fault.

So he changed into workout clothes very slowly, still getting used to the light, and made his way through Evermore on his own. He was trusted enough not to leave today, considering how the man had vanished and Neil was alone. He went to the court, and saw two full teams playing against each other, both in their Raven-uniforms.

"Twenty laps for being late," Tesuji yelled at him, and Neil pressed his teeth together. Twenty laps around the field meant roughly 3.5 to 4 miles. Still, Neil knew he was serious. This was a rather normal punishment, to be fair.

But he hadn't expected that no one would comment on his appearance. Sure, most of them were playing and unable to pay attention without risking punishment themselves, but Neil would have thought that at least someone would react to his presence.

He couldn't allow himself to feel bad just because of that, though, so Neil did as he was told and started running quickly. Even though he wasn't fond of being here, he couldn't risk being disobedient. Neil had always been a little hard to order around, but that was because he hadn't ever had anything to loose. Now he had the Foxes, and so he would work to make sure they'd be fine.

Neil hurried a lot and was almost glad he didn't have to play. Running felt like home, and while the thought alone hurt, he was okay with it. He would allow himself to hold on to this, even if it would be a wound that could never turn into a scar, because Neil would keep picking at it forever.

Almost four miles later, Neil was done. The Ravens met in the middle of their court to discuss the game for a few minutes, and Neil went to Tesuji slowly, trying hard to keep his breath steady and feet walking.

The Coach didn't even look at him, when he announced that he wanted them to play again. He yelled some names, exchanging subs for exhausted players and ended with "Wesninski for Grayson". Neil hated this already. Nathaniel Wesninski was a person that only existed during training or in private. It was someone he'd been desperately trying to leave behind.

But players went to court and left it, and Jack Grayson actually pushed his racquet against Neil's chest roughly.
"I'm not wearing any armor," Neil said to Tesuji, pointing out an obvious flaw in the plan.

"You should have considered that earlier," the Coach answered, and didn't look at Neil anymore. This wouldn't end well. "If you're not on court in five seconds, you can spend all night running until your feet are bleeding," he added, and Neil entered the court. He had enough experience with Tesuji's ways of expressing his superiority that he knew that this wasn't a joke or an empty threat. It was an announcement.

Neil swallowed again when he looked around. Two strikers on his team, two on the opposing team. One backliner missing. He would die.

While his former – future? – teammates didn't acknowledge Neil as a person, they saw him as a player, and though Neil really tried playing along, he understood that his months as a Fox-striker had damaged his backlining-abilities drastically. That fact didn't improve when Neil was checked about every other minute. When the opposing dealer slammed him against the plexiglass, crushing Neil's unprotected upper body between the wall and his shoulder pads.

When he wasn't crushed to the ground, Neil was faced with an abundance of racquets, making him stumble because they were in the way or slammed against his bare calves or knees, or because someone passed the ball and chose to raise their racquet so high it accidentally pushed into Neil's stomach.

But the game went on and on and Neil knew that it was just training. Ravens versus Ravens, to find out where the weak spots lay. Right now, when Neil was crushed between two players, he knew that he was the only weak spot. His legs were wobbly from running laps, his body ached from the checks, and his head was spinning from the way it slammed to the ground for the fourth time that game.

Neil remained on the floor and allowed himself to breathe. To count, for just a second, to get his thoughts straight. One, Dan Wilds, Two, Kevin Day, Three, Andrew Minyard…

But the game went on and people ran and Neil had to get up if he didn't want to have broken bones by the end of tonight.

They played and Neil fell apart. Exy used to be what gave him strength, and he'd thought that this hadn't changed. Apparently, he was wrong.

This felt so unnatural, and Neil realised that it wasn't the game that had given him strength, after all.

It had been the Foxes.

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"Andrew, I get your fear, but—" Abby started, but he shushed her right away.

"I'm not afraid, Abby. I said no."

She sighed, sounding desperate, and took the bottle back. "I'm sorry. Just – you're not doing better and I feel terrible when I see you like this. If this gets worse, we might have to admit you to the hospital and they'll either tube you or give injections. I don't want to hurt you, I want to help you, and while I don't have a problem with doing it your way, you need to choose a way first."

Abby looked almost hurt throughout her monologue, clenching the bottle in her fist while pulling at the ends of her hair, straightening some of the curly strands in the process.

Even though he tried to suppress the feeling sparking up, Andrew was aware of it. His condition
made her sad and while he didn't want to let this affect him, he felt something close to guilt. Not quite enough to make him feel bad, but enough to be annoyed by the presence of it.

He swallowed hard and stretched his hand out, and rolled his eyes when he saw her smile. This was not a yes. It was about as far from it as it got. But he would look at it.

Andrew studied the list of chemicals once again, looking at the concentration and balance of everything.

"What does it do?" he asked lowly. Andrew wouldn't ever take it, but he wanted the information anyways.

"Well, it—"

"Hello, Abby, the door was open," Renee called from the hallway, and she frowned a little, but shook her head.

"I'll be there in a minute, Renee," she answered, obviously wanting to finish the conversation with Andrew.

He gave the bottle back and shook his head. Andrew wasn't sure what it was exactly, but the fact that Renee had arrived just like that made him want to lock the door. Not because he didn't like her, but because he wanted a moment to himself before seeing others.

"Andrew, can we talk this through?" Abby asked, sounding as frustrated as desperate, and he was almost ready to say yes. Almost. Not to the medicine, but to a conversation.

That was, until the door opened and his twin stood there, looking at them. He scoffed when he saw the bottle Andrew had passed to Abby. "You can't talk sense into him, stop wasting your time," he said, and crossed his arms.

Andrew wanted to get up and leave. He felt his fingers twitch and felt like taking his knives out. He needed to do something.

"Aaron, seriously, you're not helping!"

Abby hadn't meant to be loud. She would never yell, and the fact that her voice was this forceful mean that Aaron had really managed to upset her. She loved the Foxes like children and wouldn't ever harm them.

That didn't matter, when Aaron flinched and took one step back. Andrew saw his face loosing all the colour, and his shoulders tensed.

Abby saw the reaction to her small outburst and regret was instantly visible on her face. "Aaron," she started, but Andrew shook his head.

"Leave him alone for a minute," he said, and Abby pressed her lips together, looking from one twin to the other before getting up and leaving the room.

"Aaron," Andrew said lowly, looking at his brother.

He looked alien like this, with his shoulders tensed and eyes on the door, staring at the last place he'd seen Abby. Andrew hated the look, because he knew what it felt like. He didn't know how to deal with Aaron when he was like this. Kevin or Neil were easy to deal with, but Aaron dealt with his past the way Andrew did, so something making him react this openly was probably terrible on the
"Aaron, look at me," Andrew demanded, and got out of bed when his twin turned around, walking towards the door.

He managed a step before his vision turned blurry. Two before he felt sick and the world twisted. Three before he fell.

He felt hot all over and could hear the blood rushing through his ears. His vision turned black and for a few seconds, there was nothing but darkness and a high pitched ringing in his ears.

Andrew blinked against the darkness and could see again. Hear again. Feel… feel? He felt arms, he…

Aaron dropped him onto the bed and Andrew was glad they weren't touching anymore. He just looked at his brother and felt almost sick because of the worried expression.

"Take the medicine, Andrew. Orthostatic dizziness gets worse when you're sick because your body is weak already and can't get enough energy to pump the blood to your brain quickly enough. That's where the dizziness comes from," Aaron said, and Andrew sat up slowly, leaning against the wall behind his bed again.

"You have some serious problems, Aaron," Andrew mumbled, and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders again.

"Whatever. Renee brought books for you. I'm leaving," he announced, and whatever they had just shared was over.

Chapter End Notes

ANDREWS CHAPYER YAS

I just wanted to say thanks to everyone who's reading this!

Seriously, you guys make me so happy and I just can't imagine ever doing this without you! The fact that you read this (yeah you! Even if you've never commented, YOU!!) makes me so happy and I just want you to know that this wouldn't be happening without you ❤

Special thanks to everyone who commented under the last chapter! You guys are like a very small and precious family and I'm so happy!

And because she says she doesn't want me to thank her, I won't say thank you. I wouldn't do this without you, and I would have abandoned it. I wouldn't use my phone half as often and I wouldn't try reading Arabic. I hope I can make you smile as much as you make me smile, and seriously, you're amazing.

So, Saya, this is not a thank you, it's a "You're amazing," and I hope that's okay ❤
Neil couldn't feel the pain anymore when he went off court. It was almost terrifying, how fast his body turned numb, and how quickly his mind separated itself from his situation. Neil was back where he practically grew up, and all he could think about was how bad these bruises would bother him when he'd feel them, eventually. He knew that the pain usually came at night or right before training, so that you wouldn't even be able to forget it by sleeping or pushing through practice.

"Wesninski."

Neil went to the hallway, not bothering to go into the locker rooms. Usually, he'd have to put his uniform back there, but today he would just go and take a shower in his own bathroom.

"Wesninski." It was barely louder this time, but caught his attention. Not quite enough to turn around, but it rang a bell.

He had never been called Wesninski here. Tesuji usually said Nathaniel while Riko used Four. His teammates knew he was Neil Josten in public for some reason, and none of them had ever slipped in front of the press. They didn't know that his father's enemies would have come to get rid of Neil, if they had known it was him.

While this seemed to be nice, it hadn't really been about Neil's safety. It had been about his spot on the Perfect Court. And if he thought about it…

Neil's head hit the ground before he realised that there was an Exy racquet slammed into the back of his legs forcefully. He pressed his eyes shut and suppressed a moan. His ears were ringing and he could barely breathe for a few seconds. The pain came crashing into him.

"You will answer when the Master addresses you," Riko said, and then there was a racquet against his ribs. Neil wanted to curl into a ball and die, but he couldn't give up just yet. He wouldn't be the dog they had kicked into obedience.

Neil supported his weight on his arms and pushed himself upwards even though his arms were trembling and his legs were working against having to carry him.

Still, he managed to stand up and looked into Tesuji's eyes, ignoring Riko completely.

"What?" Neil asked, not bothering with politeness. He regretted it instantly, when Riko raised his racquet, but Tesuji raised a hand, shaking his head.

"Stop. We can't break him over the holidays. He has to be presentable by the start of the next term," he said lowly, and Riko's jaw tensed when he nodded. "Follow me," he told Neil, and when he didn't turn around or started walking, Neil forced his shoulders to relax and took a breath.
"Yes, master," he said very lowly and for a change he didn't care about his pride. He looked at the ground and tried not to let the acrid taste drown him. He couldn't believe he was this obedient. As if the last six or seven months hadn't meant anything at all…

He and Riko were lead to Tesuji's office, and Neil couldn't even look up. He felt humiliated and weak and wanted nothing more than to climb to the roof and annoy Andrew enough for him to blow smoke into his face and feel home because of the odd familiarity of it.

"You're re-signing the contract and will play as a Raven for the rest of college," Tesuji started, sitting down on his chair behind the huge desk.

Neil couldn't look up. He knew that, but felt as if he betrayed the Foxes by even standing here. "And then?" he asked very lowly. He wasn't entirely sure how this would work, and breathing was hard. Maybe he'd be able to go back later?

"We have deals with both of your parents. If your father pays his debts, you're free to go. If he doesn't, you belong to us. Should your mother break the alliance, you're dead." His tone was dry and he barely looked up from the papers in his hand.

Neil was cold and felt sweat at the same time. "May I know the exact conditions?" he asked after a few moments. He was interpreting too much into this and knew that this would lead to misunderstandings.

Tesuji looked at him for two seconds before focussing on the papers again. "You're ours unless your father pays his debts, but since he basically traded you for this purpose, you won't have anything to worry about. You're ours. Your mother and us have a business connection in England and one condition of hers was that you'd stay alive," he explained, and Neil nodded sharply and tried breathing. He hadn't expected anything from his father, but his mother's only condition was his life? Didn't she know that death would be a lot easier than a week with Riko?

"Thank you," Neil answered out of reflex, and the man nodded.

"Riko will be able to give further details on your punishments, should you disobey," he added slowly, and Neil nodded again.

"Of course. Thank you," he mumbled, and Riko opened the door, leaving the office quickly. Neil followed him and was almost looking forward to the pitch black night, sinking into dreams of his family.

"Do you want to know the consequences, Four?" Riko asked, and Neil pressed his teeth together. It had been amazing to speak freely about Riko, and now he was back where he started, too scared to open his mouth.

Neil was looking down and thought of this as least insulting, until Riko hit his ribs with the racquet yet again, pushing all the air out of his lungs and making Neil nearly fall over, arms tightly around his chest to protect himself from farther injuries.

"I expect an answer," Riko said, with a smile clearly audible in the tone of his voice.

"Yes. Tell me about the consequences," Neil chocked out, and for a change, it seemed to be the correct answer.

Riko laughed and went on while Neil put effort into not throwing up and trying to keep up with him.

"Sure, Four. I think it's time you'll only have to carry half the punishment, don't you? The rest will be
taken out on the messed up team you chose to have around. It'll start with small things like getting Gordon, the Minyards and Boyd hooked on their drugs again. There are some gang members and customers that would really appreciate visiting Walker and Wilds. I can arrange some more foster brothers to visit the psycho, I can make sure Reynolds' parents get her back, and I can break Kevin's right hand in addition to his left one," Riko listed, and Neil couldn't keep walking.

He didn't know what it was exactly, but everything about this was wrong. The way he talked about this so casually, the way he was ready to have collateral damage in the size of a team, the way he made sure Neil could never blame anyone but himself

"And if there's no reason to punish me?" Neil asked very lowly. He had to be reassured that this wasn't as useless as it felt.

Riko laughed at that, not bothering to hide the mocking tone. "In that case, they can live on with their miserable lives and get to destroy them all by themselves," he answered, walking faster.

Neil nodded slightly, closing his eyes for a second. Thank the heavens they'd be save and free and happy. At least this wasn't pointless.

Riko waited until Neil was in his room again, and Neil could barely breathe when the lock turned again. There was no food to be seen, and the moment he realised this was the moment the hunger came.

It was odd. Riko had deprived them of food all the time, but it wasn't ever real hunger. Exhaustion, yes, and frustration, but never hunger.

Now he felt it in every cell. His stomach hadn't had a meal since breakfast with the Foxes, and that was around 36 hours ago now. His stomach felt weird, as if the acid wasn't digesting anything but the inner lining of Neil's organs at this point, and the desire to just eat was omnipresent once Neil became aware of it.

He decided to take a cold shower in order to numb the feelings. The pain of his bruises, the pangs of hunger, the desperation.

It almost helped. Locking himself in the bathroom and turning the shower to the coldest first, then to the hottest available option. Both sensations felt as of they were burning his skin off, and Neil couldn't complain. This felt better. Like the private stalls with the Foxes after practice. Privacy without feeling abandoned.

That was, until Neil realised he was just that. Abandoned and alone and unsaveable. Neil was lost.

He towelled dry and changed into clothes again, before entering his bed. He just needed to sleep. Sleep, and let dreams of the Foxes take over.

Neil was about to close his eyes when he saw the full bottle of water. Someone had been in the room and changed it. Neil knew it had been empty.

He had been showering, absolutely defenceless, and someone had been in his room.

It might have been about distance from the door, or the better angle to look at it. It might have been about sentimental reasons or the desire to feel home.

Neil got up and went to Jean's bed on the opposite side of the room. It was nonsense. He was facing the wall, anyways, back to the door; this made him feel better anyways. Protected, in a way.
He knew that neither Jean nor the Foxes could protect him, but laying here, thinking of the happiness
he’d been able to soak up in the past months, Neil thought perhaps they could at least provide a home
in this place.

Maybe these memories were who he was. Maybe the fact that they existed meant that at least Neil
wouldn't die a lie.

~

Matt woke up slowly when Dan cuddled against him closer, nuzzling into his side and letting out a
soft sigh. This was perfection. Slowly opening your eyes and seeing your girlfriend close with a tiny
smile on her lips, cuddled under a few blankets and having nothing to do. These moments were
when Matt knew it was gonna be a good day. How could anything bad happen with a start like this,
so precious and entirely perfect.

"I'm tired," Dan mumbled, and Matt smiled, pressing a kiss to her temple.

"So sleep," he whispered back and got up slowly, making sure he wouldn't disturb her too much.

He went outside, closing the door behind him softly so she wouldn't be woken by him. Matt rubbed
his eyes a little, but smiled when he saw Renee in the kitchen, drinking tea.

"Morning," he said, and she smiled, pointing at a mug next to her, filled with coffee.

"Good morning," she answered, and Matt sipped his coffee. "Allison just texted and asked if we
could bring her some more books and clothes. Would you like to come?"

Matt thought about it for only half a second before nodding. Seeing Seth like this was tough on him,
but he really couldn't bare the thought of abandoning him now. "Definitely. When do you want to
leave?" he asked, thinking of Dan. He wouldn't want to wake her up now that she finally had some
time to relax.

"Some time around noon," she suggested, and Matt nodded. That sounded like a plan.

The morning went by without the Monsters joining them for breakfast, but Matt didn't exactly have a
problem with that. He liked the girls’ company because they were so calm and steady while
remaining cheerful.

Matt usually enjoyed driving. The radio played and the girls talked and Seth and him exchanged
glances in the rearview mirror when there was nothing to say.

It was different now, with Dan and Renee very silent. There weren't enough people to actually enjoy
this, not when they knew where they were going.

It all felt a little unreal. He wondered how Renee and Dan could talk so casually when he felt like
throwing up. He knew they weren't being inconsiderate but quite normal. It felt bad either way.

Allison didn't wait for them inside but stood in front of the main entrance, talking to someone on her
phone. She looked terrible, if he was honest. Her hair was getting greasy, the bags under her red-
rimmed eyes were turning darker, and everything gave off exhaustion. Matt doubted she had slept for
longer than an hour.

"I need a signature, nothing else. If you tell them I'm entitled to help, I can pay! I can't believe this
means nothing at all to you!"

She was almost yelling into her cellphone, radiating anger and fury. Matt guessed she was talking to
one of Seth's brothers because of insurance matters.

"Are you serious? Oh my… no, sorry for bothering, Jonah, won't happen again," she said, before ending the call and giving off a furious sound. "Can believe that guy? He won't sign because 'Gordons pay their own debts! How stupid can honor make you?' she asked no one in particular, before hugging each of them tightly.

Matt hadn't lived with the idea of picture-perfect Allison. He'd seen her in the mornings, after break ups, during training, after stressful exams. He'd seen more than what she chose to show, but he hadn't expected to ever see her this devastated.

They turned their phones off before going inside and Matt swallowed hard when they were in front of Seth's room again. He looked up, checking whether anyone wanted to go in before him, but no one seemed to, so he opened and closed the door in a matter of seconds, sitting down on the chair next to the bed, looking into Seth's face.

For a moment, there was nothing else. Just Seth and the tubes and the monitors. Matt swallowed hard and tried to look at him.

"I can't believe you're doing this to us," he whispered. It was selfish and wrong, but some part of him was mad. Why wouldn't he just get up? Why did he have to show Matt exactly what he'd been doing wrong?

Matt almost choked on the memories of last year. When he'd said yes so often that he was shaking by the end of the night. Not the usual slight shivers of your hands some drugs gave you, but the flexing of every muscle in your body, making you tremble while your blood was deciding whether it wanted to get more into your system or make you sweat the chemicals out.

He couldn't believe he almost put Dan into the position of Allison, loosing herself a little longer day by day.

Matt stretched his hand out and took Seth's, careful not to touch the tubes or pull out the needle when he held his hand. He was almost confused to find it pretty warm instead of cold and rough.

"I miss you, you know? All of us do…" Matt mumbled this time, and just wanted Seth to talk back. He couldn't stand this. Matt was an only child, but being with Seth for all these years made him realise he's had a brother, after all. He couldn't believe Seth might never hear those words, though perhaps he would not be able to appreciate them when Seth had grown up with more brothers than he was comfortable with.

Matt tried being positive, but it's been days. There was a small part of him that was clinging to hope, trying to believe that Seth could make it. But there was another part. A part that had seen people on the edge of death, using all their energy to beg dealers for another shot. A part that saw Seth laying there with his body fighting against the chemicals clogging up everything he'd been trying to be for Allison, but saw nothing apart from an addict.

*He had it coming.* It was the worst thing Matt could think, but it was true.

That didn't make this any less hurtful.

- They had left Allison after an hour or two, when she hadn't been able to listen to a single sentence anymore but was looking at the door to Seth's room every other second. She needed to be close to
him, and no one would deprive her of that.

He was sitting on the sofa with a mug of cocoa, looking at the TV without watching the show. Dan and Renee were talking about Allison and Matt didn't want to participate. He wanted to be on his sofa in his room. Wanted an arm around Neil's shoulders and one around Seth's while watching some movie no one really cared about. He wanted to sleep in his own bed, in a room that was never silent with Seth's snoring and Neil's sighs in sleep, keeping him up some nights, from the creaking of the bed.

Matt looked up when the door opened and Kevin came in. He looked almost insecure, and Matt had never seen him like this.

"Hey," he said, and Kevin took the spot next to Matt on the sofa, putting his in-ear headphones on and watching something on his laptop. Okay?

"What are you watching?" Matt tried again, and Kevin gave one headphone to Matt, turning the laptop a little so he could see it.

"The Trojans are doing a charity match against a high school. Not a challenge for them but we can see their strategy for the next half of the season. They usually try everything in these games before risking anything on court," Kevin explained, and Matt put the headphone in, listening to the commentator.

"Why did you come here? Not that it's not nice, its just… surprising," Matt asked again, and Kevin shrugged.

"The room is empty. Aaron is on a date and Nicky is calling Erik. Figured I might watch it here," he answered, turning his attention back to his laptop screen.

Matt watched the game and smiled a little. Kevin had come here, of all places? Because he didn't want to be alone? He liked that.

Whether they wanted to leave them alone or had plans anyways he didn't know, but Renee and Dan left around thirty minutes later, and Kevin plugged his headphones out the instant the door closed behind them, turning up the volume.

Matt usually liked watching Exy matches, but it was an entirely different experience with Kevin. This time, it was mainly "Did you see how…?", "Now that was pretty interesting…", "If all of us managed to copy that move…". Fun with Kevin probably almost always turned out to be Exy-related, and Matt didn't have a problem with that.

He liked the way Kevin's face lit up a little every time he saw Jean making an unexpected move.

"That was pretty good," Matt remarked, and Kevin smiled at him. This smile seemed different from his press smile, though. More honest, maybe? More cheerful?

"It was a Raven move. Neil taught it to him in about two weeks. Can you believe it? He was eleven at that time, took three days to learn it and fourteen to teach it! It was shortly before Jean came," Kevin said, and Matt looked at him surprised. They didn't talk a lot in general, and Matt had never heard the other man speaking of his time at the Nest.

"That's impressive," he answered, filling the silence and trying to continue the conversation.

"He's a talented backliner. We're wasting his time," Kevin said with a sigh. "I think he should have gone to the Trojans or Lions. They'd have provided him with the opportunity to improve. We're
"But he's a good striker. Fastest player in Class I Exy, plays with a heavy racquet. I think he's comfortable here," Matt argued, and Kevin shook his head.

"Comfort isn't the point. It's about living up to your potential, and he can't do that," Kevin said matter of factly, and Matt crossed his arms, thinking for a second. He missed Neil so much, it was almost painful.

"But he wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. He came for you, Kevin. He wanted to be with you," Matt said, and Kevin's expression changed into something almost angrily proud.

Proud, because he knew that. Because Neil had come for him. Matt thought Kevin must know about the way Neil talked about him as a brother.

Matt supposed he was angry with himself for holding Neil back so willingly. What would he do without him in his life?

To Matt, Neil was a lot. A friend, a smaller brother you had to protect, the living proof that justice existed.

He thought perhaps to Kevin, Neil was the reminder of something different, thoughts clouded by their shared memories of the Nest. Maybe some part of seeing Neil every day made Kevin feel the way Matt felt when he saw Seth like this.

A dear friend, waking twisted memories of wrongness and pain.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm gonna be honest with all of you.
I feel weird because of the lack of response I'm getting. Is anyone not okay with the format of these chapters? We'll be back to normal after #10, promise.
Or am I getting bad at writing? Is the story bad? What's the matter?

I get that all of you have lives but I put a lot of time into writing this and a short feedback would just feel like acknowledgment. A smiley or two words are enough, thh. Critique is appreciated as well, just please talk to me.
It's just that I appreciate your feedback so much and it makes the sun shine brighter and I love all of yoy and that just makes me kinda sad sometimes.

And thanks to elfo and Booksbreakhearts for being the cutest

Thanks to Saya for spending nights up with me, discussing Kandreil (don't worry, won't happen) and Seth's death (well…) and live and uni and everything!
You're the best person in the world and I wouldnt wanna do this with anyone else!
Neil missed waking up exhausted for morning practice after a night of training at the stadium. Neil missed hearing Matt's alarm clock and getting up with a sigh and aching joints, preparing coffee for six people quickly, thinking of the Upperclassmen.

Neil missed the positive exhaustion. He had almost forgotten about sixteen-hour-days. About all the training and the lack of sleep and food. About Riko.

However, at night he completely forgot. Nightmares were a distant memory of his months at Palmetto, seeming an eternity away already. When life was a nightmare in itself, every dream was cotton candy.

Every night felt like waking up from a bad dream, with Matt and Seth being their usual sleepy selves.

Every racquet on his body during training turned into a high five with the Foxes, after an amazing goal.

Every time he couldn't fall asleep, he woke up to Andrew's silent gaze, to a whisper, to a kiss.

And every time they kissed, Neil woke up again, looking into his jet black room, weighed down by the pain and aching of his muscles. His heart was beating against its cage, as if it was trying to get away. To leave Riko.

He couldn't feel anything, and that was frightening. For a second, there was no pain, no missing, no shock of being back here, in the hell he grew up in. Neil wasn't feeling, he was just falling deeper and deeper in the pit he thought he'd left behind. Nothing but panic and the black void of numbness and apathy.

His breath was shallow and Neil had lost track of the days. He hadn't lost track of his team, though. Dan and Kevin, the best captains you could wish for. Andrew, Aaron and Nicky, who showed him that a family didn't have to be perfect. Allison and Seth, who reminded him of why he was here every time he dared to think of their names. Renee and Matt, who were nice and positive and a safe haven in his mind.

He was cold and just wanted to eat something. And to sit on the sofa with Matt, or the roof with Andrew.

Andrew…

Neil remembered this night's dream now.

Remembered the roof, and Andrew with the tip of his nose red. Remembered the cigarette and the
smoke and how the sky turned violet and orange. The lips and the taste and the warmth and the "I miss this" and Andrew's "This is nothing."

His "I miss you" and Andrew's "So come back."

Neil was freezing and tried to keep the memories, but they were fading and Neil felt them running through his hands like water. He was loosening his grip on the Foxes already. They wouldn't save him. He wouldn't let them.

But if he wanted to be strong, he had to leave them behind. He had to let them go so this wouldn't keep messing with his mind.

He wouldn't. Neil would keep them in his heart, no matter the pain, no matter the confusion.

The lock of his door turned and Neil sat up. He flinched back when the light flashed on and his eyes were watering before he could even attempt to adjust to the new level of brightness.

"Rise and shine, Four, we're gonna have some fun," Riko greeted him. Neil heard the smile on his face even when he couldn't see it. "If you're not in my room in ten seconds, I'm gonna make sure you'll regret ever coming here."

Neil wanted to laugh. As if Riko could ever do that. Neil hadn't questioned the decision to come here. He wouldn't regret keeping his Foxes safe.

The urge to laugh was gone as soon as Riko counted down from ten. Neil was across the hallway and inside his room by "five" and for a second, all he could think about was how this was Aaron's number. Neil hoped he was okay and that him and Andrew were working on their relationship.

Hoped that that cheerleader was with him and managed to make the boy smile.

"I think we'll have more fun with you in this room than in your own," Riko announced, and Neil nodded slightly, letting his head fall, staring at the ground. He hated this room and the memories it woke. Hated that Andrew's "This is not everything. Not if you don't let it be' didn't help, because this was all that was left of him now.

"You're sleeping in Kevins bed, Four. And I think you should know a few things about your former teammates," Riko announced, and Neil tensed. He wanted to say no. Wanted so badly to just stand up and tell him to shut up. "Go to bed. Training doesn't start for another two hours," Riko added, and Neil's breath rattled when he laid down slowly, pulling the covers up. The bed was cold and the blanket was stiff. Neil looked up and watched the postcards Kevin had collected for the seconds it took Riko to turn the lights off.

"The master wants you to play for us, but I think it would be funnier to watch you break. Your body and your mind, trembling before they shatter. And when I'm done with you, I'll do the same thing with Jean. Then Kevin. And then we can start over, with better members for our perfect court," Riko whispered, and Neil hugged the blanket closer. It was pitch black again and he felt sick. He was trying to keep them safe. This wasn't fair.

"You're not talking," Riko remarked, and Neil blinked against the darkness.

"That's against the deal," Neil said, very slowly and quietly, barely louder than a whisper.

"Yeah, but who's gonna care about that once you're dead or crazy?" Riko asked, laughing into the darkness. "And it's still fair. Kevin and I had a deal. We said we didn't need our fathers as long as we had each other and the court. Then he left for these fuck-ups just because of that bastard Wymack," Riko added, and Neil pressed his lips together. Riko's voice sounded like a mix of fury and madness,
and Neil suppressed a shiver.

'Please don't take it out on me' he thought, before he had any time to think about the information he'd received.

"What do you mean?" he asked lowly. Of course there had been conversations between him and Riko when they had grown up. Deeper and more shallow ones, because you couldn't stay sane without any contact. But there was always the danger of screwing up. The danger of waking up in a puddle of your own vomit because someone hit your head so roughly you couldn't stay conscious. That's where their hesitancy came from. But 'they' didn't exist anymore. Neil was alone.

"Oh, Kevin hasn't told you? Funny," Riko said, not sounding amused at all. "Wymack is his father. That's why he left us. Guess you weren't as close as you thought," Riko said, laughing bitterly, and Neil's hands turned into fists around the corners of his blanket.

His thoughts ran faster than his mind could follow. This wasn't possible. Kevin and him were brothers. He wouldn't have kept this from him.

"I'd suggest asking him yourself, if you have troubles believing me, but that's not an option for you. Sorry," Riko said, laughing again. "Goodnight. Don't make a sound or you'll regret it," he added, and Neil's body stiffened.

He wouldn't be able to sleep for a second, and Neil was sure this was the plain reason Riko had brought him here.

Coach Wymack.

Neil thought about it, and after a while, it almost made sense. The eyes, their skin-tone, the ambition, Exy generally, their hate-love for the team.

It had been weird when Neil had first gotten there, but Kevin has changed in his months at Palmetto. He had grown into more of a person, and - oddly - into more of someone Wymack wanted to see on the team. Neil wondered if perhaps that was a reason for Kevin's change.

He wondered if maybe Kevin had forgotten to mention it. Just maybe, he'd wanted to tell Neil. There was a chance Kevin had seen him as a brother, and Neil wasn't willing to let that go yet.

He didn't manage to rest anymore that night, but got his first meal that morning and bread felt like a miracle when his last meal had been with the Foxes. Riko didn't talk to him that morning, and his teammates were as silent as usually, during training.

Neil didn't think of Exy but used the time to think about Kevin. He had lied to him. Just when Neil was able to think of the Foxes as a piece of him that was real, he discovered that even his time with them had been filled with lies.

As if his life was laughing at Neil for ever thinking that anything about him could be a truth.

~

"Wish you were here! Miss you :( Call me?"

Aaron looked around for a second. Kevin was reading and Nicky was running around like a madman, cleaning everything for Erik. He couldn't believe that guy had the nerve to come here.

He got up and left their room, leaning against the railing of the staircase while ignoring Nicky's almost panicked'Where are you going?'
Aaron called Katelyn and waited. One ring. Two. Then she picked up.

"Aaron," she greeted him, and he could hear the relief in her voice. It made him way too proud. "How are you? How's Andrew? Is Erik there yet?" she asked quickly, and he knew that she needed distraction.

Her family was stressful to her on holidays, with her older sister and younger brother, her mom, her mom's boyfriend and her father.

"Hey, Kate," he started. It was good to hear her voice again. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen her in almost a week. "We're picking Erik up today, Nicky is freaking out because of it and I want him to go already. But I'm good, otherwise. Andrew is still too stupid to take his meds."

He sighed and tried to ignore the way his shoulders relaxed. She was there. She was gonna be back. Aaron relied way too heavily on this girl, and he knew that it was wrong. Knew, that this wasn't what him and Andrew had agreed on. But he couldn't care.

"Hey, Aaron, breathe, okay? Nicky isn't leaving you for Erik, he took him here so two important parts of his life are close! And you could try talking to Andrew, maybe? Because I know you worry," she said, her voice soft and nice, sounding like honey somehow.

He knew she was right. That didn't mean he had to acknowledge she was right.

"When will you be back?" he asked lowly, and Katelyn sighed.

"First of January, I guess. I can't believe you're not my New Years kiss," she complained, and he couldn't help smiling. Aaron missed her, and he liked knowing she did, too. He hadn't thought that he was even able to miss anyone this badly. That he was even able to miss someone so intensely.

"I'll take you out for dinner that evening," he said, and Katelyn laughed before agreeing.

"That's awesome! I can't wait to cuddle you again, Aaron. I miss you," she repeated, and he felt a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. She was everything he could have wished for.

Aaron heard a rattling sound and a curse, before Katelyn sighed. "Hey, Jared fell down a chair trying to put the star onto our Christmas tree, I'll call back, yeah?" she asked, and Aaron chuckled softly. He liked her brother – the personification of clumsiness.

"Sure," he answered, and heard many voices in the background.

"I love you," she said, voice dripping with affection. Aaron just wanted her close.

"Love you too," Aaron whispered back, and some part of him got lost in the space between him and her when all he heard was the beeping. Of course she had to hang up. That didn't mean he was okay with not talking to her anymore.

He took a few moments to breathe before intending to go back inside. Nicky was faster, opening the door and looking incredibly relieved when he saw Aaron right there.

"Hey, we should get going, yeah?" he asked, looking very nervous. Aaron knew it was because of Erik, and while he didn't especially like Nicky's enthusiasm about everything, he liked it even less when Nicky was not his usual self because of Erik. His cousin was worried and that alone meant that Aaron had to be annoyed with the German man.

"Okay," he answered, crossing his arms and going inside to put his shoes on.
Aaron was in the back of the car, as always. Kevin drove and Nicky was checking the flight for their whole drive to the airport.

They had discussed whether or not they wanted Andrew to come, but he was ill, moody and would only add another stop to their journey.

Aaron looked out of the window and pressed his jaw together. It was the twenty third of December, his girlfriend was out of town, Andrew was at Abby's, and they were picking up the personification of every reason Nicky had to leave them behind.

Happy holidays, he thought to himself, and sighed.

Aaron didn't want to be here, didn't want to get out of the car, didn't want to greet Erik. But Nicky made him, and for some reason, that was enough.

They had just exited the airport's garage and were at the entrance, when Nicky squealed. "The plane landed! He's gonna be here in, like, three seconds or something!" he exclaimed, and finally put his phone away.

Sometimes, Nicky reminded him of Katelyn a little. Of her enthusiasm and positivity. These short moments were seconds he almost wanted to formally introduce her, just because he knew that the both of them would love it.

But he knew he couldn't, so he followed Kevin and Nicky to the 'Arrivals' hall.

When they arrived and Nicky checked the screen for Erik's flight. ("He's picking up his luggage now! He'll be here, like, right now!") Nicky straightened his shirt and ran a hand through his hair before looking at Aaron for a second and wiping invisible dust off his shoulder.

"Please be nice, Aaron. For me, okay? This is important," Nicky said, wrapping his arms around his shoulders, and Aaron's muscles stiffened for a second before he tried to relax. His behaviour mattered to Nicky, and he could try to do him a favour. The fact that Nicky cared about what Erik thought of Aaron basically meant that both were important to him, right? And maybe Nicky would choose the twins over Erik when the three of them would leave uni. Maybe they’d stay together.

That was until Nicky basically yelled into Aaron's ear and let go. Aaron turned around and saw his cousin running towards the crowd of people. Even he saw the tall blond guy with a huge suitcase.

Kevin and Aaron waited and looked away when the boys had wrapped their arms around each other. He didn't need to see them kissing.

But after a while, he looked up again and saw them a few meters away, hugging closely and holding on to each other like they were two halves of a whole.

Aaron didn't know what hurt more; knowing that him and Andrew were the reason Nicky gave up this happiness, or if it was about knowing what this felt like from when Katelyn spent the summer holidays in Europe. He knew the aching and how good it felt to finally be whole again.

But he didn't want to think that they were the reason for Nicky's unhappiness.

Nicky and Erik were holding hands and wore shining smiles when they went back to them, and Nicky never looked this enthusiastic.

Erik grinned at them when he shook Aaron's hand first, then Kevin's, while holding on to Nicky all the time.
"Hey, nice to see you again!" he greeted them, and Aaron wanted to turn away, but seeing Nicky's hopeful expression, he couldn't.

"Hello," he muttered shook Erik's hand. His accent was quite harsh, and it was a part of what Aaron disliked. Nicky would have to change for him. Stick with German, move away, leave his family behind…

"Okay, should we leave? I can't believe you're here!" Nicky asked before smiling even more and nudging against Erik's shoulder. Disgusting…

Aaron turned around, leading the way to the car, and he sighed when Nicky took the driver's seat while Kevin sat in the back with Aaron.

Nicky asked about every detail of the flight, and Erik kept answering in German. Aaron knew he was just talking in his mother's tongue, but he still found it rude in front of Kevin. Every other sentence by them was "I missed you," or "I love you," or "I'm so glad you're here!"

Aaron found himself checking his phone every few minutes, opening Katelyn's chat and closing it again, without writing anything. They got home and Nicky helped Erik with his suitcase, while Aaron and Kevin talked about what to get for lunch.

That was, until Nicky and Erik sat down on the sofa, having silent conversations. There was a knock on the door and Renee opened the door a bit. They'd forgotten to lock it?

"Hey, we're ordering pizza and wondered if you might wanna join us," she said with a soft smile, looking as innocent and somehow soft as ever.

Kevin rolled his eyes and was ready to decline, but Nicky was faster.

"That's a great plan! All of you can meet Erik this way! This is my boyfriend! And that's Renee," Nicky introduced, and Aaron couldn't believe he was being this open with the other Foxes. Sure, Nicky never hid himself, but Aaron hadn't seen him present Erik so proudly before.

Renee came in and shook Erik's hand quickly, smiling warmly and greeting him.

"Nice to meet you! So, all of you can just come over whenever, yeah?" she asked, and when they nodded, Renee left again.

How could someone like her be friends with someone like Andrew? And how could Nicky just decide that all of them were spending time with the Upperclassmen, just because Andrew wasn't there to make sure they'd stay separated?

Nicky told Erik everything there was to know about the Upperclassmen for about twenty minutes, going on and off about their families, high school careers, personalities and skills. Erik looked at Nicky as if he were the world, taking in every word of the monologue, only asking a few questions in between.

Kevin complained about the pizza a little, but he didn't seem entirely bothered by it, so they actually went over after a while. Matt was sitting on one armchair while Renee and Dan shared one of the smaller sofas, and Kevin and Aaron took the bean bag chairs when Nicky and Erik went to sit on the other couch.

"So, Erik, this is Dan, that's Matt, and you know Renee already. And this, ladies and gentlemen, is the best boyfriend on the planet," Nicky introduced them, and he radiated pride so intensely when he had one arm wrapped around Erik's middle.
Dan and Matt greeted him, and Renee told Kevin she'd ordered a salad for him, instead of pizza, and while the prospect of salad from a delivery service didn't seem too great, Kevin was thankful. Aaron zoned out and ignored the majority of their conversations.

Their food arrived and they were happy to eat, finally. Unfortunately, the conversations didn't die down but became even more vivid.

They made plans for a nice Christmas breakfast at the hospital, so they'd be able to celebrate with Allison. Nicky was enthusiastic about the idea and Aaron knew he didn't mean any harm, but it felt wrong either way.

Andrew was at Abby's house, spending most of the day on his own, and Nicky forgot about him because the Upperclassmen were celebrating Christmas?

Aaron knew that he wouldn't join them and that Nicky wouldn't, either, but the fact that he was even considering it for a second was bitter.

He felt so trapped here. Aaron was longing for the lonely evenings with Nicky on the sofa, playing video games and eating junk food. He didn't like the chatter and laughing. He just wanted his peace.

Aaron had only eaten the first half of his pizza, when he decided he didn't want to be here.

"Where are you going?" Kevin asked when he got up, and he shrugged.

"Somewhere," he mumbled, and left the room quickly. The Upperclassmen were used to this because of Neil, so at least they didn't ask any questions.

Aaron could finally breathe again, in the empty hallway. He went into their room and spread out in his bed, closing his eyes.

Sometimes, he needed moments of silence, because everything was too much. Just a slight headache because people were too loud or demanding. That's what he liked about his deal with Andrew. It kept you out of these situations usually.

Aaron took a deep breath and thought about going to visit Andrew, maybe. Just for an hour or two, to see how he'd been holding up and maybe talk some sense into him.

A second later, his phone buzzed and Aaron decided he'd visit Andrew after the call. He might spend the night at Abby's tomorrow, spending Christmas Eve with his brother.

Aaron picked up the phone and felt better immediately when he heard Katelyn's voice.

"Hey, Aaron! How are you? How are the others?" she asked and sounded so happy to have him on the phone. He didn't deserve her.

"Hey, love," he mumbled and rolled to his stomach, fiddling with the corner of his pillow. "I'm alright, just don't really want to spend time with the others right now. Erik is there and everybody loves him, obviously. Why is everyone so obsessed with gay people as if it was normal?" he asked with a sigh, and laid down sideways now, finally relaxing now that he could hear her voice.

"Try to take some time for yourself, but don't spend the evening on your own, Aaron. And many people like the idea of equality, you know? So try being happy for them and be a good cousin, maybe?" she suggested, and Aaron rolled his eyes. Katelyn didn't like that Aaron had a problem with homosexuality, but he couldn't care too much. This was a topic he didn't want to discuss, and she was biased because of her bisexual brother, so talking about this was useless.
"You're taking sides," he said matter of factly, and heard her sigh.

"I didn't want this to end in an argument, Aaron," she almost whispered into the phone, and Aaron took a deep breath. Great. Now she felt bad.

"Me neither, really. How's everything with your family?"

Both of them knew that this was a lazy attempt to change the topic, but Aaron couldn't be bothered. He wanted to talk to her and knew she was stressed.

"My sister isn't leaving the room they prepared for us and Jared is trying to make this as normal as it gets, but I'd rather be at my dad's with him alone," she sighed, and Aaron wished he was there to run a hand through her hair and comfort her.

Her sister had been weird ever since she left for uni and her brother loved their mother way too much. He still lived with her and her boyfriends, and Aaron knew Katelyn was only there for Jared's sake. She felt bad because she wasn't spending all the time at her dad's place this year.

"You can do what you want for once and suggest a sleepover with Jared at your dad's. Just the three of you for a day, doesn't even have to be one of the major holidays," Aaron recommended hesitantly. He knew she didn't like being pushed, but this felt like something close to a solution.

"I can try, but he wants to stay with our mother," she said and sounded terrible. Aaron knew what she looked like right now. He knew the frown and how she was biting into her lip for a few seconds before remembering that her mother didn't approve of that and wearing a small smile instead. It had broken his heart sometimes, when he saw her playing over her feelings like that.

"Just suggest it. Tell him that you'd appreciate it a lot. He loves you, Katelyn, you'll find a compromise!" he said, trying hard to sound enthusiastic about something for a change. He didn't care too much about this in general, but he knew that she felt bad, and that wasn't okay.

"You're right, I guess. I love you," she mumbled, and it wasn't as hopeless as she'd sounded before.

"Love you too," he said lowly. It felt like more of a promise than anything else. It was weird, but Katelyn was probably the only person Aaron felt certain of. Andrew would leave after college, because their deal would be over then. Nicky would be back in Germany, but she'd stay.

At least he hoped so.

"I should help with dinner now," Katelyn said with a sigh, and Aaron nodded slightly.

"Sure. Call when you can, yeah?" he asked, and Katelyn chuckled softly, sounding way too pleased with herself.

"Of course! Love you! Bye," she said, and Aaron was glad that she was feeling a little better.

They hung up and Aaron decided he'd actually join the others for a little before going to see Andrew, when he saw a figure in the doorway to their room. Erik.

"I was just getting a sweatshirt," he explained in German, and entered the room. Aaron's jaw clenched.

"How much did you hear?" he asked, and Erik looked at him before shaking his head a little. Him and the twins had a tough relationship, that was based on the bare minimum of communication. It was a mutual agreement.
"Enough to know that you should probably talk more often. Try texting more frequently, if you miss them so much," he suggested, and Aaron was angry for some reason. Who did he think he was? Him and Katelyn didn't need any advice from some gay German that thought his thing with Nicky was even close to what they had. This was real.

"Don't mention this to anyone," Aaron said, not reacting to Erik's words.

"Okay," Erik said and shrugged, and Aaron was even angrier. This was huge and important, and Erik said 'Okay' as if he hadn't even listened.

"You don't understand. Not Nicky or anyone. This has to be a secret," Aaron added, so the man would understand the urgency of his demand. This was important.

Erik sighed and looked into his eyes when he had a sweatshirt. "Aaron, I understand that some relationships need to be secret better than most other people, so don't worry," he said calmly, and Aaron turned around, leaving the room with Erik on his heels.

"This is nothing like that! It's not wrong or twisted, it's... I can't believe I have to explain this," he pressed out between clenched teeth, before deciding he didn't need to spend the evening with the others. He still had a book in Andrew's room at Abby's house. He'd just get some reading done and maybe talk some sense into his brother.

Chapter End Notes

THANK ALL OF YOU SO MUCH

I am serious! I was so insecure about this (and honestly thought maybe there were only three people reading the updates) and feel a lot better about it now! Thanks to all of you for letting me know that you're still around! It was great to read some old usernames again and awesome to see some new names!

I feel so appreciated and can't wait for you to read on! Seth's chap is next up, and you'll finally get the answers you've been waiting for!

Sorry that this took a little long, but I have a lot of stress and beautiful AsfaHan has a life as well, so don't be mad ❤️ (The next one will be up soon!)

FEEL FREE TO MESSAGE ME ON TUMBLR (@I-ship-it-verymuch) (can't miss it) (it's orange and Allison is my icon)

Alright, I'd like to say a very special thanks to Chocolate hell cookies freedom for all of the yelling!

Kate! You made me very happy, I'm glad you enjoyed this!
SERRIS THANKS FOR YELLING AT ME! And your spam was AWESOME!
Darcy!!!!! Thanks for always being there and sticking with me!
Asylum, thanks for the very helpful feedback!
Avap!!!! YOU are amazing!!!!!
Hesnotadream, thanks for letting me know you're there!
I hope you are not annoyed but i received so much feedback I feel like I need to give it back!
GayW1zardsAndF0xes OMG I LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR COMMENTS SO MUCH YOU WOULNT BELIEVE IT!
XExelsior I'm so happy to see that you're still around!
Hiraethia, same thing goes for you! Kisses! You're the cutest!
Elfooooo!!! Thanks for making me laugh and smile so much! Love you so much!!

And THE ONE AND ONLY ASFAHAN!!! Omg i can't believe it was your birthday!
All the love! Thank you!!! You're the. Est person EVER!!!
Chapter Summary

The chapter you've been waiting for!!!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil woke up to the sound of the shower on the next morning. Riko was in the bathroom and he was here on his own. He looked around and silently cursed himself for not waking up sooner.

He sighed very softly. It was the twenty fourth of December, the Foxes would celebrate Christmas Eve tonight, and he'd make sure they'd be alright.

There was a single tray of food on Riko's nightstand and Neil closed his eyes, trying to ignore the hunger. He'd received one meal yesterday, which was more than he'd usually gotten since he was back. Still, he was hungry and seeing the food even made it worse.

Riko had always been using malnutrition as a form of punishment, and Neil wanted to give in. Risk everything and eat and be satisfied for just a minute before Riko would come back.

He got up and changed into workout clothes, ignoring his aching muscles that were screaming in an attempt to burn energy that wasn't there. Neil leaned his head back against the wall and let his gaze slide over Kevin's postcards and pieces of paper. Some were newspaper articles, some pictures, some even poetry.

A poem called "Invictus" caught his attention. He read through it and was impressed.

_Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul._

_In the fell clutch of circumstance_
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed._

_Beyond this place of wrath and tears_
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid._

_It matters not how strait the gate,_
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul._

Kevin had highlighted the word 'unbowed' and 'unconquerable', and Neil was surprised that he'd
display something that Riko would disapprove of so openly in their room. Then again, this showed that Riko's obsession with Kevin was entirely about Exy and not one last bit about him as a person.

Riko got back a minute later, and smiled at Neil. "I thought you wouldn't need breakfast today. I mean, with the amount of effort you're putting into training, you don't exactly deserve anything, am I right?" he asked, and Neil counted to ten.

*I am the master of my fate*, he thought to himself before answering. "I can tell Tesuji about this. He wants me to play, and with nothing to burn, that's not going to work," Neil answered with a small smile, before getting up. "Don't worry, though, he won't punish you for failing to keep me alive. Just like when Kevin got too good, right? You didn't have to pay the price."

Neil would never talk to their Coach about this, obviously. He'd be punished for complaining, and that was the way things worked at the Nest. Still, Riko let him eat that day, and Neil almost smiled. While the number on his cheek came with many restrictions, it also meant that he was free to move within these borders.

Neil would rule his cage. He'd be the king of this prison so Kevin and Jean could be free.

At least he thought so, until he woke up in the middle of the night. Riko was standing over him with a smile on his face that could make the fires of hell freeze instantly, and while Neil felt the cold metal on his wrist, he couldn't quite place the feeling until he heard the clicking of handcuffs.

Oh no…

"You think you're so clever, but there aren't many things more stupid than threatening a king in his castle," Riko whispered, and while Neil was fully waking up, his hands were being tied to the bed already. He closed his eyes but couldn't fight the memories that were welling up. Not when Andrew wasn't there to remind him of what was happening right now. Not when he couldn't count the small freckles on his nose and cheeks until he was being called out on 'Staring'.

"The last person who was stupid enough to try was your friend Jean. *You can't keep me from playing now that Kevin is gone* he said. He really thought anyone could tell. That was when I slit his wrist open and left him screaming for a little before letting you take care of him. The blood loss was almost lethal," Riko went on, muting the peaceful memories Neil tried recalling. He couldn't even run away in his thoughts. Not when he felt the tip of a blade slowly sinking into the skin halfway between his wrist and elbow, blurring everything else.

"You're nothing, Nathaniel, don't forget that," Riko whispered, and Neil knew he wouldn't die. He'd be humiliated and might end up emotionally dead or physically even more crippled than Kevin, but he'd live.

*My head is bloody but unbowed* he thought to himself, trying desperately to ignore the pain. He couldn't suppress choked moans and his breath hitched way too often for him to pretend to be fine, but he was keeping his family safe.

He hoped they'd appreciate the Christmas present.

•

Seth was freezing. He wasn't breathing. Underwater. Everything was blue and he couldn't move and it was so cold and he wasn't sure if he wanted to get away. It was almost okay. He could stay. Didn't want to fight the tide pulling him in.

~

He was home. His mom called him for dinner, and they sat down on the table. His brothers nudged him, pretending to hit him, but they were having fun, so it was nice. Warm. Home.
Until his dad came home and it wasn't warm anymore. It started snowing and they were yelling and plates flew and his oldest brother hugged him tightly. All of them in the room the older ones shared, waiting for the woman that raised them to kick out yet another man without helping her.

~

Seth had the needle and wasn't sure if this counted as attempted suicide. If your life didn't matter to you and you couldn't care less, that wasn't really killing yourself, right? It was more… speeding up something that's inevitably gonna happen, right?

His mother didn't think so, when she screamed at him because of the hospital bill. Why had he spent all the money on drugs, why had he overdosed? He didn't tell her that he hadn't intended to end up at the hospital.

~

The girl was new on the team, and Seth had troubles remembering her name. There were a few new girls, this year.

He was at a party and ignored her. This was his time and he'd have fun. He didn't have to babysit his teammates because they didn't know their limit.

But she was eye-candy and he looked at her every once in a while. How couldn't he, in that dress?

And when some seniors got her drunk, Seth didn't care. He had just gotten a new dealer and man, he had taken some good stuff. The night was perfect.

Still, something bothered him. Something about the way they crowded her and about how she was still laughing, but also pushing against the men now. Something about the way they kept giving her glasses she declined but emptied anyways.

So when one of them took her hand and pulled her along, Seth left his group of friends. He was in the mood for a fight and picking one with that guy had nothing to do with the girl.

But somehow, that changed when he stood in front of them.

"What's your problem?" the senior asked and Seth locked eyes with Allison. She wasn't too drunk to have a nice evening, but definitely too drunk to have a nice evening with some random guy.

"Where are you going?" Seth asked back instead of answering and Allison smiled way too brightly when she said "He wants to show me his room. He has a painting he wants me to see."

Seth rolled his eyes. How naive could girls get?

"See, she wants this! Why are you making it your problem?"

"She's on my team, so leave her alone," he said, and was surprised by how easy this was. Teammates were a serious deal at Palmetto, and the discussion ended soon after that.

"We're leaving," he told Allison, and took her by the wrist.

She argued for no more than ten seconds and he pulled her along. Allison talked too much for him to listen in his drugged state and Seth was annoyed. Why had he done this?

"You never talk to me, you know? I've been on the team for over a month and we haven't had a real conversation yet," Allison complained then, and Seth rolled his eyes when they finally entered the Fox Tower.

"You're new and you shouldn't be on the team. You're not good at the game and think you're so
much better than everyone else because of your parents' money," he said. There was no filter between his mouth and brain, sometimes. He wasn't sure if this was a side effect of the drugs or his usual self.

Allison looked hurt when he pulled her up the stairs behind him, but he didn't care. "Why did you do this, then?"

Seth shook his head slightly and shrugged. The alcohol was kicking in, and his brain was clouded. He was almost glad to be home.

"Just because," he mumbled, and left her standing in the hallway. He wanted to lie down before he'd feel dizzy.

~

Allison yelled at him when she had gathered up the confidence, a week later. Alright, she was drunk, but she was also screaming because it wasn't okay. She had been having a fun time and he had no right to pretend to care for her when he still didn't talk to her. He was too high to care about anything apart from her body and she was too drunk to say no to the kiss.

She yelled at him again, the next morning, because how could he have kissed her?

~

Somehow, Allison was always there.

Seth was drowning again, and it was pulling him under, and everything hurt, but now something pulled him up.

The first 'I love you'.

Her eyes.

The way she came to him when she was at her lowest.

Her arms around him when it got too much.

'Let us be more important than this'.

He had tried. For her. And she thought he'd failed. He hadn't.

Not this time.

~

It was too bright.

Seth groaned and closed his eyes. There was a weird taste in his mouth and everything felt uncomfortable. When he wanted to bring up his hand to run over his face, he could barely move and opened his eyes again, very slowly. Something was wrong. This wasn't his room.

He felt panic rising up because of the lack of orientation, but two hands found his and there was a whisper in his ear and his breathing went normal again.

"Hey… hey, it's okay, don't worry, it's okay, I'm here," she whispered, and Seth relaxed. Allison…

He closed his eyes again when she ran her hand through his hair, and felt so warm for a second, he was almost ready to give in to the waves again. To drift away and be back where he was for all these… days? But not this time.

"Hey," he whispered, and pressed her hand softly, and tried keeping his eyes open. It was so bright.
Allison took a step back and looked at him for a second, seeming utterly shocked by his reaction. Then she hit the alarm button for nurses three times so a emergency signal would be sent, and shook her head.

"I swear…" she mumbled, and helped him get the breathing mask off his face. "Don't you ever do that again, Seth!"

And then he saw tears in her eyes but he couldn't quite place the situation and so he simply stretched out his hand. She was there and she was crying and Seth had never been this relieved to see her tears.

It was way too familiar, when the doctor came in and checked his reflexes. His pupils, his breathing, his blood pressure and pulse. But all he could think of was how Allison stood outside the room and waited. He wanted her back.

"What's the last thing you remember?" the woman asked, and wrote some things down on a piece of paper.

Seth frowned and tried to catch the thoughts that kept slipping. He remembered Allison. He'd been looking for her, and she was… he couldn't find her…

He swallowed hard and shook his head a little. "I want her here," he said, and was almost shocked to hear his own voice so raspy.

The doctor looked at him with a frown and seemed slightly annoyed, but he didn't care. He wanted her with him.

"Sure. I'll be back in thirty minutes. Make sure to call in case of any complaints, okay?" she asked, and Seth nodded a little. He didn't care. Allison.

And when she entered the room again, his breathing slowed down. She was here.

The doctor left them and Allison sat down on the bed, taking his hand in hers again. Seth sat up very slightly, still leaning against the pillows. She pressed her lips together and looked at him with way too many emotions on her face. He closed his eyes, couldn't take her expression right now.

"What happened?" he asked lowly, and she pressed his hand more tightly.

There was so much dust in his brain, clouding his thoughts. He couldn't remember too much. The banquet. He'd been looking for her.

Seth didn't want to believe that he'd screwed up again. Maybe it was different. Alcohol poisoning, a car accident, something that didn't have to do with what he thought.

Allison sighed and laid down on the bed, carefully avoiding the injections when she placed her head on his chest. "We were on the banquet, I went looking for you," she started, whispering softly, and he nodded, listening closely. He knew that. Remembered it.

Seth let his hand run through her hair and felt home when she cuddled closer, warming his side with her body. He was so glad she was here.

"I found you on the toilet, unconscious. The ambulance took us to the hospital and they said you'd taken too much again. All the usual stuff. They searched you and the bus. Your room at Palmetto and the bathroom there. They didn't find any drugs and couldn't find the needle," she said very slowly, and Seth tensed. She was disappointed.
He hadn't had anything on him. He hadn't bought drugs in weeks.

"Al? We're perfect at the moment. I wouldn't have wanted to take anything," he whispered. His head ached and he tried to remember. He had gone to the toilet and… Seth pressed his eyes together and tensed. He couldn't remember.

"Don't, Seth. I don't want to hear it. You're here and that's a fact," she answered, but didn't move away. He pulled her closer and looked at the ceiling, trying to grasp the thoughts.

"My head hurts," he mumbled, and Allison sighed deeply, hiding her face in his shirt. One of the hospital dresses… oh man, he hated them.

"You fell because of a seizure. Hit your head pretty badly," she mumbled, and he nodded. He remembered that headache.

But he wouldn't have remembered it if it came with a seizure, right?

Seth remembered because he'd been fully conscious.

"Someone was there. In the bathroom," he mumbled, and Allison nodded.

"Sure. Someone must have given you the drugs and taken the needle with them. Who was it?" She didn't sound accusing, more… demanding. A little disappointed, still.

"No, you don't understand, Allison. There… ow…"

He pressed his eyes shut and pressed a hand to his face. Thoughts and memories came crushing down and he could barely stand the intensity of them.

"Seth? Hey, what's wrong? It's okay, don't worry, it's fine," she whispered into his ear and her hands were in his hair again. She grounded him, stayed with him until he could form words again. It hurt. His head felt like it was being ripped apart, as if one half of his brain tried to separate itself from the other one violently.

"I didn't take anything. There was a person, I don't know who. Hit me on the head with something. I fell and they… I don't remember. I didn't do it, Allison. Not this time, I promise," he mumbled and his breathing was too shallow. He'd hyperventilate. He hadn't done it. Wouldn't have. Not this time.

"Hey, Seth, calm down. It's okay, I'm here! We'll work it out, I'm not mad, don't worry…" Allison whispered, and it made him feel grounded. He hated this hazed state of mind, so openly vulnerable.

She didn't believe him. She thought he was making this up because he didn't want to upset her. That wasn't true! He hadn't.

"I didn't do it, Allison. I promise! Not this time," he mumbled, and she shifted closer, cuddling him again.

"We'll talk about it, okay? Don't worry, Seth. I'll stay, no matter what," she whispered, and his eyes fell close.

Allison told him about the time he hadn't been there. Of how Matt had been there at least once a day, how the others worried, that Nicky's boyfriend was there.

She talked about how all of them were low-key worried about Neil because he wasn't answering texts, but how Kevin told them to calm down, since he was working things out with his mom.
She mumbled until he fell asleep, and kept running her hand over his arms or chest. Through his hair, over his cheeks.

Allison was there, so he knew it was safe to sleep. He has never had any sentimental connection to a physical place. Allison stayed with him, so he was home. Nothing else mattered.

Chapter End Notes

THANK ALL OF YOU FOR EVERYTHING!! Every single one of you!!

CHECK OUT MY SIDE FIC CROSSING LINES ITS ABOUT AARON AND KATELYN

TEXT ME ON TUMBLR IF YOU FEEL THE NEED TO YELL AT ME (@I-ship-it-verymuch)

Special thanks to the commentors on the last chapter:
Avap for sticking around!! And for making me happy and for being amazing!
Booksbreakhearts for caps lock comments and snaps and general happiness!!
Elfo because you get my Aaron just the way i wanted you to!
Hiraethia because you ask just the right questions!

GayWizardsAndF0xes and hesnotadream: SORRY FOR NOT ANSWERING YOUR COMMENTS!!!! I was on a party (and maaaaybe a little drunk but don't tell anyone) and just forgot :( I'm so glad you like these chapters! Thanks to the both of you for appreciating Erik and for yelling at me, I couldn't live without it!!

Hell Freedom and Cookies, because you didn't comment but let me knownwhat you thought anyways!!!!

And ASFAHAN FOR CONTINUING TO DO THIS WITH ME EVEN THOUGH SHE IS AT UNI AND HAS A STRESSFUL TIME!!!! I love you with all my heart!!!
Neil was fainting. Breaking. Dying.

He couldn't take it anymore. Riko's laughter and the blade and the whispered promises about what he'd do to Kevin. How he'd get Jean back here. How he'd make Andrew number five.

Practice was nothing but torture. His vision was blurring around the edges and he was close to fainting by the end of training, when he was the only player that hadn't gotten to drink water for hours.

He was panting and leaned his back against the wall while the others drank, fighting against the urge to faint. There was not much left in him at this point. Exy didn't make him feel alive anymore and thinking of the Foxes hurt more than it inspired. Neil wanted to give up, to give in, to… just stop.

"Nathaniel," Tesuji called and approached him. Neil straightened his back and raised his head, looking up at the coach. "You look terrible. Did you drink something?" he asked, and Neil looked past him at Riko for a second. The other boy seemed displeased with Tesuji's concern and slightly tense because he was probably fearing the consequences for himself.

"No, sir," Neil answered with a slightly trembling voice. He couldn't make himself say master. He couldn't lie.

Tesuji seemed to be annoyed and held out a bottle of water to Neil. He closed his eyes for a second and wanted to be grateful. He'd told Riko that Tesuji would make sure Neil could play. He'd known. Riko radiated anger from some feet away, but Neil couldn't care when he stretched out his hand for the bottle Tesuji had already screwed open.

"You shouldn't display your weakness so openly, Nathaniel. Others can take advantage of it," he added, and Neil nodded a little, not daring to look anywhere but into Tesuji's eyes.

"Yes. I'm sorry, sir," Neil said quickly, and just wanted to drink. He'd been playing for almost two hours, running on nothing but spite and slowly, he was even running out of that.

"You should be. See how it weakens you?" he asked, and Neil wanted to agree and just drink when Tesuji looked into his eyes and turned the bottle upside down, emptying it onto the ground. That…

Neil pressed his teeth together and refused to let anything show on his face. He wouldn't grant any of his teammates that kind of satisfaction. Not when he heard Riko chuckling already.

"Training is over. Another fifteen laps for Wesninski for getting his hopes up, though," he added, and Neil lost every single shred of belief in humanity that was still left in him.

Fifteen laps became twenty, and Neil didn't think he could make it back to his room. The prospect of a shower was what kept him going, though, and he didn't care about Riko's "That was fun."

He showered and drank water straight from the tap and was breathing again when his muscles relaxed under the warm stream of water. He would ignore Riko. Maybe that would get him to leave Neil alone. Maybe he'd get bored and just let him go.
Neil went back into their room and laid down in bed right away. Training would have usually ended thirty minutes from now, and Neil was glad to get a little more sleep.

"You know what, Four? The look on your face was my favourite thing since I heard the sound of bones breaking in Kevin's hand," Riko said, and Neil closed his eyes. Kevin was playing again, so none of this mattered.

He laid down and pulled the blanket up, wrapping himself into it. He would sleep and go on with his life.

Neil had gone through the rain for years. Simply knowing what sunshine felt like shouldn't change that too much. He would keep going.

"Four, if you don't answer, I'll talk to Jean instead. Or I'll call one of the psycho's other brothers. Should I make him go after Minyard or after you?" Riko asked and Neil counted to ten. Counted his Foxes. It still eased some of the pain. "I have a better idea! I'll get Minyard here and make him number five and then I'll just mess the both of you up at the same time. That's the thing about former stars, Four, they make the people realise who the real talents are."

Neil balled his fists and pressed his teeth together even more tightly. "Leave the Foxes alone, Riko. We have a deal," he answered slowly. He wouldn't let Riko get away with everything.

Riko laughed from across the room and Neil swallowed against the uneasiness creeping up. "We'll announce your transfer soon, Four, and I'll propose some deals to your friends. Though… probably only Andrew and Jean because he others are useless. I'd appreciate another striker, but Kevin is a cripple and the junkie won't play again," he said mockingly, and Neil's mouth went dry. This couldn't be true. He didn't want to believe it.

"Don't pull them into this, Riko. And what's wrong with Seth?" His voice was shaking and Neil couldn't even hide it. Anger because Riko was sinking so low. Fear because of what was yet to come. Panic because of what happened at home.

"Oh, I didn't tell you? Seth died at the hospital. Choked on his own vomit or something, just how you'd expect a pile of trash to leave," Riko explained cheerfully, and Neil's eyes were burning. He couldn't react. Not without risking everything. "Don't you wanna say something? Go ahead, Four. Tell me what you think and Boyd will be the next one."

"Just shut up for once, will you? For once in your life, try understanding when you've gone too far," Neil snapped at him, and Riko laughed.

Neil turned around and pressed his eyes shut, allowing himself a moment of mourning. If was tough, with all the fury filling him, but thinking of Seth made him feel numb. The thought of Allison was almost worse. Seth was gone because of him, but Allison would have to stay and take care of everything. Of herself, of Seth, of the shattered remains of what they were trying to be.

The night was filled with thoughts and pain rather than any kind of rest, and Neil's body felt like a punching bag the next day, when yet another racquet found its way to Neil's stomach.

It was fine, though. He was numb and hadn't eaten that morning. He'd survive Riko because Seth hadn't. He'd stay strong because Allison couldn't.

He'd endure this hell so his friends wouldn't have to.

•

"Hey Matt," Allison greeted him on the phone. She was standing outside the hospital and freezing,
but there was a smile on her face. Her voice was raspy but that wasn't important. Nothing mattered with Seth up and healthy. Not when the doctors said she could take him home.

"What's wrong?" Matt asked right away, sounding alarmed. She could practically see him sitting up a little straighter and sighed.

"Nothing! Don't worry, Matt. I was just wondering… I know it's Christmas Eve but my car is at Fox Tower and — Seth woke up this morning and I was wondering if you could pick us up? I can still ask Renee to take the monster's car, but—"

"I'll be there! He's fine? All the way? They want to let him go?" he asked, voice so hopeful and happy. She couldn't help smiling.

"He's good. They still wanna see him every other day but since Abby is there, they don't have a big problem with letting him go. He's still a little confused about what happened, but he'll tell you!"

She could hear some muffled sounds and conversations before Matt closed the door behind him. "I'm on my way. See you in a few!"

Allison relaxed when he hung up and stayed outside for a moment. The sun was shining brightly, radiating warmth no one felt on December-evenings and the sky was the coldest orange you could think of. It was so cold and Allison wrapped herself into her coat more tightly. This was a good day.

She went back inside and started packing her and Seth's things, putting the bag next to the door before sitting down on Seth's bed and taking his hand. "Matt will pick us up. He's on his way," she explained, and Seth nodded. He looked better now, with no more tubes and injections, and after the shower she'd helped him have.

Seth looked out of the window and she could see the thoughts running behind his eyes. Allison sat closer and let go of his hands, letting her fingertips run over his cheek softly.

"Hey," she mumbled, and he pulled her against him. Allison worried about him when he was so lost in his own mind.

"Was anyone here?" he asked lowly, and she rested her head against his chest. She knew he wasn't talking about the Foxes but his brothers, and Allison's heart broke a little because of the tone in his voice. He didn't want to acknowledge it, but she knew he wanted their support.

"They couldn't make it. Busy schedules, the kids, it was too stressful," she answered. Allison couldn't bring herself to simply say 'no'. They hadn't wanted to come, but she could make Seth feel a little better like this, so she would.

"Sure… yeah, figures," he said and shrugged, but held her closer. Allison let him hold her and was okay with being his anchor. He needed this and she wouldn't leave him alone. "Al? I really didn't do it this time," Seth added and she pressed her teeth together.

"I told you I'm not mad, Seth. I just hope you're over it now, yeah? Because I don't ever want to go through this again," she answered in a calm tone. Allison was getting mad at him. What reason did he have to lie? She'd stayed with him and wouldn't leave, so why did he bother?

"Allison, I'm serious! I wouldn't have. Not this time," he said, and Allison wanted to believe him. Wanted to with all her heart, but couldn't. This was the repetition of so many events before. She wasn't stupid.

"Matt will be here in no time at all. Let's go down already," she mumbled and got up. Seth let out a
frustrated sigh but she didn't let herself be bothered. Allison wasn't naive enough to let him get away with this.

They went downstairs in silence, her carrying the bags because she wouldn't let him take the weight. Matt was waiting in the parking lot and Allison smiled a little when he hugged Seth as if his life depended on it. Seth let Matt hold him up for a little before straightening his back. He didn't want anyone to think that the past week's weakness affected him in any way, and Allison sighed. He'd kill himself with that attitude one day.

She sat down on the backseat and they stayed silent for the whole way. Allison and Seth couldn't talk when they argued and Matt couldn't say what he had to say with anyone else present, but nobody seemed to be bothered.

Matt's "Hey, Seth, mind if we had a short conversation?" Didn't bother either of them, so Seth left for their room while Allison went into hers. She opened the door and dropped the bag, half because she was relieved to be back home and half because…

… What?

Dan and Renee sat on a sofa with Kevin, while Aaron was in one beanbag and Nicky shared the other sofa with a blond guy Allison had never even seen in her life.

"Thank God," Dan said, got up and hugged Allison. Renee joined them and she let her shoulders fall. These girls would always be there to hold her up when she couldn't do it herself. The hug lasted for almost a minute before they let go.

Kevin was the first to talk, which was surprising. "I'm glad you guys are okay," he said, and Allison just nodded and ran a hand through her hair.

"Thanks," she mumbled, and he actually smiled.

Nicky smiled at her reassuringly when she sat down on his and the other boy's sofa. "It's a Christmas miracle, isn't it?" he asked, and Allison couldn't help smiling a little. He was right.

"Kinda, yeah. Who's the boy?" she asked, looking at the blond guy next to Nicky on the far end of the sofa.

"How many people do you talk about, Nicky? Why does she have to ask?" the boy asked with a thick German accent, and Allison smiled at the pretended accusing tone. They were adorable. "I'm Erik!" he said, and they shook hands over Nicky.

"Not that many! To be fair, I mainly talk about the other boys on the team! It's only you and Kevin. And Neil, occasionally, but he's a kid. And sometimes Matt, but who can blame me?" Nicky answered, and it was so refreshing. He wasn't pitying her or being considerate, he was being himself. Allison liked it.

"Will I meet that Neil or won't he be back by January third?" Erik asked then, and Nicky shrugged.

"He hasn't texted back yet, but I'm guessing he'll be back soon. Maybe they have no internet connection because of the whole secrecy-thing," Nicky answered, and Allison raised an eyebrow. They hadn't heard from Neil in a week? She'd been at the hospital for all the time so she hadn't really cared, but this… this was odd.

"He hasn't talked to her for more than two times since he was sold to the Moriyamas, guys. I don't think we should stress him, he has a lot of catching up to do," Kevin interrupted her thoughts, and
she nodded. This was probably okay, right.

"Whatever, he'll be fine," Nicky answered, and Erik looked confused at the soft chuckle that escaped everyone's mouth. "But I was thinking… The plan was for the Upperclasmens to have breakfast at the hospital with you and for us to go to Abby's and celebrate Christmas with Abby, Andrew and Wymack. But now that Seth is up and you're here, we could celebrate a Fox Christmas as a team," he exclaimed excitedly, and Dan smiled so brightly at the idea. Allison knew she loved her team and especially the way they were actually acting as one, lately.

"Abby will be freaking out, Nicky. How is she gonna prepare all that food for tomorrow?" Kevin asked, and Nicky started laughing.

"Twenty bucks on her staying up until at least three," Nicky started, and Renee smiled at that.

"Fifteen on her sleeping by one in the morning," Renee added, and Allison couldn't help smiling. These guys…

Nicky took his phone out and called Abby, while the others were throwing bets at each other. Allison loved these idiots wholeheartedly and wanted to join one of the bets when the door of the room opened. Matt stood there without Seth, and he looked too stern when he tilted his head, indicating that he wanted her to join him.

Allison sighed. Where was Seth and what had happened? She left the room and stood in the hallway with Matt for a few moments before he started talking.

"Seth is still in the room. He doesn't want to socialise I guess," Matt started and bit his lip then, running his hand over his own arm as if to warm himself. Allison frowned at the way he radiated insecurity and wondered if this was due to Seth. She knew it was hard on Matt, the drugs and everything that came with them.

"What's up? What did he tell you?" she asked and heard the alarm in her own voice. She hated it, but she knew that Seth's behaviour was always tough on Matt. He wouldn't even sleep in the room sometimes, when Seth did drugs. He'd won the battle a long time ago, but that didn't mean that the scars didn't hurt from time to time. She couldn't imagine how hard it would be on Matt if Seth told him he'd found a new dealer or a new drug.

"Nothing. Not what you're thinking, anyways. I seriously doubt that he took the drugs," Matt answered, and Allison closed her eyes for a second and took a deep breath before thinking of the right words.

"Matt, he always does this. When we're good and everything is going upwards and you feel like maybe he understood, he starts taking the shit again. It was a matter of time," she said matter of factly. It didn't hurt nearly as much as it should have, considering that she'd really believed in him this time.

Matt shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair, spiking it even more. "I know, Al, we've been in this together. And to be honest, I thought he did it too! But now I talked to him, and he's not like usual. He doesn't feel guilty, he doesn't try to defend his actions, he's not looking for excuses. He isn't even as apathetic about it as he used to be. He's… confused and I really think he's innocent," Matt said, voice growing thinner and thinner. She knew it was tough on him and she was sorry for putting him through it again.

"What else happened, then? Who could have possibly drugged him? Why would anyone want that?" she asked, crossing her arms. Matt was right, in a way, but Seth had broken these promises along
with her trust so often, she couldn't find it in her to believe him. Apologies meant little when the words weren't followed by actions.

"I think you should talk to him about what he expects," Matt started, and bit his lip. "But who could possibly be afraid of us? There's only one team that really hates us because of how good our season went, and I wouldn't put this past them," he went on, and Allison raised an eyebrow.

"You think the Ravens are behind this? You think Riko drugged Seth?"

Chapter End Notes

1: There might be no chapter next week since I'm on a school trip to England
1.1: Any of y'all from Stradford/Cambridge/London and wanna meet?

2. Did you know I had a side fic about Aaron and Katelyn? It's called "Crossing Lines" and I'd appreciate you checking it out!

3. 6K HITS OMG THANK ALL OF YOU SO MUCH!!!

4. I live how all of you collectively wrote "Neil my son" and "Riko you evil bastard"!!!

5. Thanks to all of you who commented!
   Avap, I'm so happy everytime I see you and I can't type "amazing" without thinking about you hahaha
   Booksbreakhearts because of CapsLock and because we love the same poems and because there's some more Evil Riko JUST FOR YOU
   Elfo because Neil is f i n e. And because you keep up with my spams on Tumblr and because you always make me happy!
   GayW1zardsAndF0xes! Thanks because you've been here from the beginning and are sticking around!
   Zoey because you like seth and Allison and because you make me so happy.

   And special thanks despite the lack of comments (looks into your direction angrily because Saya, you don't have an internet connection and Free, because you??? Have a life????)
   No seriously Cookie/Free/I will definitely misspell your real name so I hope this is okay. I love writing you and it makes me happy and I appreciate you A LOT

   And Saya, thanks for adopting this baby with me! Thanks for sticking with it! Thanks for everything! I love you
#8, Nicky Hemmick, Backliner

Chapter Notes

TW: So, obviously these are the Nest chapters, but this one has a particularly severe storyline for Neil in mind, so should you be sensitive to graphic descriptions of violence, please check the end notes for further details and stay safe❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil couldn't see through his left eye properly because of the cut on his forehead that resulted in blood and sweat alike dripping into his eyes.

But they were training and Seth was dead and he wouldn't risk anything. He wouldn't risk the Foxes.

Neil swallowed when the next practice-game started. He was up against Riko for the first time in forever, and this was pathetic. Neil had played two full games today while Riko had barely played two full quarters so far.

Still, training was the only time he could really stand up against Riko, so Neil did. He knew that Riko would play the whole game this time, just to piss Neil off and be the dick he was.

Neil didn't exactly know what it was in him, but there was a fire burning so fiercely and Neil blocked Riko like his life depended on it. By halftime, his team was three goals ahead of Riko's. The boy was getting angrier and more frustrated, but Neil pulled strength out of it. Pressed and pushed harder. Riko was running to catch balls but Neil was faster and when someone slammed into your side with full force, there's no way to perform a decent move.

He knew it was risky, but Neil needed to show that he had a lot left in him. Of course Neil has had many years to realise that he was many things, but that unbreakable was not one of them. What Riko didn't know was that the Foxes had taught him something new about himself.

Neil might be breakable, but he was also mendable. Reparable. This wouldn't destroy him. Couldn't, as long as he kept the Foxes safe.

By some sort of miracle, Neil's team won with a five point gap. Riko ripped off his helmet and threw it to the ground before leaving the court. Neil allowed himself a smile, just a small sign of success, before going into the locker rooms and changing with everyone else. Privacy wasn't an option and Neil had grown up in this place. This was back to normal, back to being nothing, back to your teammates not caring about your boundaries.

Riko wasn't in the locker rooms so Neil knew he'd have to be in their shared room. He also knew he'd suffer and pay for this more than he ever had, so far.

Still, entering the room and seeing Riko totally furious didn't frighten him too much; not when there was so much satisfaction welling up inside his chest. He'd shown Riko what he was made of.

"You'll regret this," Riko barely whispered, and Neil shrugged a little.

"What? Showing the Ravens that their leader is bad at being the one thing he was raised to be? I'm not afraid of you anymore," Neil said, and was almost surprised about the way it felt. True and real.
Riko was as much of a failure as Neil was, with the plain difference that Neil wasn't alone. He had a team, or hoped so. Neil would bleed, but as long as he'd bleed orange, Neil didn't mind.

"You should be, Nathaniel. But first things first. Do you remember the night of Kevin's accident?"

Riko got off his bed and took a step towards Neil.

_Run…_

He didn't, though. He stood right there and looked into Riko's eyes. "The night he would have won against you if you had played fairly? I do," he answered, and took a step back when Riko came closer. Neil felt the door in his back and tensed a little.

"The night I called Kevin out of our room and left him to die in the hallway? The night he wouldn't have survived without you?" Riko added, and invaded Neil's space further, smiling up at him slightly. Neil tried not to look away and kept eye contact with Riko, looking more challenging than he meant to, probably.

"I remember. What about it?" Neil asked coldly and Riko's smile widened a little.

"Who is gonna be there to pick up the broken pieces of you tonight, Four? Who will sew you back together?" Riko asked, and Neil forced his breath to stay calm and regular. He still pressed himself into the door more tightly and couldn't suppress a shiver. "I'll answer for you. Nobody, Four, because you're alone. Because you're standing up for people who don't care about you," Riko whispered and Neil swallowed back the disgust. Riko was wrong and he didn't even know it. Though maybe…

Before his thoughts could betray him, his body did. When Riko lifted his leg and forced his heel onto Neil's bare foot with the whole force of his weight two, three, four times, Neil sunk together into his own body.

"Was that a crack? A broken foot? How unfortunate, Four. But at least you're as crippled as your hero Kevin now," Riko said, sounding encouraging while Neil's life crashed over him like waves in a storm. Neil was a ship and he was leaking and breaking and drowning in the waves.

His foot would be fine. This was fine. It didn't even hurt at all. His foot was numb and yet, something told Neil to scream when Riko didn't do anything but step onto it lightly. He couldn't even hold back this time and Neil found himself begging for Riko to stop, to just finally stop.

There was still no pain, but when else could you expect from Neil? There was a numbness and void and the darkness of nothing at all consuming him from the inside out and it fed on Riko's laughter and on the humiliation of begging for your life.

"And after today, I don't think you deserve the number anymore, do you? It always looked odd on your cheek. Pretending to be something you aren't," Riko mumbled and Neil sunk together on the floor, hugging his knees to his chest and hiding his face. He was pathetic and useless. Nothing against Riko. Nothing at all. Just the darkness and pain and the pulsing in his right foot and the way his fingers clawed into his knees and how he held back the tears because he couldn't do that now. He couldn't be that person. There must be light somewhere, there must have been light and brightness somewhere along the way.

But suddenly, Riko's hand was in his hair and ripped his head back. Their eyes locked for a few seconds and Neil froze when Riko smiled.
No Foxes. Neil had failed. Riko would throw him away because he was nothing at all and go one tormenting the rest of them until every threat was gone.

It was painful, the way he gripped Neil’s hair. It was even more painful to see him produce a knife out of thin air.

"You're a pathetic, dirty bastard and you will not ever make Court. Not as long as I rule this kingdom," Riko whispered, and then the knife was on his cheek, pressing into the flesh and then turning. "Say goodbye to your number. Let the world see that you're unworthy," he added softly, and Neil lost his grip.

He wouldn't ever play Exy again.

He didn't keep the Foxes safe.

He had risked everything and lost it all.

Neil was back where his life had started. Miserable and worthless and lacking any ever so smallest spark of hope.

•

Nicky was cold, but when he stretched out his arm and found a warm body, he smiled and cuddled closer without opening his eyes. He didn't need to, with Erik.

"Morning, Liebling," Erik whispered, and Nicky chuckled lazily at the pet name. He'd grown used to waking up next to him again and for these short moments, it didn't matter that they'd be separated again in a few days. Right now, only Erik mattered. "Merry Christmas," he added, pressing a kiss to Nicky's temple.

Nicky's eyes opened at that and his smile grew even wider. "It's Christmas! We're celebrating Christmas together!" It was silly, but it was so meaningful! Nicky didn't even try to keep the cheerful smile from his face when he kissed Erik with all the happiness there was.

Erik was there and his hair stood into every direction and they were cuddling and it was Christmas!

They were in one bedroom at Abby's and Nicky's face brightened even more when he thought about breakfast! Breakfast with his cousins, Erik, Kevin, Abby and Wymack!

"Let's go! We have to help Abby prepare! I can't believe you're here…" Nicky smiled so brightly and pretty much forgot about how tired he was. This was a miracle.

Erik left for the bathroom but Nicky went straight for the kitchen. Aaron was sitting on the sofa with headphones on, facetimeing someone apparently. He smiled and whispered words into the microphone too softly for anyone to hear and he kept checking the room anyways. He couldn't make out more than a flash of long, blonde hair on his cousin's phone but would never talk about that.

Nicky didn't want to disturb him too much, but still ruffled the blond hair and wished him a merry Christmas in a whisper. Whoever he was calling had a positive influence on Aaron, apparently. He slapped Nicky's hand away, but smiled a little when he said "Merry Christmas" back and looked back at his phone. It was more than Nicky had gotten last year.

He went into the kitchen and saw Abby checking pans and the oven while managing too cook eggs and setting the table at the same time.

"Morning, Nicky! Happy Christmas. Could you prepare the coffee maybe, love?" she asked and ran a hand through his hair softly before putting plates on the table. He helped her, of course, and Nicky
doubted there were many times he was happier than this.

Neither Kevin nor Wymack were there for breakfast because Kevin slept til noon on holidays and because Wymack was called in for some emergency meeting with the school's officials for some reason nobody knew about yet.

It was nice, anyways. Aaron had ended the call as soon as Andrew entered this room and took his seat at the breakfast table. Erik came a few minutes later, freshly showered, the blond hair looking almost brown while it was wet.

Andrew looked like crap when he took a piece of bread and spread nutella on it in a thick layer. Aaron raised his eyebrow at his sick twin, but one of the rules on Christmas was that no arguments could take place. There were only three occasions on which the twins followed Nicky's bid: Christmas, trials and funerals, and that was enough for him.

He spent most of the morning talking. The Upperclassmen had decided to have breakfast together and stop by for lunch.

"Has anyone heard from Neil, anyways? I mean, I get the whole family-thing, but he should call on Christmas, don't you think?" he changed the topic for the fourth time, hoping someone would participate in his monologue this time.

Andrew shrugged a little at that and said the first thing today. Maybe in days. Andrew wasn't talkative when he was ill. "He doesn't seem to be the religious type," he said, voice scratchy and low.

"Neither are you guys and we're still celebrating," he said and Andrew shrugged, looking back at the book in his lap. Nicky couldn't even be mad at the sudden end of their conversation when he saw Andrew reading the book he'd given to him this morning. The cousins had a silent agreement on presents: they had to be cheap and useful in a way. They wouldn't spend big amounts of money and they wouldn't make presents just because it was Christmas. They wouldn't be mad if they didn't get a present and nobody was allowed to feel bad if they picked the wrong thing.

This was okay for all of them and while Andrew might not especially appreciate the books he got from his cousin, he read them anyways.

Nicky had given a pair of black jeans to Aaron, as well as a tiny pompom he'd seen at a gift shop and Aaron had looked at him as if he might kill him, but Andrew hadn't been in the room and Nicky thought he might secretly appreciate it.

This was another agreement. Presents were given one on one. It wouldn't be a great ceremony or a huge unwrapping event. You gave them what you wanted and left.

Kevin woke up after a few hours and had hot chocolate with the twins. Calories didn't count on holidays, another rule so Kevin wouldn't start fights. Abby was in the kitchen and Erik tapped Nicky's arm softly. "Can we have a moment?" he asked and Nicky looked up surprised. What was this about? Nicky hoped it wasn't a present, since they had agreed on splitting the cost of Erik's flights and basically being each other's present.

They got up from the sofa and went into the bedroom that was Nicky's over every vacation he spent at Abby's house.

"What's going on?" Nicky asked once the door was closed and Erik scratched his neck. He was a little taller than Nicky and had greyish blue eyes that seemed to sparkle. He saw how insecure the man was and took his hands, pressing them softly. "Erik?"
The blond boy intertwined their fingers and looked at them while biting his lip. Nicky felt insecurity well up inside him and swallowed against it. This couldn't be negative. Erik was there and they were happy. This was good!

"Can we sit down, maybe?" Erik asked and they took a seat on the bed's edge. Erik ran his fingers over Nicky's palm and seemed lost in thought. "Okay, so... I know it's hard, okay? The separation, university, the season and everything. It's just that I miss you and I worry and..."

Erik stopped and sighed, looking at their hands and Nicky frowned in concern. "Three and a half years," he reminded Erik. Then he'd be done with uni and they could be back together—for good this time. Why did this sound so wrong? Why did Erik sound so different?

"I love you," he added in German. Erik smiled up at that and looked softer. Something changed.

"I know, Nicky! I love you, too! That's what this is about!" he said, and smiled this time. They switched between German and English when they missed an expression or couldn't find the word, but Erik was only using his mother's tongue right now. He always was, when something was important.

"Okay, Nicky... I need you to listen, okay? I don't have a lot of money at the moment and I'm not sure that will change in the next few years, but I still want to give you the world," he started and looked into Nicky's eyes. It eased the panic and the warm expression in Erik's eyes made him feel absolutely happy.

"And... it's not much, okay? And I promise you'll get a real ring one day and I won't ever leave you, no matter the difficulties. So... God, my hands are sweaty," he mumbled and rubbed them on his trousers before taking a box from his pocket.

Nicky's smile grew wider and he rubbed his eyes before he knew there were tears in them. "We said we wouldn't buy any presents," Nicky mumbled, but was as far from mad as it got.

"We said we'd be each other's presents, and that's what this is. The promise that we'll be there forever," Erik answered, and Nicky opened the box slowly. It was a small ring on a silver chain. Nothing fancy, probably even too small to fit around his finger, but the necklace looked beautiful. Nicky sniffed.

"It's like a promise ring, I guess. Nothing fancy, but I felt like you should have one," Erik mumbled and Nicky was crying. He couldn't believe it. He'd gotten a ring!

Erik kissed him and Nicky hugged him close, pulled him in, held him tightly.

"Thank you," he whispered and Erik smiled, running his fingers over Nicky's cheek until there were no more tears.

"Thank you, Nicky", he answered and helped him into the necklace. It looked unsuspicious and wouldn't raise attention, which was probably the reason for the decision against a real ring. Still, it was perfect.

"You don't have to tell anyone just yet," Erik promised, and Nicky nodded a little. Erik understood that this would result in some kind of confrontation with Aaron and neither of them wanted that today.

Nicky kissed Erik's cheek again and couldn't hide his happiness. He didn't want to. "I love you," Nicky mumbled and Erik nodded, pulling him into a hug again.
"Love you more," he answered and Nicky smiled. For once, he didn't argue. He'd just let Erik win this round.

They must have stayed cuddled together for a while, because the doorbell rang and then chatter filled the house. The Upperclassmen had arrived. Nicky stayed with Erik, whispering about their future for a while. He wanted this moment for them!

They only got up when Abby called for lunch, leaving the room while holding hands and wearing the brightest smile anyone could imagine.

Aaron saw them holding hands and rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything. It was Christmas, after all.

The Upperclassmen had dressed up for the meal; they looked posh and fancy, but somehow Allison and Matt still seemed normal. They always dressed like they had money, Allison more apparently that Matt.

The first course was a light soup, and Abby smiled stiffly at them.

"Where is Coach?" Matt asked, and they all looked around the room a little as if they were sure he was around somewhere.

"He's still at the headmaster's office. It's probably about money or new locker rooms or… I don't know. Enjoy the food, guys," she said, and the Foxes exchanged worried glances. If Abby was like this, something was wrong.

Seth looked terrible. Not as bad as Andrew, who was wrapped in many layers of sweatshirts and didn't talk to anyone, but still terrible. He was pale and looked like he hadn't slept in days, even though he'd just woken up form basically a week of non-stop sleep. Allison checked on him all the time and touched his hand or arm quite often.

Renee sat next to Erik and tried to get rid of the tension somehow.

"Hey, you know what? We decided to not go home for New Years this year, so… what do you think of celebrating together? The Vixens and the basketball team asked, I'm sure the other athletes will be there as well," she said and the cousins and Kevin exchanged glances. They couldn't go to Columbia with Andrew as sick as he was and this would be on campus. A way to celebrate, even if it wasn't what they had in mind.

But before any of them could answer, the front door was practically ripped open and Wymack stormed in, face as cold as ice and radiating tension.

"You guys have one chance to tell me everything about Josten. Right now," he said and took his jacket off.

Abby looked worried and concerned while the Foxes were confused. Dan was the first to speak up. "What's wrong with him?" she asked and Coach Wymack shook his head.

"Don't, Dan, don't play dumb. Because what's wrong is that he's exchanging his orange jersey for a black one," he snapped at them and Nicky swallowed. All of them were small on their chairs, Kevin looked pale and Matt frowned.

"That's bullshit," Allison answered, crossing her arms. "Why would you say that? And don't yell at us, we didn't do anything wrong!"
Allison had the magical ability to calm people down by plainly being annoyed. Nicky didn't know why, but it worked.

Wymack sat down at the last chair at the table and took a deep breath. "The headmaster called to say that NCAA wants to announce the transfer of one of our players, so they called me in. Tesuji told the officials that Neil will transfer after the holidays. Does anyone know something about this?"

All eyes went to Kevin, who looked like he'd seen a ghost. "That's wrong, Coach. He wouldn't do that. I bet he doesn't even know about this; he's in England, they just want to pressure us. This is a publicity stunt." Kevin answered, voice a little too worried to be taken seriously.

Allison was the next to start talking. "He's right, that sounds exactly like what they'd do. They'd have published pictures if Neil was with them," she said, crossing her arms. Nobody remarked that they'd only publish pictures if he looked presentable, which wouldn't be very likely.

But Nicky nodded. Neil was so happy with them, he wouldn't leave. Never. The boy had grown into a real person in his months here, and he was happy. Nobody would give that up.

Then again, Nicky himself had gone back to America because of the twins, even though he'd found Erik along with happiness. But Neil wouldn't go back!

"The headmaster wanted to know why we haven't told him about it. He said Tesuji made it sound final. Can one of you call Neil? Does anyone have his mother's number?"

All of them looked lost, and Nicky bit his lip. "He doesn't answer the texts we send him. I don't think he'll pick up," he said lowly, and Kevin pressed his lips together, swallowing audibly before talking.

"And his mother is not the kind of person to give out her number," he answered and Nicky looked around the table. All of them looked lost and tired and broken. What had happened to Christmas?

"Okay, here's what we're gonna do," Wymack said, but a phone rang.

Andrew pulled his mobile out of his pocket and checked the number. He looked even more sick than at other times.

"Could you turn that off?" Wymack asked, but Andrew shook his head before picking up. All eyes were on him when he wordlessly put the person on speaker. You could hear a woman yelling into the phone.

"— that you'd take care of him and now I get a call from my contacts saying he's at the Nest? How absolutely useless are you at protecting my son? I'll be there as soon as I can and I swear to God, if I don't see him safe and sound the Moriyamas will not be the only ones to suffer, Andrew!"

All eyes were on Andrew, who looked at the phone with his shoulders tense. How did he manage to look bored when that woman screamed at him?

And why would she blame Andrew? Why did Neil's mother call him, of all people?

"What exactly is going on?" Andrew asked, voice scratchy. He sounded worse than he had before and Nicky wanted to support him in a way. Pat his shoulder or just encourage him. He couldn't believe that woman blamed anything on Andrew. Though… what exactly did she blame on him?

"Abram—Neil… Neil is at Edgar Allan and I've been informed that he's going back to their team. You said you'd keep him safe and you failed! And now he's back there and you're probably watching them taking my son apart and I bet you psychopath—"
Andrew ended the call when the woman's voice got more and more hysterical. Nicky took Erik's hand under the table and all of them looked several shades paler.

"So he's not with his mother but at the Nest without telling anyone?" Aaron asked and even though he concealed it mostly, Nicky could hear the concern.

Erik didn't know about the mafia situation or about how the Ravens treated the members of the future Perfect Court, but Nicky figured he was getting the idea.

He looked around once more. Matt stared at the phone that was still laying on the table as if to demand more information. Dan frowned, seeming to calculate difficult formulas. Allison and Seth exchanged looks with Abby and Wymack, Kevin looked ready to pass out, Erik was pressing Nicky's hand.

Renee and Aaron were both watching Andrew, and Andrew…

Andrew looked ready to burn down the world.

Chapter End Notes

Update: Trigger Warning: breaking bones, panic attacks (spiralling)
As always, feel free to contact me on Tumblr (@i-ship-it-verymuch) for more detailed warnings and explanations! Stay safe!

I'm back! England was AWESOME in case anyone is interested!
And Update on my Life: I'm reading Fangirl and tbh I see some of this in carry on?
Like, of course we don't have 35 Thousand hits and everything but I just want all of you to know that I'm super happy to be doing this with you! It's a tiny piece of myself and I'm in love with the fact that you're sharing it with me!

I hope its Okay if I don't thank everyone individually this time because this is like a general thanks to the 6K of you that are in this with me!
However I DO want to thank hesnotadream for the long comment, melpomenethemis for the heads up on the strike that didn't take place in the end ❤ And 2aminyard because I appreciated it a lot!!

And I hope everyone who didn't comment is still around reading it
And I hope everyone who did knows that there's a special place in my heart for you!

And I just wanted to say that i couldn't be more thankful. For you, for where this is going, for the people i met! Darcy, eleftheria, elfo, and many others

Above all Saya, whom I couldn't live without anymore. I hope you're aware that i'm fangirling over each of you, and I just want to confess what a total embarrassing nerd I am
Renee's!!! Aka "What will we do now that Neil is missing?"

Chapter Notes

What was he even holding on to anymore?

When everything was slipping and he lost grip of what used to matter, was there anything left to keep him together?

He'd gotten lost in an illusion, built a tiny dream and realised too late that returning to reality came with inevitable pain. The world he'd tried to build was crumbling and buried Neil in the remains. He looked up, saw pieces of towers and castles breaking off and covering him in dust and smoke until he couldn't see the light anymore.

He consisted of nothing but the blood on his hands and failure. Nothing but the darkness and void inside.

Neil let go of everyone he'd been trying to be and everything he'd wanted to become.

Nothing.

Renee watched Andrew closely. Many others looked at him and saw someone apathetic, but she liked to believe that she could see past the shell. Andrew usually pretended to be the monster people saw in him, but she had never bought into it.

Now was different, though. Now, he didn't guard his emotions, forgot to shield himself from the world. Andrew looked like he wanted to punch someone or something so desperately...

Then she wrapped her fingers around the cross on her necklace and took a deep breath. Work. They needed to work, to do something.

Aaron was the first to speak after the phonecall ended. "So he's not with his mother but at the Nest without telling anyone?" he asked, and Kevin swallowed audibly.

"He's not picking up?" Coach Wymack made sure then, looking at Nicky. The oldest cousin pressed his lips together and shook his head and Renee wanted to be there for him in some way, knowing she couldn't. She was relieved when Erik placed his hand on Nicky's shoulder and comforted him that way. "So what are we going to do?"

Renee took a deep breath and managed to sound as collected as she could. "We need to get him out of there some way. Jean was almost broken when I got there and he still called me. If Neil can't do that anymore, we should go and get him," she answered and was met by nods all around the table.
Kevin, however, cleared his throat.

"I'm not trying to say that this isn't a bad situation, but Neil spent half his life there without his mother caring. She might be mad about a broken deal, but I doubt she really cares about him being there. She didn't even know he was gonna be there, so he lied to us from the beginning. He never went to England," Kevin started and all eyes were on him.

"What is that even supposed to mean?" Matt asked and sounded way too defensive about it. Renee sighed softly, hoping this wouldn't result in an argument.

"I'm just trying to say that Neil chose to leave. Maybe he decided to go back for a reason. You don't understand this, but it was his life. He might have wanted it back," Kevin said lowly and Renee pressed her lips together. She wondered if the others knew how much of a confession this was. How Kevin practically told them that he felt like maybe he should go back, some days.

"I don't think he would consider transferring. He learned how to smile here, why would he ever give that up?" Allison asked, and Kevin let out a frustrated sigh.

"Maybe this is about more than his personal happiness. Think of the Moriyamas and tell me you cannot imagine a single thing they could threaten you with so you'd give this up!" He was probably louder than he meant to and Renee saw Nicky flinch back a little. Some of them seemed confused, but Renee understood, and from the way Dan looked at Matt she knew that some of her friends knew the feeling, too.

Renee thought about the situation. What could they do? She didn't know. Jean had asked her to get him and there was no thinking twice. Neil? Neil had left and hadn't contacted them. They couldn't just take his freedom away like this. However, maybe he couldn't call. Maybe it was too late. Maybe...

"Did he say goodbye to anyone? Did he say anything at all indicating that this might not be what he wants?" Abby asked then and Andrew's hands balled into fists. She wanted to tell him to breathe and to let the heat in his chest cool off a little before talking, but she knew he wouldn't want her to in front of so many people.

"He didn't go willingly. He apologised for the inconvenience he was right before he left," Andrew said and Renee seemed to be the only one surprised to hear this. The others either didn't pick up on Andrew's emotions or didn't care.

Dan bit her lip and nodded. "He was weird when he left," she confirmed and Kevin sighed.

"Maybe because he was leaving. We can't question his decision, it's not our place."

"Why?" Seth asked, crossing his arms. "Because you decide it was his will? You're the single person who knows best what he went through, yet you're the one that doesn't want to get him out of there? Because, Kevin, maybe he didn't want to go. And I'd rather not take the chances. The idiot is one of us." Seth looked at Kevin challengingly and tilted his head. He only relaxed slightly when Allison ran a hand over his upper arm and whispered something.

"I think we should check it out," Coach Wymack declared and Renee was relieved that he was taking control of the situation. They needed someone to tell them where to start. "Any plans? Ideas?" he asked, looking into the group.

Andrew was up before anyone could even attempt to answer. "I'm picking him up," he said, but lost his balance and held on to the table. Andrew was rarely ever sick, so he must have gotten dizzyer
than ever whenever he got up. Strangely enough, Aaron was there to support him, offering an arm when Andrew shut his eyes, trying to gain his balance back. And even against all odds, Andrew held on to his twin's arm.

"You're not going anywhere. What would you do, anyways? Sneeze at Riko until he gives Neil away? I can go. At least I know how to take care of wounds."

Renee frowned for a second, wondering why they were just assuming he was wounded. Then she remembered Neil as a person and nodded to herself. There was no scenario in which he'd go through the time at the Nest unharmed.

Andrew sat back down on his chair slowly and looked into Aaron's eyes for longer than ever, before looking back down. It was as close to approval as Aaron could wish for.

Wymack was the one to break the silence. "And what are you going to do? Tell Riko you want him back and drive Josten here? He signed a contract, guys, a college student won't get far." Renee's thoughts were running. This was so wrong!

"What if the contract was disapproved of? What if someone at the committee said you couldn't change teams mid-season? Kevin didn't, he only coached. And neither did Jean. Maybe it's not possible. Not if I say so," Allison said and Renee frowned at the girl. She looked every bit like the daughter of her parents in that moment.

"What do you mean?" Wymack asked cautiously and Allison smiled grimly. "I'm gonna call a friend of the family who works at the ERC. I'll tell him we can't afford to loose him and make something about my family up so he pities us. Then the contract is illegitamate and we can technically just take Neil," she said and Renee smiled. Allison was right. This made sense and was exactly the role you'd expect her to play in situations like this.

"Do it while they're on the way. I don't want you to go alone, Aaron, that's the Nest we're talking about," Wymack chimed in again.

"I'll go with him," Renee said. "I've been there, I've done exactly this. I should be there," she said and nobody disapproved.

"I'll drive so you can plan everything on the way. And my car is bigger," Matt said into Andrew's direction, who just glanced at him.

Wymack looked from Aaron to Matt to Renee and nodded a little. "Try bringing him back in one piece," he said and suddenly everything happened in fast forward. Matt was getting his keys, Allison took out her phone, Aaron helped his brother to his room. Andrew even let him support some of his weight. Renee sighed softly, mentally preparing herself for how they would find Neil. She hoped he looked better than Jean had. She hoped Kevin was right and Neil just wanted his life back, so they'd be able to just make him happy again.

She was ready to leave the house and climb into Matt's car, when Aaron tapped her shoulder. She turned to him, smiling slightly. "Hey," she said and Aaron pointed at a door.

"He wants to talk to you."

Renee nodded a little and knocked on Andrew's door once before entering the room. He was sitting on the bed, looking more miserable than before. "You really shouldn't walk as much as you do. You look terrible," she remarked with a smile. Andrew only shrugged.

"I don't care. Nicky wouldn't have let anyone skip Christmas lunch," Andrew answered and she
smiled at him, waiting for a real answer. "I know it's not your job, but can you take care of them tonight?" he asked then and she nodded very softly. She knew he needed to hear it, even if she wouldn't even have thought about this. It was just naturally that way. Of course she'd keep his family safe.

"As long as you can't do it yourself, I will," she promised and Andrew gave her a sharp nod. The bags under his eyes looked terrible. "Can you do me a favour and sleep a little before we come back? You really need to get better," she added and Andrew looked away.

"I'm gonna ask Abby for the medicine. This won't happen again," he whispered and Renee knew better than to make a big deal of it. She was still incredibly relieved he'd made this decision, even if it was about being needed. Even if Andrew only did it to protect others, at least he took care if himself as well.

"It'll help you get better," she promised and came a few steps closer until she sat down on the edge of his bed. He was starring into the other direction out of the window.

"That's what they said back then," he answered and Renee bit her lip. She hadn't wanted to...

"There was nothing wrong with you then, Andrew," she whispered and he scoffed.

"I know that. I want to be alone," he said with his voice stern. Renee nodded and left Andrew's room. She saw Nicky and Erik helping Abby with the table, Seth and Allison by the window while she practically purred into her phone and Coach Wymack and Dan talking on the sofa. She couldn't see Kevin but just assumed that he was in his room.

Renee left the house and saw Matt and Aaron waiting in the front seats of his truck. "Ready?" she asked after climbing in and Matt started the engine.

They drove in silence for a few minutes – maybe the first hour – the only sound being Matt's frantic tapping on the steering wheel.

Surprisingly, Aaron was the one to break the silence. "What should we expect? Will he look worse than when he first got here?"

Renee looked at her hands and clenched her teeth for a few moments, distancing herself from the memories far enough to talk about them.

"I don't quite know. I mean, he's there voluntarily—"

"Maybe. Maybe he was forced to lie to us. We don't know that," Matt chimed in and Renee nodded.

"Right. I'm just saying we don't know what to expect. We don't know Riko or why Neil is there," she explained and Aaron sighed audibly. The sky was clouded, only bits of crystal clear blue shining through every once in a while.

"Just tell us how you found him so Matt won't faint when he sees his idiotic friend," Aaron demanded and Renee chose to ignore the tone in his voice. He was stressed, all of them were. She couldn't hold this against him.

"Okay… okay, sure," she said and thought back to that evening. The memories consumed too much space in her and she forced herself to swallow them back before she could let them spill out unfiltered. This wasn't the place for these feelings. "There were many cuts. A lot of blood. He was barely conscious when I arrived and the drive back was frightening. Six hours of groaning and nothing else – sometimes only silence. You worry a lot," she explained, trying not to become too
It was tough when the memories were omnipresent, surrounding her like thick fog on cloudy autumn mornings. She took a deep breath and forced herself to look at the present. Jean was with the Trojans. He shared a room with Jeremy, who was the most positive and cheerful person ever. He was saved.

That didn't mean the memories hurt any less. She felt her neck stiffen from the six or seven hours it had taken her to get there as if she'd just arrived, as if her muscles were recalling the situation more clearly than she allowed her head to. She felt the tension in her shoulders and her dry throat. She recalled the quick conversation with a security guard until he let her in, then an even shorter one with Riko. *He's broken and useless. Take him and do what you want with him, just like you did with Kevin.*

She pushed past him and ignored his presence, entering Jean's room. Her years in the gang should have prepared her for the view, but she hadn't expected this. The cuts all over his face and upper body. Dark bruises, a smashed cheek, blood everywhere.

Renee had allowed herself a second to breathe before walking towards him. He'd been patched up to a minimalistic degree, band aids and bandages covering some parts. Then someone came from the bathroom connected to this room. Neil Josten, the Raven’s most promising investment for the next season, looking tense when he saw her. There was blood on his shirt and hands and then he'd dared to look at Jean.

She was younger then, less collected, less mature. Renee had shoved the boy away from Jean, reacting too violently, hurting him every way she could. He'd done this. Done it or watched. Hadn't helped. The boy deserved to suffer for the pain he'd inflicted or for what he'd let happen.

Renee thanked God that she had given her knives to Andrew, because she would have used them back then.

It was only Jean's condition that made her turn away from Neil and help him to Andrew's car.

"And you think Neil will be like that, too?" Matt asked from the driver's seat, taking her thoughts back to the present.

"I think what we're hoping for is that he's not worse than Jean. That would be a good scenario," she mumbled, starring out of the window.

"What would a bad scenario be?" Aaron asked, frowning back at her and she swallowed again, shaking her head a little.

"Think of Kevin's hand and tell me that you put anything but knives past Riko," she said, watching as raindrops hit the window suddenly. That was good. Rain meant the sky was open. That prayers were answered and the wellbeing of everyone assured.

She felt guilt welling up inside her, making her feel sick and cold. Renee had been so mad at Neil, not once questioning that this was at least partly his fault. Jean told her on the way home that Neil was probably the main reason he was still alive; someone just as bad off as Jean had been, suffering during his time at the Nest.

She wanted to be in charge of him. On the one hand because Andrew had Kevin to care about, on the other hand because she wanted redemption for the wrong she'd done him.

Andrew had declined, obviously. It was foreseeable, really, when you considered his intentions.
behind the whole safekeeping. He wanted her to take care of the others while he protected his family from the Moriyamas and every other possible threat. He basically had to take Neil to minimise the all-over risk.

Yet here she was and maybe that was a part of a plan. Maybe she finally got to say sorry. Maybe her mistakes would be forgiven because she had finally found a way to give Neil back what she'd taken.

They had started driving around three pm and even though Matt was ignoring the speed limit, time was passing by slowly. Renee watched trails of raindrops chasing themselves on the window and thought of this as a chance. It was the only way not to lose hope. Maybe bad things happened. Maybe a ton of bad things happened and Renee had seen too many of them to believe that they were God's will. She thought they happened no matter what, but that at least there was a way out. Neil being at the Nest couldn't be part of a higher plan, but them coming to save him might be.

Around four hours into the drive, Allison called. It was pitch black already, though it was only around seven and the highway was as close to empty as it got. People were at home, celebrating Christmas with their loved ones.

Renee picked up and put her on speaker right away.

"Hey, I made around a thousand calls," Allison said, sighing. Aaron scoffed from the passenger seat but at least he didn't say anything.

"Was there anything helpful coming from it?" Renee asked, looking at the display with furrowed brows.

"Oh yes! I called that old friend of mine and told him how we couldn't afford losing Neil. He made some calls and just got back to me. Players can't transfer mid-season. There's an official rule saying this is only possible if the athlete's marks are so low he wouldn't pass the year. Wymack checked Neil's record and while he's not especially great at Spanish, he'll definitely not drop out. We're safe, they can't have him," she explained, sounding very pleased with herself. Matt exhaled and Renee saw his shoulders relax. That was great.

"So they can't even argue? This isn't lawful and we're just taking him because it's the right thing to do?" Renee made sure and felt a smile spreading on her face. Thank God.

"Right! So… how long until he's back here?" Allison asked and Matt looked at the GPS.

"We'll be there in around an hour and a half. Then… six, maybe seven hours. So… around four am or something. We'll let you know," Matt promised and Allison sighed softly.

"Take care, guys. Don't forget to grab some food, yeah? And for the love of God, don't let Matt drive back on his own, you're splitting the drive! Call as soon as you have him," she demanded with a smile in her voice.

Renee felt something growing and she knew the others felt it too. Hope blooming up inside them, like a small flower just daring to look out into the world. She just hoped that no one would stamp along and step onto the plant, crushing it beneath their weight.

The rest of the way went by faster. Matt even turned on the radio a little and the background noise relaxed all of them. The only thing to worry about was Neil's condition now, but Renee was sure they'd deal with it. Kevin was playing and so was Jean. They had gotten Neil safe and healthy one time, they could do it again!

Still, it didn't feel entirely good when they pulled into the parking lot of Edgar Allen University,
stopping the truck only meters from the entrance to the Nest. Renee grabbed her cross for support one last time, took a deep breath and opened the door of the car.

"Let's get this over with," Aaron said as they walked up to one of the guards outside the building. The Ravens might be a huge cult, but they took security seriously.

The guard raised an eyebrow at Renee, who stood in front of the boys for some reason. She recognised him and smiled softly, though she didn't really want to. He'd been there when she'd picked up Jean. Renee guessed her hair gave her away as well, even in the only dimly lit parking lot.

"Do you have an appointment this time?" he asked, crossing his arms and leaning against the door. He was shorter than Matt but still at least a head taller than Renee. She wasn't intimidated by him. How could she?

"No, but I don't need one. I just have to pick someone up," she said and he sighed.

"Don't make these visits regular, I'm gonna lose my job if I let you in so often," he said. Renee didn't know how much he knew of the Moriyamas. Probably nothing at all. Though apparently enough to know he should be afraid. "I'll show you to Coach Moriyama's office," he said, but Renee shook her head.

"It's fine, I know the way," she said, voice leaving no space for arguing. The guard considered her for a second before nodding a little and taking a step to the side.

She led the way inside, the two boys right behind her, following her deep into the building.

"That was too easy," Aaron remarked, but Renee just shrugged.

"He remembers the last time. I doubt he wants to repeat it. Wouldn't let me in until I showed up with the headmaster and his boss," Renee answered and something in Aaron's gaze shifted.

They walked down corridors and stairs, around corners and deeper into the building until only Renee had a clue as to where they were. It was part of the plan behind the layout, probably. She looked up at Matt and saw his jaw working, shoulders tense. She wanted to comfort him in a way, but there was no way to do that until they'd have Neil in the back of his car.

They went around one last corner and looked into a wide hallway. "This was his room last year," she said when they stood in front of Jean's door, thinking of how she'd stood just here all these months ago.

She laid her hand on the door handle and opened it slowly, bracing herself for what she was about to witness. But when they got a look in, the room was empty. The walls looked the same, Neil's full of Exy posters and some books laying around, Jean's wall covered in postcards and a small French flag in addition to them.

"That's Neil's suitcase," Matt mumbled and Renee frowned. She checked her phone and bit her lip when she saw the time.

"They should be training at this time. Maybe he's on court," Renee said and Matt sighed. Neither of them wanted a confrontation with the whole team.

"When he got to Palmetto he said Riko took him to his room for the last weeks," Aaron told them after a moment and the three of them exchanged looks.

"Let's just check it out before facing the whole team," Matt said, shrugging a little. He took Neil's
suitcase before they closed the door again. "It's so weird. Looks as if they were still living here," he mumbled, shaking his head in disbelief.

They looked around a little before Aaron shrugged a little. "We should just look into the rooms around this one, right?" he asked, walking to the one on the opposite side of the hallway and just opening the door. He froze in the doorway and looked back at the others then, nodding slightly.

Renee and Matt were by his side in seconds and for a single moment, time stopped. The light was shut off and they only saw the outline of a body laying on a bed. It was almost peaceful, for a second. Almost. But then Matt switched the light on and Renee heard Aaron take a sharp breath before she could even look at the figure.

Neil was laying on the bed with his eyes closed, wrapped into a small ball, arms around his knees. He groaned softly when the light was switched on and hid his face in the pillow. Renee's chest felt tight. Smeared with blood. Dark bruises. His face was bloody, his cheek…

She took a deep breath and walked towards the bed, bending over Neil slowly.

"Neil?" she asked in a whisper, careful not to startle or scare him. There were cuts all over his face, some healing, some fresh. The worst injury was on his cheek. The bone wasn't broken like Jean's had been, but instead of his tattoo there was a big part of his skin and flesh missing, edges of the wound ragged and uneven. Twisted knife…

The boy under her whimpered but didn't open his eyes and she looked up at the boys, brows furrowed and mouth tense. "I think we need to carry him," she said softly and Aaron nodded. He was by her side in no time at all.

"I can—" Matt started, but Renee shook her head. "You can take the suitcase. You shouldn't carry him on your own and we couldn't exactly help if you pulled him six feet off the ground," she explained with a soft voice that still left no room for arguments.

Aaron and her opened Neil's arms quickly but carefully, prying them away from his legs and pulling him up softly, making sure not to hurt him. It was tough, because about every inch of the boy was covered with blood and he choked out moans when they pulled him up.

Renee and Aaron slung his arms around their shoulders and carried his weight, but they couldn't really do anything about his feet on the ground.

She took a deep breath when they walked through the corridors and Neil didn't say a word. He was so far gone and she just hoped they'd get him back home safely. How could you leave someone alone in a room if they were in this condition? It was as if Riko was asking for Neil's death.

Then again, maybe he was.

The four of them exited the building and by some miracle, the guard was walking around, apparently. They could just leave without anyone noticing Neil's poor condition.

Matt put Neil's suitcase into his trunk while Renee and Aaron placed the boy on the backseat as softly as they could. In the streetlights, something caught Aaron's attention apparently, because he pulled Neil's sock off one foot and pressed his lips together tightly.

"Renee," he said softly and she took a closer look. Neil's foot was swollen and looked sickly blue in this light.

Oh no…
"We'll ask Abby about it," she mumbled, taking a deep breath. "Matt, I'll drive us back. You shouldn't concentrate on the street right now," she said then, giving orders rather than asking for permission.

Matt just nodded, throwing her the keys before he took a seat on the passenger side.

Renee sat down behind the steering wheel and relaxed only a little when she pulled into the street and drove away from the Nest.

"Dan? Hey… yeah. We have him. He's…," Matt mumbled into the phone, looking over his shoulder. "Can you just get Abby to the phone, please? I don't… he's not fine," he added and swallowed thickly, handing the phone back to Aaron.

Neil's head was against the window, jackets behind his back to make him more comfortable. He was practically laying there and her and Matt's seat was all the way to the front, giving Aaron space between the front and backseats. He had a first aid kit and was just desinfecting some wounds, getting rid of all the blood to get a better look at the situation.

He grabbed the phone and nodded when Abby gave instructions. Neil was pretty much passed out, eyes only barely fluttering open now and then.

Aaron frowned at Abby's words and nodded a little. "It's your fault if he chokes," he mumbled, shaking his head a little. Then he slapped Neil's unharmed cheek, making sure his eyes were open, and looked into them. "You need to swallow these," he said firmly, putting two pills between Neil's lips before he pressed a water bottle against his mouth. Neil did, fortunately, but his eyes fell closed again pretty soon.

"What did you give him?" Matt asked worriedly, looking back.

"Painkillers. High dose. Abby says he might fall asleep deeply enough to not hurt while moving," he mumbled and went on. There wasn't much he could do except for cleaning and covering wounds with band aids and bandages. He didn't touch Neil's foot at all, probably worried he'd worsen the situation further.

After an hour or two, Aaron had done everything he could and all three of them felt utterly useless. Renee was silently praying for everything to work out. Clouds covered every last star and the night was pitch black. It was cold, they were tired and the only sound came from the engine running in addition to choked moans or coughs from the backseat.

Minutes went by feeling like hours and the road stretched farther and farther, seeming to be endless. Renee felt like maybe they wouldn't ever arrive back home. Maybe they'd just keep on driving and driving and time wouldn't be measured in hours anymore but in how long they thought Neil could make it.

Matt turned the heat higher a few hours into the drive and Renee only realised that her fingers were numb from the cold, clenching around the steering wheel like iron bars, when blood started streaming in and warmed them again, making them tickle uncomfortably.

"Everything alright?" he asked uncertainly and Aaron shrugged.

"He's sweating and ice cold. I don't know. He should be in a warm bed somewhere, making sure his legs don't freeze off or something," he answered, looking at the broken body beside him.

As if he knew people were taking about him, Neil coughed again and even opened his eyes. He looked at Aaron for a second and his shoulders relaxed, he closed his eyes and turned his face away
again. Renee wasn't sure if she was imagining it, but she thought she'd heard a soft "Andrew," which gave her hope for some reason. If Neil was still anchoring himself with them, sure he'd make it when they were back home.

Chapter End Notes

I'm extremely exhausted. So… take a sec and read this?
I'm sorry this chapter took almost two weeks! I'll hurry more from now on! But the Cheer-season is just starting again and I'm in my senior year and everything is going great but it's tough, you know? So sorry for the delay

Now the thank yous:
The 6.6 People who gave Raven to Fox a shot! Thanks A LOT (Yes I know that ao3 counts double hits and everything but 6.6 is still a huge number so psssst)
Now to some comment-people (commentators?)
You know I love ALL OF YOU and just let me tell you, there's nothing better than seeing comments a week after you posted. It's miraculous!!!
> GAYW1ZARDSANDF0XES IS BACK EVERYBODY (sorry but that makes me so happy)
> SO IS SERRIS
> NikiNeon binged through this, THANKS!!
> 2aminyard: you make my day! Seriously! Thank you
> zoey_tinkerbell you just make me happy but you know that i think
> BEE17 WROTE AGAIN!!!!! YAS!!!!! (i'm always smiling like an idiot when I see names of people i thought had ditched me/this)
> Mergadel of course I'll keep writing hahaha i have no life
> neil-lynoodle you made me wonder if you could negatively love something haha
> hesnotadream thanks for everything! Thanks for letting me see your thought process and helping with this a lot!
> hiraethia sorry for breaking your heart :( but i LOVE YOU SO THAT MAKES IT BETTER I HOPE
Now some more veterans haha
> Darcyyyyyyyy because I love your snaps and your squealing and talking to you in general haha
> Elfo because I live for you and your thoughts!!! Thanks!
> and Avap a chapter wouldn't be the same without your amazingness under it haha
> eleftheria because CAPS LOCK MESSAGES ARE LIFE

>>>>>>>>>>>>AsfaHan<<<<<<<<
Guys
She made this possible
It wouldn't EXIST without her
I'm not even kidding
#10, Neil Josten, Striker

Chapter Summary

UPDATE
I called the chapter Backliner by accident (because I'm stupid and cruel and the working title was "#4, Nathaniel Wesninski, Backliner" and I messed up) SO NO WORRIES
Neil will be a striker
END OF UPDATE

I'm annoyed because the side crashed
And Neil is home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He coughed and felt himself moving, a constant vibration below and all around him. He wasn't in pain and everything was okay and—

Neil opened his eyes, looking around while panic spread. He should be hurting. He should be consumed by nothing but pain. But there was only the cold all around him like a cloak; sparks of confusions the only thing spending a twisted and burning warmth. Because if he could still think, then surely he was alive. Right? But where was he moving? What had Riko done to him? Where—

His head fell back when he saw Andrew in the car right next to him through tired eyes and could breathe again. Not Riko. Neil was going home.

There wasn't much else. Sometimes pain. Sometimes nausea. The omnipresent smell of old leather that reminded him of something he couldn't quite name. Some car, probably. Which one?

But there was light as well. Shining through the edges of his vision, making everything a little easier. Neil wasn't eaten up by unease anymore. He wasn't choking on lies but inhaling comfort and breathing out dreams.

Maybe that was all there was. Only dreams. Nothing but the illusion of safety. The Foxes couldn't help him hold on, but he was anchoring himself with them. What if this wasn't real? If he woke up in Riko's room again, just like all these times before?

But somehow, that didn't matter when he coughed and groaned in pain as he was being moved. Not when he heard Matt's "It's okay. We're home, Neil, it's gonna be okay." Because somehow, Neil believed him. How couldn't he, when he was drifting off again and everything was a little warmer? A little more comfortable. Neil buried his face in a pillow that didn't reek of blood and sweat and couldn't stay there for too long.

Something pulled him in and while the place was cold, it wasn't bad. It was the roof and the taste of a cigarette he hadn't smoked himself. It was autumn sun behind the silhouette of something that was too dangerous to be true but too good to be wrong.

And when Neil opened his eyes for the next time and didn't find the dream fading off all the way, he
couldn't help but reach out. It was weak and painful and his eyes fell closed already, but when be pressed the fingers in his hand, he was sure they pressed back.

- It was more drifting than anything else. More in between than somewhere. Not here or there.

"Neil? Hey… do you think you could eat something? Just a few spoonfuls of soup, then you can go back to sleep," Abby's voice whispered softly, too familiar to be ignored.

And while Neil couldn't recall eating or opening his eyes, he felt better. He wasn't sleeping well, but he looked into hazel eyes whenever he woke up and somehow, nightmares faded away.

He was woken up for food, water and medicine ever so often, but at least a day went by before he really woke up. The room was only dimly lit and Neil was looking at a window. He didn't know the place or the time, but the orange hue that slowly faded into dark blue made him think it must be dawn.

He wasn't sure when he'd seen sunlight for the last time.

Neil turned his head when he felt a soft touch across his palm and some of the tension in his shoulders just vanished when he saw Andrew on the armchair by his bed, one hand in Neil's, their fingers interwined, the other one mapping the faded scars and edges of band aids so softly, he wasn't sure of this was a dream fading off. Neil pressed his hand softly, just to make sure this was real. That it wasn't an illusion he'd wake up from. This was real.

Andrew looked up at him, raising and eyebrow when he saw Neil awake.

"Hey," he mumbled and Andrew frowned, taking his hand from Neil's slowly. He looked at Andrew for some seconds before closing his eyes again, head falling back into the pillow. "What am I on?"

Neil wanted to say other things. How he'd missed this. How happy he was to be home. How he felt like some pieces of him weren't scattered anymore, but slowly sewing themselves back together. But Andrew wouldn't want to hear it and Neil needed to know what substances were clouding his thoughts.


"My foot?" he asked with his voice low. He heard Andrew sigh softly and looked up again. No! No no no! This wouldn't… couldn't have happened!

"What did he do? I'm taking a turn," Andrew said and watched him closely. The bags under his eyes looked worse than they had, but Andrew seemed less ill. He looked like shit but Neil hoped perhaps he was getting better.

Then he moved his foot slowly and flinched when he felt a splint. Broken! Definitely! "He said I'd feel like Kevin had felt. That he'd break my foot and make sure I'd be as crippled as he is and…"

Neil couldn't breathe. The memories were everything and he was drowning and there was water all around him and he was choking again and…

Andrew brought his hand over Neil's mouth and nose, making Neil gasp when he took it away. "Don't. No hyperventilating, no panicking," Andrew said and Neil swallowed. "What happened to your face?" he asked then and Neil brought his hand up. Instead of the soft spot of skin his tattoo was on, he felt a band aid.

"He cut it off. The number," Neil answered lowly and looked at the ceiling. He couldn't play again.
He was too high on everything to really realise it, but something inside him shifted. Broken. That's what he felt like.

"Do you want to talk to Kevin?" Andrew asked and Neil pressed his teeth together. Kevin had lied. "I don't know who my father is. You'd be the first to know, Nathaniel. Wymack…"

"I don't want to see him," he mumbled and thought of the others. Of everything he owed them. "I'm sorry," he said then, lowly and Andrew shrugged.

"Now I see why you need someone to make sure you stay alive. It's not because people want to kill you, it's because you want to do that yourself. I was your excuse to do stupid things but this won't happen again," Andrew said and Neil swallowed. He didn't usually talk this much, so Neil thought he must be very angry. Not as angry as Allison would be, but fairly—

Neil brought a hand over his mouth and tried to hide the ice water that hit him. The fist in his gut, the twisted knife, the nausea…

He'd killed Seth and here he was, back at home pretending anything was okay. Nothing was! And he was pitying himself for not being able to play fucking Exy anymore.

"I need to talk to Allison right now. Can you get her? I…" Neil took a deep breath and sat up very slowly, leaning against the wall right away and pulling the covers higher. He felt like crap, but he needed to have this conversation right now.

Andrew looked at him for a rather long moment before shrugging. He got up and Neil felt sorry immediately. Andrew had waited for him to wake up. Had been by his side and stayed. He'd been the constant Neil desperately needed and Neil was so ungrateful to send him away. But he needed to talk to her.

The boy left and closed the door behind him. Neil listened as voices got loud. He heard Kevin's and Matt's but couldn't make out words. A few moments later, Allison came in and Neil exhaled. She looked good. Not broken. She was living through this.

Allison sat down beside him and Neil appreciated it, moving to the side slightly so she had enough space. "You look terrible," she said, shaking her head a little as her eyes took him in. Neil didn't know what he looked like, but he guessed he wasn't smeared with blood anymore, so it couldn't be as bad.

"You don't," Neil answered and she smiled at him, sighing then. It was tense. "I'm sorry about Seth," he added then, voice low. He bit his lip and looked away.

"Yeah… it's not your fault, Neil. And it's over, so don't worry. There's nothing you could have done," she said, averting her eyes. Neil didn't know what to do. He wanted to be there for her.

"But it wasn't him, okay?" he asked lowly, taking a deep breath. He could do this. "Riko did this to get me to come with him. It's my fault he died, Allison," Neil confessed and his voice shivered a little. He couldn't look at her though he knew she deserved it. Neil stared out of the window and swallowed hard. "You can… I understand if you don't want to see me right now, it's fine," he mumbled then and played with his fingers.

Neil felt her eyes on him and just wanted her to leave, right then. That would be easier than dealing with her now.

"Neil? Look at me. Right now, I'm serious," she said with a voice so stern, it almost reminded Neil of Riko's demands. He turned his head slowly, looking in her eyes. She should be mad or sad or
anything at all, but not this… not the confusion and strictness.

"Allison, I'm so sorry! And if there's any way I can help you—"

"Seth is alive, Neil, he didn't die! He's in the living room right now," Allison said as if she was teaching a kid something it should have known already and Neil almost flinched back at her voice alone. Then he shook his head. She was definitely lying. Neil had cried over Seth and Riko had made sure he'd understand just how much this was his fault. It couldn't be wrong.

Neil stared at her as she stood up and left the room quickly and pulled Seth back a few seconds later. Alive. Up. Looking better than Neil was. Allison closed the door and left them to themselves while the boys just looked at each other.

"Wow, you look terrible," Seth said, actually managing to smile, but Neil clenched his jaw, starring at Seth in disbelief. "What's up? I mean, apart from all this," Seth asked, gesturing into Neil's general direction.

Neil felt so helpless. Everything was shaking but also somehow managing to mend itself. As if breaking and repairing met in this very moment. He looked at Seth and couldn't talk for a few seconds. Alive.

"He said you had died of the overdose," Neil whispered after a few long moments and swallowed hard. He almost wished there was enough left of him to cry, but there wasn't. He was breathing unevenly and felt his shoulders shiver, but he couldn't get lost in the feeling all the way. He was too empty for anything to be flowing out.

Then a smile crept into his face, and he couldn't help laughing. How ridiculous! How he'd almost lost sanity at the nest, thinking it was his responsibility. The laughter sounded wrong, twisted, almost demonic, but he couldn't stop. "He said he'd killed you because of me."

Neil was still laughing when he hid his face in his hands. His cheeks were hot and wet and Neil didn't know when the tears had started spilling, but he hated himself for it.

"Bullshit. If Riko thinks he can kill me with my own drugs, he's wrong. I tried and didn't manage to do it," Seth said, dark humour not weakening the tension in any way. "Hey, Neil? It's fine. I'm okay," he added a lot more softly and Neil nodded, looking away, running his hand over his eyes and brushing the tears away. Pathetic.

Seth was on the bed beside him then, putting an arm around Neil's shoulders very carefully. It wasn't really a hug, but Seth pulled him closer and Neil lay his head down on Seth's shoulder. It reminded him of how Matt used to sit between them, pulling the both of them in just because.

"I'm still sorry. It could have been true," Neil said lowly and Seth nodded a little. He didn't argue and somehow, that almost made Neil feel better.

They sat there in silence for a while and the both of them thought about everything for too long to possibly talk. After around ten minutes, there was a knock on the door and Seth got up slowly.

"I'm glad you're back," he said, before just leaving as Abby entered the room. She smiled when she saw Neil in a sitting position.

"Hey, it's good to see you up! How are you feeling?" she asked, setting a new glass of water onto his nightstand and putting three pills next to it. "Do me a favour and take these, okay?"
Neil nodded very and sat up a little, taking the pills, trusting her enough to not ask what they were. "I'm fine. Dizzy. My foot hurts," he said lowly and Abby sighed softly when he leaned against the wall and looked up at her from a sitting position.

"We're going to X-ray it at the hospital as soon as we can. I'm hoping it's not a fracture, but that's what it looks like. That's what we're treating it as until we know more," she explained and looked at him. "If anything really hurts, you call for me. That's not a question. You are so full of painkillers, anything that hurts is severe. I'm trusting you," she added then, looking into his eyes.

Neil nodded a little and tried not to think of himself too much. He felt dirty and weak and didn't want too many people to see him this way.

"Good! I'll be back with some food in around an hour. Call if you need anything, I'm literally two rooms down the hall," Abby said, smiling at him reassuringly. "We're going to make this work, Neil, don't worry. Look at Kevin, yeah? We managed to turn him into that person and we'll get you back to normal as well!" she assured him, reaching out and running her hand though his hair softly, combing it out of his face.

Neil resisted the urge to close his eyes and fall right back asleep. The gesture was so motherly and so entirely positive, no harm meant, that he didn't know how to react. "Okay," he mumbled, nodding once before he looked down. "Thank you," he added, hoping she'd get everything he meant. What they'd done so far and what they were ready to do from now on.

Abby wore a conflicted expression and shook her head a little. "I promise, Neil. Don't lose hope just yet," she said and Neil looked down at his hands when she bend down to press her lips to his forehead. Why was she… what exactly? Why was she so much like— like a mother. When she didn't have to, when there was no obligation for her to not just give them up?

"Okay," he repeated, but didn't look up when she left the room. His thoughts pulled him in too deeply. Kevin… Kevin had needed half a year to be back on court. Neil did most definitely not have half a year! And Kevin hadn't been treated like this. He might have been number two to the rest of the world, but he was Riko's favourite. He might have made him useless for playing, but he had intended to keep Kevin otherwise. Neil? He'd only been trying to let his anger out on him. This was worse than Kevin had been and while they could deny it, that didn't change anything about the truth.

Neil closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, breathing in and out very slowly to make sure he wouldn't freak out again. The door opened and closed so quickly and quietly, Neil didn't have to open his eyes in order to know it was Andrew.

"Thanks for being there," Neil mumbled, not looking up.

"It's my room. My bed. Why wouldn't I be here?" he asked, and Neil decided not to argue. It didn't have to mean something to Andrew in order to mean the world to Neil.

"Okay. Sorry for making your job harder," he said then and laid back down already, tucking himself in more tightly, looking at Andrew now. The boy watched him closely, slight frown on his face.

"It's not as if you've done something else since July," he shot back and Neil smiled a little, nodding. "Sorry about that, too," he added and just watched as Andrew took one pill out of a small box and swallowed it dry. "I'm glad you're working on getting better," Neil said then, knowing Andrew wouldn't want to hear it.

"Can't exactly be like this if you or Kevin decide to commit suicide again," Andrew said with a
shrug and Neil's eyes fell close.

Seth was alive. Andrew was up and getting better, the others were chatting outside, and he was with them. It was a warm feeling and Neil decided it was okay to slip away again when Andrew talked again.

"Ask something so I can take my next turn," he almost demanded and Neil looked up again, smiling lazily.

"What did you get for Christmas?" he asked and Andrew scoffed.

"A book and a shirt," he answered with a soft sigh and Neil nodded. He didn't feel as if he threw the turn away. "Why did you leave? The whole story," Andrew added and Neil bit his lip.

"We were on the banquet and Riko said he'd either talk to me or Kevin, so I went with him," Neil started and played with his fingers. He knew he owed Andrew the full truth, though, so he kept talking. "He also said he'd hurt the Foxes. That Seth would be— he said Seth would be the first piece of collateral damage in this game and that Matt was gonna be next. And he made sure I'd remember this while I was there," Neil explained, swallowing thickly. It was tough to admit all this.

"And you said goodbye to everyone thinking what? That you'd stay with the Ravens?" Andrew asked and Neil didn't want to point out it wasn't his turn. He was tired.

"I couldn't risk all of you," Neil muttered and bit the inside of his cheek. "But… thanks for picking me up. I think Riko was getting bored and I don't know what he would have done next," Neil added and Andrew frowned at him.

"I didn't pick you up. Renee went with Matt and Aaron," he clarified and Neil thought back to… was it actually last night? The memories were blurred but he remembered Renee. Matt's voice. But he also remembered Andrew everywhere.

"You're joking," Neil said, frowning slightly. He knew that Andrew wasn't actually joking but he couldn't imagine this being the truth. He had been there.

"I couldn't go. Abby didn't let me," he said then, almost daring Neil with the tone in his voice. He couldn't believe he'd mistaken Aaron for him. Neil almost smiled.

Neil pulled the covers up under his chin and took a deep breath. He wasn't entirely home, but almost. And with Andrew and the Foxes here, he wasn't sure if there really was a difference.

"Did I offend you by saying you look like your identical twin?" Neil asked lowly, not even bothering to keep the soft chuckle out of his voice.

"Not as much as by thinking we would just let you stay at the Nest," Andrew answered and Neil closed his eyes for a few moments. Yeah, that had been terrible. But Andrew said 'we' meaning the Foxes and while Neil knew he couldn't make a big deal out of it, he felt warm inside.

"Yeah, bad thinking. I'm not gonna leave again," Neil promised only halfway joking and Andrew shrugged, seemingly unmoved by this information. Neil didn't care, he needed to get it out.

"What did Riko say? To make you stay," Andrew clarified, taking the conversion back to its original course. Neil sighed.

"Things I need to sort through with Kevin, mainly. Things about all of you," Neil explained slowly, looking at Andrew to see if he'd get a reaction. He didn't.
"Details?" the boy asked, raising an eyebrow and crossing his arms. Neil didn't even have to think about it, the words were burned into his brain, still making him a little sick. He was tired and the meds clouded his thoughts uncomfortably, making him close his eyes for a second.

"He said he could make all of you relive their pasts. Then he… I don't really want to say all of it. It was screwed up and sick. Don't make me paint the picture," Neil said lowly, breathing against the memories of words. Of how Riko had told him he could just call up about any of Andrew's old foster brothers to make him suffer. How he'd asked if it might be even funnier to swap Andrew's and Aaron's experiences.

He laid his head back again and took a deep breath. All this talking was exhausting and resisting Andrew's demands was horrible in this state. Reliving the memories was draining and there wasn't much to take power from in the first place.

The room was getting darker already, and his eyes fell close more and more frequently as there was no conversation to keep him up. His eyes closed and opened and Neil didn't feel as if he were awake or asleep. He was drifting in between again.

And every time he opened his eyes, he saw Andrew in another position on the armchair, arms crossed and face stern.

His room was almost completely dark when Neil woke up from actual sleep, seeing Andrew just walking up and cracking his neck, massaging the muscles with one hand.

"Why aren't you going to bed? I'm fine now," Neil mumbled just intelligible enough for Andrew to understand the words.

"You're sleeping in my bed. And apart from that, someone has got to make sure you don't run right off again," he mumbled, voice just a bit slower than usually. There was no other sign of sleep or tiredness or anything.

Neil hid his face in the pillow, turning only slightly. He was a little dizzy and just wanted to sleep. His body was aching in a dull way, pain just starting to creep through the medicine.

"It's a bed for at least six people, Andrew. You could… I could make room," Neil said and rubbed his fingers over his eyes. He didn't want Andrew to sleep on that armchair, but he was also tired and not in the mood for any kind of discussion. It was deep night and he needed the rest.

"You wish," Andrew mumbled, readjusting his posture and position on the chair, while Neil shuffled closer to the window, leaving almost three quarters of the bed unoccupied.

"Can't let you have a stiff neck in case I decide to do something stupid tomorrow," Neil argued and to his surprise, Andrew got up. He went for the door and Neil was almost protesting for him not to leave when he heard the lock clicking and Andrew moving back.

"You're sleeping on the other side," Andrew said before Neil shuffled to the side of the bed facing the room, and Andrew actually climbed into bed, his back pressed against the wall while he was facing the room. Neil was on his side now, back to the door and facing Andrew. He felt protected even though he couldn't see anything apart from his face. It reminded him of the roof again, somehow.

"You're staring. And you're thinking too loud," Andrew complained, but Neil didn't protest. Sleep pulled him in and after a while, Andrew's even breathing worked just like a lullaby. It was oddly comforting, to hear him breathing in and out so softly. There was something strange about waking up
in the middle of the night seeing Andrew under the same blanket, eyes closed and expression peaceful, arms limply between them.

Neil thought back to some hours ago, when Andrew had touched the scars on his hands and about how comfortable he'd been. It was the first time he wasn't hurt in a long time. The first time in forever he felt good about a touch. Neil moved his hand to Andrew's and ran his fingertips over his knuckles very softly, tracing the fingers only enough to know Andrew wasn't pulling away. He was definitely still awake but didn't react, so Neil slipped his hand into Andrew's very softly before he closed his eyes again and let his breath relax.

He'd been lost and shattered into a billion pieces. Neil was still far from mended, but he was being repaired bit by bit. They'd make it work. His foot, the season, whatever him and Andrew had, and everything else.

The good thing about hitting rock bottom is the knowledge that you can only move upwards from there on.

Chapter End Notes

I'm annoyed, sorry (side crashed when I tried posting)

ALSO sorry for taking so long to update! I'll try ro be quicker! (I'm in my senior year of High School though. So… don't be mad)

AND GUYS I HAVE A QUESTION: what did you thing about Abby? Seth? Andrew-cuddles? (Not really but…) 

And I hope no one is mad about not getting a shout out but I answer every comment and love all of you!

THOUGH I NEED to SCREAM a THANK YOUUUU at Saya. You're the reason I'm writing. Sometimes you're the reason I smile. You make me better some days ❤️ (Always…)

Then again, you're also the reason I throw my freetime away to write fics about characters I don't even know, but…

I still love you! Thanks!!!!!!
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

YOU ARE AWESOME
(I just found out that the Chapter Summary shows up in subscriptions so… just wanted to make y'all smile a little)

Okay summary: aftermath of the Nest, Neil is coping… or not…

Chapter Notes

HOW SHOULD I CONTINUE COUNTING THE CHAPTERS???? HELP

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Waking up next to Andrew was like the verification that he was back. Neil looked at the boy's blond hair, their hands still intertwined between them, and couldn't really grasp how he deserved waking up to a reality that felt like a dream.

But seconds could only stretch so long and soon they had to get up. Andrew left him for some time and Neil pushed himself out of bed, using the crutches Abby had leaned against the bed to favour his foot. The bathroom that was connected to his room had fresh toothbrushes and Neil was glad to be able to make himself feel less gross than he was at the moment.

Abby came into his room a while later, putting a tray with breakfast on the nightstand.

"David and I are taking you to the hospital in a few minutes. Do you want to see the others on the way out or should we tell them to wait?" she asked, smiling at Neil, who just looked at the food and felt sick.

"I'd rather… not see them just yet," he answered and Abby nodded, leaving him alone again.

Andrew hadn't come back yet, so Neil stared at the bread and cereal on his own. He felt physically sick just thinking of eating, so his breakfast consisted of nothing but the pills next to the plate.

Neil briefly wondered if it had something to do with Riko denying him food or making him burn off way more than he took up, but shook the thoughts out of his mind. The first step wasn't wondering about food but his foot.

Abby came back a few minutes later and if she recognised that he left the tray untouched, she didn't point it out. "David is in the car and the others are not on our way out. You can decide if you want to see them later and when you want to move back to Fox Tower. We're doing this your pace," she said, smiling. Then she handed him the crutches and led the way out. Her car was parked in front of the house and she helped Neil in before sitting down behind the steering wheel.

Wymack looked back at Neil from the passenger seat and shook his head a little. "You look like a train wreck, Josten," he said in lieu of hello and Neil nodded slightly, stretching his leg across the
backseat and sighing.

"I know. Sorry," he mumbled, leaning his head against the window as Abby started driving. It was freezing but the cold felt good, in a way.

"You shouldn't apologise for your appearance but for the feeling we all got when Tesuji announced your transfer," his coach answered and Neil swallowed thickly while Abby tsked at Wymack. "No offence, but did you really think we'd let you go this easily?"

Neil shrugged a little, looking at his foot. "I didn't plan on giving you a choice on the matter," he answered truthfully and Wymack let out a forced laugh. "And it's not as if I am a valuable member of the team at this point. I mean, I'm… Schroedinger's cat. Don't know if it's dead or alive until we X-Ray the foot," he mumbled, not succeeding in keeping the bitter tone from his voice.

"Cut the crap, Josten. This is America, your foot is innocent til proven broken," he answered and something about it made Neil smile a little.

Maybe. He was sure it was the wrong decision to give in to the feeling of hope, but he liked the taste of it.

Abby lead them past every counter and receptionist there was, walking down long corridors and past empty rooms. Neil felt sorry for everyone who had to stay at the hospital on Christmas, only then remembering that he turned Abby and Wymack into these people as well.

Neil let go of the situation – or maybe he lost grip of it, he couldn't tell the difference.

He was in a room on his own, then sat in a corridor on a chair next to Wymack while Abby rushed through the hallways, almost running past them. It felt like an eternity being pressed into mere milliseconds. As if it took ages and minutes stretched to days while hours passed like seconds. It was as if time decided to make the wait unbearable for Neil, twisting and rushing and then crawling, while him and Wymack sat there in silence.

Minutes or hours later, he really couldn't tell, Abby was back with huge copies of blue shades on big transparencies. Her face was relieved and Neil's shoulders lost all tension. Thank God… it couldn't be bad!

"I'm not gonna make this a show because you deserve the answer. It's a hairline fracture. Everything is exactly where we need it to be and we're going to be fine if we splint it. You'll be back to normal in a few weeks. Three, I think. We'll keep an eye on it," she said, smiling brighter with every word she said. Neil couldn't believe it. He wasn't smiling but something inside him pieced itself together again. He held his head a little higher and felt a weird sense of pride. Riko hadn't managed to break him.

'Not as badly as he broke Kevin, at least,' a voice in the back of his mind whispered, and Neil shushed it immediately.

"When does practice start again?" he asked Wymack, who actually laughed at that.

"On Thursday the tenth, so in around two weeks. You'll manage catching up, don't worry," he said, patting Neil on his back. For once, Neil didn't flinch back.

"So… ready to face your team now?" Abby asked with a smile, and Neil nodded sharply. He would be able to look into their eyes now. He might even be able to talk to Kevin.

Neil kept his eyes on Wymack on their ride back, wondering if he knew about his son. He didn't,
couldn't, right? He refused to believe Kevin had told anyone if he hadn't told Neil.

The drive home was filled with the sound of Abby talking about how to take care of his foot and Neil's thoughts about how he could avoid the rules. When she pulled into her driveway and unlocked the front door, Neil felt like an entirely different person than he had when they'd left earlier.

"Try not to crush him," Abby called before pushing the door open, but when Neil walked through with his crutches, Matt pushed the air out of his lungs, pulling him into a tight hug. Neil let him, closing his eyes and allowing the boy to keep him steady for a few moments.

He let go after some seconds and gave Neil a once over. "You look a lot better!" he exclaimed while Dan wrapped her arms around him from the side, pulling him in and then ruffling his hair.

The Nest was so isolated and Neil had missed this. The closeness, the chatter, all the warmth everyone was willing to give.

Only seconds later, Nicky embraced him as well and Neil couldn't help smiling. Right now, they were mending some broken pieces he thought he'd lost for good. As if he was finally able to breathe again.

The twins sat next to some blond guy and… Kevin. He got up and Neil's back stiffened a little when he patted his shoulder, both looking unsure.

"I understand if you don't feel like talking, but," Kevin started, and all eyes were on them when he asked "How is everything? Generally?"

Neil swallowed thickly before nodding a little. "It's alright, I guess. Hairline fracture. Three weeks and I'll be as good as new," he answered, and a sigh went through the room.

"We all knew you liked playing too much to stop," Allison answered from across the room, somehow breaking the tension.

"Alright, Neil, you chose a fantastic time to come back because now you're still able to meet Erik and celebrate New Years with us, which is amazing," Nicky changed the subject quickly, introducing Neil to the stranger on the sofa, who just smiled insecurely and waved.

And like that, everything went to normal. It didn't go back to normal, but pretended that this was something close to normal. They crowded the living room and filled him in on Christmas without making him feel like he'd actually missed it. The Foxes avoided the truth as one avoided putting too much pressure on a hurt foot, perhaps. Just enough so it wouldn't hurt, not enough to acknowledge that there was something wrong. Neil found himself losing track of everything else when they talked, totally consumed by the fact that he finally had positivity in his life again.

These people were not a blessing. They were too broken and rough around the edges to be heavenly, but they were something slightly different. They had survived, seen the worst their lives had to offer, and were here with him. The Foxes weren't perfect, but they were more of a family than he'd ever dared to wish for.

An hour or two later, Nicky asked if they should head back home and while Abby seemed concerned about this, she didn't say anything on the matter. She gave Neil small boxes with pills and told him to take it easy and to call as soon as he had anything at all he felt like telling her about.

And then they finally headed home. The cousins, Erik and Kevin filled Andrew's car to the brim, so he went with the Upperclassmen, which wasn't a problem. Renee sat by his side but he was glad she didn't say something about how she'd found him in the Nest. Glad this wasn't a topic in any way at
Some minutes later, they took the elevator up and after some moments, Neil breathed in the leathery smell of Matt's sofa that was always present in their room. The slightly sticky air that had a faint smell of deodorant and the lacking humidity that came in winter when you turned on the heater for too long.

Home.

"Is everything okay?" Renee asked, closing the door behind them and smiling up at him, bringing Neil back to the situation.

He nodded, running a hand through his hair and taking another deep breath. "Yeah, it's fine. Just... thanks for bringing me back here," he said, voice barely louder than a whisper, before she smiled even more warmly.

"You're welcome, Neil, anytime," she answered and the Upperclassmen settled in the room.

It was late afternoon or early evening and apparently, they had lunch when Neil was at the hospital, which was fine by him. Somehow, the sheer thought of food made him feel a little sick. Especially when Matt suggested ordering pizza and Neil grimaced at the sheer thought of oily cheese and greasy toppings.

They put on some Christmas program and Neil only looked around the room. He and Renee were on one of the sofas, Dan and Matt on the other one. Seth sat on the armchair and Allison was almost curled into him, arms around his neck as her head rested on his chest while she watched TV. Neil realised that he'd barely ever seen them not touching since he was back and pressed his lips together. This was his fault. Allison was overprotective of Seth because Riko had used him to get Neil to change his mind.

That was when he realised that Matt's eyes flickered to him every once in a while, obviously checking on him. He hadn't even thought about him yet. About how Neil's state must have affected his friend.

Neil found himself losing grip of the situation and pressed a finger against one band aid that was covered by his shirt, just so the pain would get him back.

It worked...

He didn't quite know how much time had passed when the girls said goodnight, but the only light came from the TV at this point. Seth went to get water for all of them and sat down next to Neil when he came back, dropping a bottle in his lap and throwing one to Matt. "So, what are we doing tonight?" he asked and Matt shook his head, smiling a little too forced.

"We're not doing anything except for eating and sleeping, it's late," he answered and Neil knew he was handicapping them with his condition and general state. He was about to apologise when Seth shrugged.

"'Kay," he mumbled, looking at the TV. Neil sighed and counted to ten, trying to be normal and not act like the wreck he was.

"So... how's everything with the girls?" Neil asked, trying to get them to talk. The TV didn't succeed at distracting Neil from his thoughts and it was stressing him out.

Matt laughed at the question and gestured for Seth to start. The boy next to Neil just scoffed and
shrugged. "Allison is being… weird. But it's fine, she has every right to be," he answered, taking a sip from his bottle and not looking at either of the boys.

Neil turned his head to Matt, who just smiled. "You know Dan and me. Everything is great," he answered, his grin lighting up the room a little before he returned to watching TV.

Seth saw something on the table then, picked it up and sighed. "Al left her phone. I'll be back in… depends," he said, making Matt laugh. Neil looked past Seth and sighed deeply. He hated how the only sound came from the TV, how nothing really distracted him at the moment.

"Can we talk?" Neil asked lowly and Matt frowned shortly before nodding quickly.

"About?" he asked hesitantly, trying to make sure he wouldn't push Neil into a direction he wasn't comfortable with.

"Nothing. Just… talking," Neil answered, feeling pathetic for even requesting it. Still, he couldn't really move, couldn't run or go for a walk, couldn't play and couldn't breathe. He needed a distraction.

"Okay, sure. So… want to tell me about what exactly is going on with Andrew? Seth and I have been betting on you since you started spending a lot of time on the roof together, but it was more of a joke," Matt said, looking curious, and Neil frowned. That was not… what?

"What?" he asked lowly. He wasn't stupid or especially slow, but he wasn't sure what Matt wanted from him.

"It's just, I don't know, the way he looked when we found out you were gone and everything," he explained, making Neil frown more deeply. He couldn't imagine Andrew reacting to the information a lot. Maybe he'd been annoyed when he'd realised that Neil had screwed up.

Probably.

"There's… it's really nothing," he answered, only realising that he meant it. Not the nothing Matt heard when he said it, but Andrew's nothing. Their nothing that meant that maybe it was something, but it wasn't to be talked about. Maybe it was too dangerous and meaningful or too safe and unimportant to be something. Maybe it was nothing at all, but maybe it wasn't.

"Okay, sorry man! We're here, either way. And I'm glad you're back, too," Matt said, looking at Neil and smiling again, but this time it shivered.

"I'm sorry for what you saw. You shouldn't have," Neil said lowly and Matt shook his head a little.

"Don't worry about me. I feel like I actually understand you better now. As a person and everything," he mumbled, stopping the sentences way too often for the three seconds he talked. "Just come over here so we can watch a movie," Matt interrupted his thoughts and Neil couldn't decline. He got up and walked the few steps to sit beside Matt, fixing his eyes on the TV after resting his fractured foot on the table just because it felt better.

Matt turned the TV louder and Neil sighed very softly, trying to swallow the sour taste welling up. Matt was trying to loosen the situation, not to ignore Neil, but he'd asked for a conversation and only received another kid's movie without any plot to focus on.

Not even ten minutes went by until Neil stared at his foot. He understood that Kevin went to the Foxes when he'd broken his hand. Running off and finding somewhere to prove that you weren't as broken and useless as you looked. Neil wanted to do just that. To run and leave this all behind. To…
not disappoint them all. He was their weakness. Transferring positions and even showing up injured. His time at the Nest had showed him how much potential he had as a backliner. He was throwing it away by not even practicing the position anymore. Neil sucked at being a striker and would ruin the team with his foot, and…

"Neil?"

He looked up, only now realising that Matt was snoring softly next to him. Seth was standing in the door, watching as Neil had troubles looking away from his splinted foot.

"That's just pitiful. Come with me," Seth said and while Neil frowned in confusion, he still took his crutches and followed the other boy, leaving Matt behind.

"Where are we going? We're only wearing sports clothes," Neil almost complained. It meant that they'd have to stay in the building, right? Seth couldn't expect Neil to go out without shoes or anything.

"That's good, idiot. You're getting rid of that negative vibe right now," Seth answered and pressed the basement-button on the elevator, bringing them down slowly.

Neil looked at him and was confused when Seth led him to the student gym none of them ever used. It was open to all athletes but usually filled with the basketball team crowding the area and making it unbearable.

"We're training so you can burn all that miserable self loathing off. Arms. Nothing that needs your legs to work in any way at all," Seth almost ordered and Neil looked after him as he went to the treadmills, leaving Neil with the weights. He'd always done cardio training because it was easier to push fasted and farther, to measure results and it made him feel relieved. But now he needed to do something and for once, running wasn't an option.

Neil sat down on one of the benches and grabbed one of the handles, curling his arm carefully, watching his own muscles flex under his skin. The thing was probably a little too heavy, judging from the slight burn he felt already, but Neil liked the sting. Practice was wasted if you didn't leave with your muscles feeling ripped apart and your bones feeling like jelly.

Seth was a great trainingbuddy, leaving Neil to himself and only pointing out that he did something inaccurately. Left Neil enough space to think or to numb his brain with the pain shooting through his arms and shoulders, burning every cut and bruise. It was wonderful.

"Are we good?" Seth asked after a while and Neil wanted to say no before he understood that Seth didn't want to leave and go home already, just talk.

"Why not?" he asked back, eyes focussing on the cold metal weight he pushed up, on how his body pushed to his limits and crossed them as if they didn't even exist.

"Because I'm the reason you went. I'm not gonna apologise for - you know - being attacked and then drugged against my will, but still. I'd get it if you wanted space," he explained, breathing heavily after an hour of cardio.

Neil pushed the barbell up into the safety-post and sat up, arms feeling hot while blood shot through his veins like lava. He looked at Seth and didn't really know what to say.

"I feel like this is the wrong way round, Seth. You're not the reason this happened. I'm the only one responsible for what happened to you. I chose to go so he wouldn't do anything else. I'm the one to blame," Neil argued, for some reason avoiding Riko's name. He sighed when he realised that; just
"That's not what I meant. And it's bullshit, Neil. Riko is the one to blame and he's the only one responsible for any of this. Don't even think we'll let you get away with that attitude, blaming yourself and everything. That's screwed up," Seth said and Neil looked at him as he stopped the treadmill slowly, panting as it stopped a little later. "We should head back up. I'm tired and you should sleep, whether you feel like it or not."

There was something so final about his statement that Neil didn't argue. He still burdened himself with guilt and blame but wouldn't let it out on Seth. So he took the crutches into shaking arms and went back to the elevator with Seth, riding all the way up and exiting on their floor.

The doors opened and they walked down the corridor, drenched in sweat, and Neil felt so worn out he might actually be able to sleep. That's when he saw the door of the Monsters' room open and frowned at Andrew.

The twin stopped when he saw Seth and Neil on the far end of the corridor and raised his eyebrow, giving Neil a once over and taking his exhausted form in, before walking towards the roofdoor and vanishing.

Neil looked after him, trying to keep any expression from his face. Seth might hot have seen it, but Neil recognised the slight frown on Andrew's face. He swallowed as they went into their room and it took him about two seconds to decide he'd change into clean clothes quickly and follow him.

Matt was still laying on the sofa, a pillow hugged to his chest and snoring softly. "I'll shower first," Seth announced and Neil nodded.

"Don't hurry, I'm gonna--" Neil started but stopped, looking for words. What? He was going after Andrew to see why he was mad. But he couldn't exactly say that.

"Roof?" Seth guessed, not reacting in any other way. Neil nodded and the boy shrugged, going to the bathroom.

He went to the bedroom and changed into a new shirt and sweatpants carefully, not disturbing any wounds and glad to be out of the clammy clothes. He put on a jacket - it was December, after all - and left the room with his crutches. The stairs up to the roof were narrow and steep and today was the first time it bothered Neil. He was relieved when he was outside finally and Andrew was sitting by the edge of the roof, white clouds of smoke slowly dragged away by the wind. Neil sat down by his side carefully, which felt awkward and kind of wrong with the crutches in the way and everything, but he let out a deep breath when he was finally seated.

"Isn't it too cold for you to be outside?" he asked lowly, accepting the cigarette Andrew handed him. "You're still sick, after all."

Andrew just glared at him before looking away again. So he wasn't in the mood to talk… Neil blew against the tip of the cigarette slowly, watching the tip glow and breathing in the smoke. It grounded him.

"What's wrong?" he asked and Andrew shook his head sharply, eyes looking distant as he looked over their campus.

It was freezing, their breaths forming small clouds for seconds, and Neil's fingers and ears went numb pretty quickly. It was silent, not even cars or students making a sound. Most of them were elsewhere over the holidays. There were clouds all over the sky, hiding stars and the moon, and the
only light came from streetlights below them and a weak emergency light over the door. Andrew finished his cigarette and stared into the distance and Neil wanted to know everything he wasn't saying.

"I'm taking my turn," Neil broke the silence in a whisper and while Andrew didn't appear to hear him, he still knew he had the boy's attention. "Why are you like this?" Neil asked, unsure whether or not he was overstepping lines that had been drawn so long ago that he forgot them.

"I can't do my job if you're not letting me," Andrew said matter of factly and didn't look at Neil. Then he raised his fingers to his throat and measured his own pulse, as Neil had caught him do quite frequently.

Neil thought about that, looking into the distance again. What exactly was he talking about? Neil knew he was talking about their deal, about keeping him safe, but couldn't see how he was doing anything to make that harder for Andrew.

"I don't--," Neil started, but Andrew shook his head, silencing him just like that. Neil felt cold and it had nothing to do with the temperature. What could he possibly be doing wrong?

"My turn. What else did he do?" Andrew asked, and Neil knew he was talking about the Nest.

"I told you about my foot and the number. The rest was… the usual, in a way. The first day or two, they locked me in my old room without light or food, then they made me play without gear. He--" Neil's voice trailed off as he stubbed out the cigarette on the cement next to him, needing some seconds to breathe and collect his thoughts. "He threatened all of you. Used Exy racquets as measures of education and -- I don't know. No sleep, little food, knives. Just the usual deal, when it comes to Riko," Neil mumbled, actually daring to say the name this time. He fumbled with the cigarette, considered stubbing it out, and only then realised he'd done it already. Neil was a wreck.

Andrew didn't do or say anything, but Neil felt relieved he'd gotten the words out. They had been burdening him a lot for some reason, and this was just as if pounds of sorrow had lifted off his lungs.

"Kevin wants to talk to you," Andrew said after some time, not reacting to Neil's confession at all.

"Tell him he can come if he feels like it," Neil answered lowly, getting up carefully when Andrew did. The blond boy didn't help him stand but handed him his crutches anyways, which was okay for Neil.

"I'm not your messenger pigeon, get over it and talk to him yourself," Andrew answered dryly, holding the doors open so Neil could go through.

He looked at Andrew and frowned a little. Neil thought he'd gotten even colder than he'd been before, somehow, but he knew he wouldn't want to talk about it.

When they separated in the hallway, Andrew stopped for a second before opening his door. "You're mimicking him, Neil. I bet you haven't eaten today. Abby was concerned because you didn't touch your breakfast. Depriving yourself of sleep, overexercising. Go to bed, it's pathetic," he said, before vanishing in his room and locking the door behind him.

Neil stood there for some moments, thinking about it. Was that what Andrew had meant when he said he couldn't protect Neil of himself, basically? Probably…

When Neil went to bed silently, careful not to wake his roommates, he bit his lip. This was his bed, his room. These were his friends.
He was home.

But the thought burnt in him and occupied his mind, until Neil realised that he wasn't mad or annoyed with Andrew's misinterpretation of the situation. The statement was sour because it was true.

Chapter End Notes

This is to every single one of you guys. 7K hits is more than I ever thought I could get and this is just… it makes me very proud ❤
Everyone who commented: you made my day better. Seriously. How you made me feel better about every single decision I made is amazing!
Zoey I know this isn't exactly Andreil drama but… just know that you inspired this small section ❤
And Elfo and 2aminyard you guys seriously!!!!! Just!!!! Because you take the time to talk about so many things to me and just!!!!
And Darcy and Eleftheria; you guys make my social media a better place haha

And Saya you're everything to me! Thanks for helping me through tough times and taking the time to listen. Thanks for letting me take part in your life and for taking part in mine ❤
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Neil sucks at having a family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four hours of sleep and a cold shower - with his foot wrapped in a plastic bag and tape around it - later, Neil debated with himself whether or not he should…

He should. There wasn't a lot of discussing, rather one half of him trying to convince the other one that it was the right thing to do.

Seth and Matt were still sleeping soundly, Allison in their room, sleeping in Seth's overly narrow bed, Matt snoring too loud for anyone to sleep peacefully.

Neil took his crutches and walked over to the Monsters' room when he realised two things: talking to Kevin was inevitable so getting it done was the right decision. And that working out was stupid because even if you favoured your foot, walking became difficult when your entire arms were burning and aching. His muscles were sore, it hurt and while Neil didn't usually have a problem with this, right now it bothered him.

He knocked softly before swallowing against the dry taste in his mouth, clenching the crutches hard.

Neil was almost surprised when Kevin opened the door. The boy looked down at him before making room, walking back to the sofa. Taking the book by his side, Kevin started reading it. Neil closed the door behind himself and took the place next to him.

He was reading something for class, seemingly history or something, while almost ignoring Neil. However, the tension was omnipresent and Neil knew he wasn't being looked over. Rather than that, both of them were overchallenged with the conversation that was about to take place.

Neil looked around the room that was almost too clean as he was looking for words to start with. It was hotter than in his room, heating on and windows closed. The smell was heavy and the air lacked oxygen, but he preferred it to the cold but fresh air in his own room. They'd been freezing all night long.

"You want to talk to me?" Neil says. It's not really a question or a statement, just words trying to fill the silence.

Kevin looked up at that, green eyes looking hesitant as he took Neil in. "Yes. There's a lot to say as soon as you're willing to hear it," Kevin says, closing the book but keeping his finger in it, indicating that he wasn't sure if Neil was willing to.

He thought about that before answering. Yes, he was mad. But Kevin didn't know what he was mad about yet, so taking it out on him already wouldn't be okay. "Yeah. I want to talk to you," Neil said lowly, trying not to be too aggressive, making Kevin close the book all the way now.
"Coffee?" Kevin asked, but Neil shook his head, just looking at him. "Okay. I don't really know how to start, but – you know?" Kevin asked again, looking at Neil almost helplessly before sighing and wiping his hands on his trousers.

"What did you want to talk about?" Neil helped out, crossing his arms and leaning against the back of the sofa, keeping his eyes on Kevin.

"The Nest, Neil. The fact that you went and that we didn't look for you earlier. It's just that you came back looking like this and I can't help thinking that we're moving backwards," Kevin explained and Neil pressed his lips together, looking away. He'd given him one more chance to talk about Wymack, but Kevin was lamenting…

"I don't see what there is left to talk about. It's over," Neil said, but Kevin shook his head, running a hand through his hair and letting his eyes wander before he settled them on Neil again.

"Neil, you're not yourself. When you came here this summer, you said I was your brother and suddenly, the word had a meaning. I should have sticked to your side at the banquet and I should have realised that you would be leaving. You shouldn't have had to face it on your own again, because we're supposed to be in this together," Kevin explained, voice speeding up as the truths got heavier. Neil was glad everyone else was still sleeping, since he couldn't have had the conversation with anyone else around.

He felt cold in the uncomfortably hot room suddenly, while feeling a tight pull in his chest that was anything but positive.

"Brother implies that we're family, but as Riko told me, you weren't quite honest about yours. Or did you just fail to mention your relation to Wymack?" Neil asked, making Kevin's face lose several shades of colour. He looked nauseous and almost afraid, but not quite. There was something left in him that thought there was anything at all he could do about it.

"So Riko told you," Kevin mumbled, eyes nervous but expression almost cold. He wasn't as good as Andrew at concealing his feelings, so Neil saw through the facade pretty easily.

The room fell silent again and Neil's chest was heavy with all the accusations and their shared past weighing him down.

"This was supposed to be the one thing that mattered, Kevin. You were the one person from my past that didn't have a twisted relation to me," Neil mumbled, not letting himself sound as panicked as he felt. Kevin looked conflicted and hesitant as he opened his mouth, but Neil shushed him quickly. He wasn't in the mood for empty excuses.

"No, don't. Don't just talk, think about it. Because we – you, Jean and I – we were supposed to be a truth in that stupid castle of lies and now you took that away," Neil said, mad as ever. He couldn't keep it all in.

"What does it matter to you? He doesn't know, nobody does. You don't understand that, Neil, but if you've got a shot at a family, you take it," Kevin said, actually crossing his arms. He wasn't aggressive but rather defensive, making Neil even madder. How could he just – how could he insult Neil like that?

"Okay, sure, so I don't understand because I don't have a family? Or because the one I have sucks? I get it, Kevin. And honestly? I can't believe I went so he wouldn't take you, because apparently, whatever this used to be doesn't matter," he snapped. Neil was louder than he should be, considering that there were four people sleeping in the room next to him, but he couldn't care less. Neil obviously
didn't mean it, he'd go in Kevin's place all over again. He'd never let anything happen to him or Jean again. But he was hurting and didn't know how else to let it out.

Kevin stared at him and his eyes were wide as he shook his head slightly. "Neil, that's not—"

"I don't care, Kevin. I don't want to hear it," Neil answered, shaking his head and looking away. "You will never understand it because you were his favourite. You always were. I'm not saying he was easy on you, but he was a lot harder on us. So don't pretend."

If Kevin's breath was shaking, Neil and him both ignored it. And if Neil's chest tightened and he inhaled with shivers, neither of them acknowledged it.

Minutes passed before Kevin found the words to say and Neil didn't find it in him to stop him when he whispered "I'm sorry. I should have gone in your place, you shouldn't have been there on your own."

Neil shook his head slightly, not saying anything for a moment. He couldn't, his throat was tight and his foot was hurting. He was exhausted, suddenly and for some reason, he couldn't breathe properly. "I always thought this was real and now I'm wondering if the only reason you took me in was so you'd build your own Perfect Court," he whispered, stating a fear that had been eating him up for too long, poisoning every thought he wasted on Kevin.

"Neil—" Kevin started again, but this time Neil didn't have to stop him. Kevin hesitated, words too heavy to be spoken out loud. The seconds stretched and Neil swallowed against the lump in his throat. They looked at each other, finally, and Kevin's eyes said more than his words could have. They spoke of regret and of being sorry, of something like compassion and a hint of friendship. "I'm sorry. And that is definitely not true," Kevin said, not leaving any space for Neil do doubt it.

"That doesn't make it okay," Neil answered, voice scratchy and raspy.

Kevin nodded very slightly, releasing a short breath. "I know, how could it? But we'll work that out as soon as we can," he answered softly, turning away again. The air was heavy around them, thick with tension and unspoken truths sizzling between them as the bedroom door opened and the twins left the room.

Andrew went straight into the kitchen while Aaron sat down in a bean bag chair, rubbing his eyes as he checked his phone ans smiled sleepily at the screen, before putting it away again.

"Morning," he mumbled at no one in particular, so both Neil and Kevin answered.

When Andrew came out of the kitchen, Aaron got up and entered it, not acknowledging his brother in the least. Andrew had a steaming mug in his hand, that spread the smell of chocolate through the whole room and Neil was almost glad that he and Kevin weren't alone. The conversation was over but nothing had been resolved and neither of them was ready to continue talking.

Andrew passed the sofa and dropped a piece of bread in Neil's lap before sitting down in a bean bag chair, just as Aaron had, a minute before.

Neil looked at the bread roll on his lap and frowned at Andrew, who raised an eyebrow at him and sipped his cocoa. He eyed it and sighed, not feeling all too hungry. Still, he needed to have breakfast and a bread with cheese wouldn't harm him, especially considering that he hadn't eaten in... was it more than a day already?

As he nibbled his breakfast, Nicky and Erik came out of the bedroom as well, Erik looking as if he'd been up for a while, Nicky looking tired, clinging to his boyfriend sleepily and stumbling into the
kitchen behind him just when Aaron left it and took a seat next to Andrew. Neil wondered if he'd ever trust a person enough to let himself be so utterly defenseless, relying on them to take care of everything that might happen. He thought perhaps the answer was no, not because he didn't trust anyone, but because "everything that might happen" was a different scenario to him than it was to most other people.

Aaron rolled his eyes, seeming way too annoyed for the time of the day, while drinking his coffee.

When the men were back in the living room, Nicky sat down next to Neil and made sure Erik would fit onto the sofa that was helplessly overcrowded with them, Neil and Kevin on it. Nobody seemed to mind, though, so Nicky rested his head on Erik's shoulder and intertwined their hands, seeming more grounded than Neil had ever seen him, as if all that nervous energy and sizzling enthusiasm was put aside with Erik there to steady him. Somehow, Nicky seemed more mature and childish at the same time, which wasn't a bad thing in any way. Neil actually liked how real Nicky seemed and how much of himself this revealed.

The silence was disturbed by a knock on the door and Matt opened it slightly, visibly relieved when he saw Neil sitting there. "Hey, sorry to disturb, but, uh," he mumbled, looking a little conflicted. "So... Neil, your mother is here and she wants to talk to you. Seth and I are in the girls' room for as long as you need us to," he explained, shrugging a little and leaving, not bothering to close the door.

Andrew got up at the same time as Kevin asked "Do you want me to...?" while Nicky frowned and Aaron raised an eyebrow, looking from his brother to Neil and back as if he was either not sure what to do with whatever he was seeing or not willing to voice his thoughts.

"It's okay, I need to talk to her," Neil said, making Andrew sit back down and the others settle back. They all kept frowning, but Erik actually smiled a little. "Good luck," he said with his thick accent and Neil couldn't help smiling back slightly, nodding a little before taking his crutches and leaving the room, closing the door carefully.

That was when he stopped. She was in his room and he was just going there? The Mast... Tesuji. Tesuji had told him about the deal he had made with Mary. That Neil was to be kept alive, that was it. He remembered how that was all she cared about, her heir, just like his father had. He wouldn't go in there and pretend everything was okay because the situation didn't turn out to be as terrible as it could have been. He wouldn't be the small kid happy to see his mother again, but face her like the adult he was.

Neil straightened his shoulders before entering the room, but a weight fell off his shoulders as he saw his mother's blonde curls and her way too familiar cold expression as she eyed him from head to toe, shaking her head a little.

"Abram," she said in lieu of hello and approached him, eyes looking almost conflicted. "I doubt your father would have made you look worse," Mary added, coming to a stand in front of him and letting out a deep sigh that sounded as if the burden on her shoulders got increasingly harder to bear. His mother brought her hand up and Neil remembered the last time he'd said goodbye to her. How she'd run her hand through his hair and made him feel as if maybe she had actually cared all along. But the memory consumed too much attention and Neil paid the prize for that sooner than he realised that he had been punished. The slap landed on his wounded cheek, definitely harming the tattoo-wound. He didn't manage to suppress a choked sound when he grimaced, feeling the burn on his cheek, blood actually pulsing in his veins.

"Didn't we teach you not to flinch away?" she asked, raising her arm again, but Neil grabbed her wrist before she could touch him another time. He looked into her cold face and wondered what this
woman thought being a mother was about. One of his crutches clattered to the ground as Neil forced her hand down and kept looking sternly into her face.

"I'm not a kid anymore and I won't let you treat me like one. Especially not when you've forgotten what that used to mean in the first place," he said, trying hard to sound calmer than he felt. He let go of her then, walking over to the sofa with only one crutch and sitting down. That way he felt steadier than on his legs, unable to put weight on one foot.

Mary sat down beside him and faced her son, shaking her head a little and seeming utterly disappointed. "I cannot believe I trusted that psychopath enough to watch out for you," she said, sighing and running a hand through her hair. Neil suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. So she was still exactly this person, pretending to pity and blame herself so others would admit to their mistakes. But not this time.

"I went. There is literally nothing he could have done. And his name is Andrew," he answered, keeping his head straight as he looked into her eyes.

"Yes, I absolutely do not care. I make deals and trade off territory to make sure these people don't put their hands on you, and you go there to make it as easy as possible for them to harm you? That's even more stupid than I gave you credit for, Abram," she said and Neil frowned, resisting the urge to fumble with his fingers or look away.

"What's that supposed to mean? You allowed them to do everything but - what? - to kill me? That's not exactly a good thing at the Nest," Neil argued, crossing his arms like the rebellious teenager she saw in him.

"I am not your father, Abram, I wouldn't let them take you. That was a part of the deal. No kidnapping, killing or anything like that. And you go there voluntarily," Mary said, shaking her head as if to express her exhaustion with a nerve wrecking child.

Neil looked at her for a long moment, evaluating her expression and body language, hoping to find any hint at her lying but didn't. "He didn't give me a choice. Said he'd hurt all of the Foxes if I didn't go," Neil told her and actually felt bad when she rolled her eyes ever so slightly.

"You have a lot to learn if that is not a choice to you. How are you feeling? What's up with that foot?" she asked while she kept sitting straight, not getting comfortable on the sofa whatsoever.

"Hairline fracture. It'll be fine soon and I'll train in three weeks, so it's not too bad. Not as bad as it could have been," he answered and couldn't keep himself from adding "And if there's a decision to be made about that, you obviously haven't changed in the past ten years."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked almost challengingly, as if she was daring him to insult her further. Neil didn't mind.

"You made the choice between a maybe with me and a safe on your own. It doesn't surprise me too much you'd choose your own safety over your family's all over again," he answered, not judging or challenging her this time, but implying it all the same.

"I chose you when I made these deals and connections. And these people are a sports team, not your family," she said, seeming annoyed Neil didn't get the point.

He forced himself to not scoff at that and kept a straight face. "They came for me. What did you do? Negotiate with the Moriyamas?" he asked, arching an eyebrow as he watched her become more and more furious. Professional as she was, she hid it well beneath layers of shields and lies she'd built
around her like an undestroyable facade.

"I contacted these kids you call family, because they didn't even know," Mary almost snapped and Neil pressed his jaw together. Was she not listening to her own words?

"So what you're saying is that you called a bunch of college students you don't trust to complain about their incompetence instead of doing something to get me out? And as soon as they found out they got me? I'm having troubles understanding how this makes you a better family than them," Neil explained lowly and Mary looked more like Nathan's wife than she had ever in his memory.

"I came here as quickly as I could," she answered, keeping the mask on, "And this is how you show your gratitude? This is a waste of time." She stated the last sentence as if she hadn't realised it before and Neil couldn't help scoffing this time.

"Mother-of-the-Year award goes to the woman making sure her heir is alive and slapping him instead of asking how he is," Neil said and realised a second too late that he was giving her one of his father's smiles. He wiped it off his face and kept a neutral expression for the rest of what he wanted to say. "I'm thankful for the money and the possibilities. I'm glad you helped when I called, but I don't want anything to do with the Hatfords any more than I want something to do with the Wesninskis, so..." Neil explained, trying to ease the tension.

"Abram, don't you dare compare me to your father," she said, threat ever so present in her voice and Neil stopped himself from raising an eyebrow at that.

He couldn't bite back his answer, though. "I compared your family to his, Mary, but now that you say this I can't help remembering how the both of you raised me to be this person. This isn't the first time you or him laid hands on me and honestly, you're as good of a mother as he's of a father."

Mary's face grew colder and colder and Neil would have said sorry at any other moment. Not today, though. He was right today.

"I am nothing like that man, I'm here and—"

"You're here after days of me being back!" he almost exclaimed, but silenced his voice, keeping the accusing tone. "I'm okay now. I'll manage going on from here on, but I don't think I could have two or three days ago. You were in England, weighing the options of when or whether to come."

Mary looked at him and Neil couldn't tell if she was disappointed with him or with herself, which made him feel a little smaller. As if his shoulders were shrinking and he lost an inch or two. But he straightened his back when she started talking and didn't allow himself to pretend to be the person she saw in him.

"I'm not a bad person," she answered and Neil hoped she wasn't trying to convince him but herself of that.

"You're not. You just suck at being a mother," Neil answered and Mary looked as if he'd just returned the slap. He was almost glad he didn't feel satisfaction at her discouraged figure, glad that he wasn't resembling his parents' sadistic tendencies.

"I'm going to leave," she said, getting up and wiping invisible dust off of her pants, while Neil wondered if it would be very impolite to answer "Be my guest."

He didn't.

Neil got off the sofa as well, taking his crutches as he walked her to the door. "Just for the record, I'm
still thankful you came," Neil said as she opened the door and Mary looked at him for a long moment, calculating and reserved as she watched him.

"I care about you and I'll come again, whether or not that changes anything," she said, raising her hand, hesitating when she saw Neil almost flinching away. He took a small step back, shaking his head a little. Neil didn't want her to even touch him at this point, much less show motherly affection.

"It doesn't," he answered and forced himself not to buckle under the tension as she left the room and closed the door with her head held high. Neil looked up to her as a leader and as a person. He knew she was strong and independent and mostly unafraid, but he knew that there were weaknesses right beneath her perfect surface. Years of abuse had damaged her and him alike and neither of them was able to kill the part of themselves Nathan Wesninski had deformed and played with. That was probably the main reason they found getting along so tough.

He waited a few minutes before taking a deep breath and opening the door. Neil couldn't stand being alone with his past weighing him down in addition to his present. He wasn't crumbling, didn't allow himself to, but his edges were frayed and he needed something to keep him together.

When he was back in the monsters' room, only Erik and Nicky were there, more awake than before, talking softly. They looked up when they saw Neil, who almost froze at the door.

"You okay? The others are buying stuff for lunch," Nicky explained and Neil just shrugged and nodded a little.

"Okay… I'll just –" he started, gesturing to the door, not wanting to disturb them.

"No, come here, it's alright! You haven't met Erik properly, which is a shame! So…" Nicky said, gesturing to the space that was left on the sofa. Neil needed company too much to argue about this, so he closed the door behind himself and sat down next to Nicky.

"And was it okay? Kevin was concerned," Nicky said, nudging Neil softly. He just nodded.

"She's… It was alright. Nothing you wouldn't have expected," he answered, fiddling with the hem of his shirt.

"Wanna talk about it or change the–" Nicky started, interrupting himself when he saw Neil's glare. "Okay, so, we were just talking about how we needed to go shopping soon and I am definitely going to pick stuff for you! Do you know what you need, Neil? You wear too much plaid, it's time for sparkle," he said, actually making Neil smile a little.

He looked at Erik, trying to be polite and nice to Nicky's boyfriend. "So, what do you do for a living?" he asked in German, which made Nicky smirk almost proudly.

"Told you Neil was fifty percent brain and fifty percent perfect legs," he said before Erik had any change to answer, making his boyfriend laugh.

"I'm studying pedagogics at the moment. To be honest I live off mini jobs and a student loan," he explained and Neil nodded a little.

"What do you want to do with that?" he asked, trying to keep the conversation going when he noticed how Nicky fondly fiddled with his necklace. That's when Neil realised there was a ring on it. "Is that new?"

Erik looked like he wanted to answer, but Nicky grinned too brightly at that, nodding a little. "Isn't this just the cutest present anyone has ever given anyone for Christmas?" Nicky asked, pressing a
Neil decided to agree instead of pointing out that he wouldn't know, given the fact that he had never celebrated Christmas. His parents didn't have time for these celebrations and at the Nest, the only thing different was that practice was a little less crowded with some students going home for the holidays.

He wondered yet again how these two men could be so incredibly happy, considering how Nicky had been raised. It shouldn't be possible for someone who had gone through so much to experience so much happiness. Neil wondered if perhaps that meant he could find happiness if he really—

He lost track of his thoughts when the door was unlocked and the others entered the room, packed with bags they brought into the small kitchen. Kevin came back, sitting down on a chair close to Neil and looked at him, frowning a little.

"Want to talk?" he asked in French, which made Neil's throat tighten. Something about the language and the worried look made him want to say yes. He hesitated, though, taking a deep breath. Neil knew that he was being weird and that this probably counted as overreacting, but he couldn't help it.

Kevin got up, handing Neil the crutches and going to the bedroom, not making sure whether or not Neil was following him. He was.

They closed the door behind themselves and sat down on Kevin's bed next to each other, not doing anything against the familiar silence for a moment.

"About earlier, Neil? I don't want anything like making a Perfect Court, but I really want to make Court with you. And maybe we're going to qualify for the Olympics together. That would be it's own kind of perfect," Kevin said lowly, not knowing that Neil needed to hear those exact words. He looked at Kevin and nodded a little, ignoring the bitter taste of their previous conversation.

"I wanted this to be true, Kevin, but then it wasn't. I just hoped I could be more than my parents' lies but I'm caught in this weird web and this felt like you're a part of it," Neil whispered, explaining what he felt in an exhausted attempt to make Kevin understand.

"I'm sorry," Kevin said, letting the words hang between them. They both knew Neil wouldn't just say it was fine this time. But the silence showed that at least Neil didn't shush him, which was progress. "How was everything with your mother?"

Neil's jaw clenched and he pressed his lips together for a second. "I don't... she's... I don't know. But I'm glad we have Abby. Honestly? You should be thankful for Wymack, it could have been worse," Neil mumbled, running a hand through his hair.

Kevin nodded a little and they were lost in thoughts for quite some minutes, maybe half an hour, just sitting next to one another.

"I'm not mad, Kevin. I think we'll work this out," Neil mumbled after a long time, making Kevin sigh with a nod.

"Even if everything goes downhill, Neil, at least we'll hit rock bottom together," Kevin answered, actually making Neil smile very slightly.

It wasn't more than a minute later that Andrew entered the room with two plates of something that looked like salad with chicken.

"Erik cooked," he explained, handing one plate to Neil and only looking at Kevin, who nodded at
whatever was said unspoken between him and the twin, actually leaving the room and closing the
door.

"You don't have to feed me," Neil said lowly, at which the blond boy only shrugged, sitting down
next to Neil.

"Prove it," he answered, starting to eat a little too quickly, almost wolfing down the food.

Neil wasn't a picky eater, but he didn't like these kinds of salads that contained all kinds of other
vegetables, cheese and even eggs. It was wrong, somehow. He still started eating the slices of
tomatoes and cucumbers before actually working on the portion of food in front of him.

"Thanks for – you know – checking on the situation and for trying to be there," Neil mumbled,
making Andrew roll his eyes.

"Deal," he reminded him coldly, but Neil shook his head.

"It's not only a deal and if you don't want to talk about it, I will. Because if it was nothing but a deal
then you wouldn't care. And I know you do," Neil said lowly, reminding Andrew of what they had
rather than accusing him of anything.

"You don't understand," Andrew said between bites, shaking his head a little. There was more to it
than he was admitting and Neil has heard too many lies that day to miss a so entirely twisted version
of the truth.

Andrew might not care about everything the way others did. He might not care about Neil the way it
seemed or the way he sometimes wanted him to, but that wasn't important. He cared about Nicky,
Aaron and Kevin. About Bee and Renee and honestly, about the rest of the team.

But Neil couldn't open up the many wrapped and wrinkled layers of Andrew's protective shields
during lunch and he didn't want to.

"Will you explain it?" Neil asked but Andrew remained silent for the rest of the meal, not making a
single sound while Neil tried to not look as if he was forcing food down. It was weird to have a
sufficient amount of food and for some reason, it felt almost wrong. Still, Neil wouldn't give in to this
feeling.

"Maybe," Andrew said, a moment before they both looked at the door.

Aaron had almost ripped it open, but looked a little confused to see them.

It was easy to forget how Andrew let his guard down sometimes, once Neil had gotten used to it, but
the fact became apparent in the second Andrew needed to conceal everything he'd revealed to Neil.
It hadn't been a lot, but Neil realised the change and so did Aaron, judging from the frown on his
face.

"What's your problem? Don't approve?" Andrew asked close to challengingly, getting up from the
bed he was sitting on and carrying his empty plate.

Neil didn't like to see the twins arguing or just being this rude to one another and he wished he
wasn't there to witness it.

"Even if I did, you're breaking the deal as well," Aaron said, blocking the way. They stared into each
others' eyes when Andrew raised an eyebrow.
"As well? Care to admit something?" he asked, before pushing past Aaron and leaving the room.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys. I love Aaron. I love Aaron. Just
In case you doubt it. I love him. And Kevin. Please don't hate them.
Fuck Mary we have Abby
And I love Nicky and Erik
And Neil
God I love these babies

Okay sorry. Thanks to everyone who commented! Thanks to Eleftheria for the calls, I died!

And thanks to my beautiful little fairy princess Saya for everything. For Everything.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

New Year's Eve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He didn't understand.

Neil had been back from the Ravens before and of course his sleeping rhythm had been messed up. This time, however, he didn't want to sleep in different rhythms, he just wanted to sleep. It was as if every night he lay down in bed his head tried to recall the entire past weeks. He couldn't fall asleep and kept staring at the ceiling of his room. Matt and Seth were loud sleepers, which was comforting most evenings. But sometimes Neil needed more than this to be reminded of where he was.

The result was an abundance of nights spent on the roof, sometimes with and sometimes without Andrew, Neil making up stories for constellations, talking to Andrew for hours, getting no more than two sentences a night. Sometimes he was just reminding himself that this was theirs. He was safe here.

It was early morning, the day before New Year's Eve and Neil hadn't slept for longer than two hours that night, nightmares of Riko waking him as soon as he'd fallen asleep.

So as soon as Neil thought it was safe to assume someone was awake, he got out of bed slowly, only stopping in the bathroom before taking his crutches and walking out of the room slowly.

Neil stopped when he saw Aaron leaning against the wall next to his room, talking on his phone. He couldn't make out a lot but there was definitely a "Love you too, Kate," before Aaron looked up and saw Neil. His expression went from carefree and happy to rather cold and almost annoyed.

"Gotta hang up, I'm sorry," he mumbled and his mouth twitched a little when he nodded. "You too," he said lowly, before hanging up and looking at Neil. "What's your problem?"

Neil raised an eyebrow and didn't know how to react for a second. "Everyone is asleep, I thought I'd go over. You can keep talking to her, I'm leaving you alone," he said quickly, but Aaron shook his head.

"Don't talk about her," Aaron almost snapped and Neil stared at him blankly for a second. He was too tired for this. God, why was Aaron so…

"I wasn't. And I didn't tell Andrew about this, he figured it out himself, in case you're wondering," Neil said as calmly as he could, walking a few steps into the direction of the Monsters' door. He was too tired to not get into this argument. Too exhausting to even try to avoid it.

"You don't get to talk about Andrew either!" Neil stopped at how angry Aaron got, frowning at him a little.
"What's your problem?" he asked, voice almost threateningly low, keeping his shoulders straight. Neil wouldn't let his time at the Nest make him crumble at this. Yes, he was used to being punished for these answers. But did that mean he'd have to avoid arguments with Aaron? Certainly not.

"My problem is that Andrew pretends to be so over everyone else and breaks his sacred deal by doing whatever disgusting things with you. My problem is that you take advantage of whatever broke him during foster care and turn it into your twisted version of compensating for what you missed," Aaron spat, coming closer.

Neil forced his expression to stay blank as the twin spoke of truths he didn't understand. He doubted Aaron knew as much as he did about Andrew’s past, and he wouldn't give anything away by letting his expression betray him. It wasn't as hard, considering that he was dead tired and just wanted some kind of company.

"What do you expect me to say? You're mad because Andrew does things you feel like you can't do. Talk to him about that, I'm not the reason you're trying to keep your girlfriend a secret," Neil said matter of factly, thinking of ways to phrase his thoughts without becoming too challenging.

"Stay away from him. He might be too stupid to see all the ways you're exploiting him, but I'm not," Aaron said lowly, turning around and going into his room again. He left the door open for Neil anyways, for some reason.

He followed Aaron into the kitchen, not wasting thoughts on his words. Aaron didn't understand that he and Andrew were nothing. The only time they had even been close enough to touch in the time Neil was back was on that first day, when they'd fallen asleep next to one another, fingers barely intertwined.

"You could introduce her to Andrew, you know? If he knew she wasn't any harm, maybe he'd let it go," Neil said lowly, getting a cup of coffee and looking at Aaron, who was staring at him with a stern expression.

"You could shut up and stop talking about things you don't understand. You don't know how Andrew feels about this childish deal," Aaron said in a whisper, well aware of the fact that his twin was sleeping in the bedroom and could wake up at any given time.

Neil didn't feel like picking fights today. And more importantly, he wanted the twins to work it out. Aaron didn't know just how much Neil understood of Andrew and his deals, but that didn't matter.

"If you don't want to do it alone, you could have a session with him and Bee?" Neil suggested and Aaron's shoulders tensed. "Just... see if it works. If it doesn't you wasted an hour of your afternoon, so what's the matter?" Neil asked, but Aaron turned around and sat down on the sofa.

"You're an idiot if you thinks that could work," he mumbled, sitting down, but didn't complain when Neil sat down next to him. "It's disgusting, you know? Repulsive. But I'll still slit your wrists open if you hurt him."

Neil looked at Aaron for a long moment, frowning. His job as a brother was probably to have this conversation with Neil, but somehow he wasn't expecting it. Even though he was rude and impossible towards Neil, he made a mental note not to treat Aaron as hostilely anymore. He was just a twin caring for his other half in ways Neil couldn't even attempt to understand. These boys had many broken and twisted layers, many malfunctions and paradoxical definitions of words like "brotherhood" and "family", but they cared for one another and Neil wasn't stupid enough to attempt to get in between their hurricane of a relationship.
"Good, you should. He'd do the same thing to her," Neil said with an almost smile on his lips when Aaron raised an eyebrow. Neither of them said anything for a while until the room started filling. Erik and Nicky were the first to join them, Kevin—surprisingly—came out second and Andrew was the last one to leave the bed. He looked a lot better and the sight of him made Neil smile a little. The rings under his eyes became paler and his face got some of the colour back. All in all, Andrew looked healthier and more alive and Neil was honestly so glad.

"How didn't I realise just how gay you guys were?" Nicky asked with a laugh, ripping Neil's attention away.

Andrew hit Nicky's head as he walked by, but it wasn't as harsh as it could have been. The room went quiet for a few seconds before Nicky changed the topic yet again.

"So, there's that party tomorrow evening. Are we going? Or should we drive to Columbia now that you're almost back to normal," he said as soon as Andrew was back. The boy sat down on a bean bag chair next to Kevin and sipped his drink that smelled an awful lot like liquid sugar and was probably the sweetest hot chocolate a human being could drink.

"Who will be there?" Aaron asked, looking at his cousin, who smiled brightly at the participation in the conversation.

"All athletes are celebrating in front of Fox Tower," he explained, smiling brightly. "The basketball guys, the Vixens, they even let the chess team participate," Nicky laughed, tone as cheerful and careless as it could get.

Andrew didn't say anything, which was almost an invitation by his standards. Aaron was the one to use the opportunity. "I don't think you should drive for an hour just for us to be alone. What's the point in that?" he asked, making Andrew raise an eyebrow.

"And this doesn't have anything to do with that Vixen, right?" he made sure challengingly, looking at his twin and seeming almost unmoved.

"Why are you picking fights at eleven in the morning?" Aaron asked, crossing his arms, and Andrew's jaw tensed.

Kevin interrupted their conversation before it could escalate. "Going to Columbia would be complicated. We're six people and there are five seats in the car," he said, leaning forward a little and looking around.

Nicky nodded at that, smiling at Erik. "Staying here is great because that way I can introduce you to even more people! And it's easier if others organise everything," he said, laughing softly.

"I'll tell the Upperclassmen, they'll be happy," Neil said just so he could contribute something to the conversation.

They went on talking and planning and chatting, when Neil received a text by… Andrew? "Roof"

Neil looked up and saw Andrew getting up. He left the room and didn't say anything to the others' questions, simply closed the door behind him after he got a jacket.

Nicky didn't leave enough space in his head to debate on whether or not to follow, but started talking immediately. "So, you and Andrew," he started, which resulted in Aaron getting up and shaking his head.

"No. I'm not gonna— no," the twin mumbled, taking out his phone and already leaving the room.
"Why is everyone acting as if anything changed?" Neil asked a little confused. It's not as if he and Andrew had kept anything secret or had revealed this in a way. There was nothing to be revealed and Neil wasn't sure why they were all acting as if something had shifted.

"Excuse me, but you didn't see the look on his face when we found out where you were," Nicky went on, making Kevin sigh.

"Nicky, they don't want to talk about it. Let it go," he said, and Neil was glad Kevin was standing up for him in a way. He didn't want to be rude but he'd like to talk to Andrew about what they should and shouldn't say. For some reason, Neil thought perhaps he'd get more than a 'nothing' today.

"It's fine, really! There's just nothing to talk about. It's not what you think it is, anyways. We're not… we're not even a 'we', so just please stop acting like it," Neil mumbled, ignoring the glances they exchanged. He was uncomfortable in the situation and decided to get up. "I'll be back," he said, trying to smile so Nicky wouldn't feel too let down.

Andrew had told him where he was going so while that wasn't an invitation, it was at least some kind of verification that he wouldn't mind Neil joining him.

The staircase was a nightmare with his crutches, but he did it, and some of the exhaustion and weight dropped off his shoulders when the cold winter air filled his lungs with life again. It was freezing and everything seemed too cold to even move, as if branches and clouds consisted of immovable crystals. Andrew wasn't sitting, he was laying on his back, looking up at the clear blue sky. You could see the moon, which Neil always found weird. He knew the physics behind it, but it always seemed strangely miraculous when you could see it during daytime, as if it had gotten the schedule wrong and didn't know what to do now that it had messed up already.

Neil sat down next to Andrew clumsily, laying the crutches down on his other side.

"Hey," he mumbled, leaning back until he felt the cold cement underneath him. He should have taken a jacket…

Neil looked at Andrew, who simply stared at the sky, not acknowledging Neil's presence at all.

"Andrew?" he tried then, taking a deep breath as the other one actually turned to look at him. "The others are asking about us and I'm not entirely sure what to tell them," Neil went on. He knew this topic would end in a matter of sentences but he wanted to discuss it with Andrew anyways.

"There is no 'us'," Andrew said with a blank expression. "There was never going to be one."

Neil smiled at that answer and nodded. "That's what I told them. But are you sure it's nothing?" He stopped himself from saying anything else, not sure which words might follow.

Andrew took out a pack of cigarettes and lit two of them, handing one to Neil wordlessly. Neil couldn't bring himself to look at Andrew, staring at the sky instead.

"It doesn't feel like nothing, Andrew. I've had too many years of experience with being nothing to mistake this for it. This could be a potential 'something'," he said lowly, pressing the words out. It felt like more of a confession than it should but Neil needed the words outside. Now they were hanging between them, pieces of a truth better off unspoken.

"That's not my problem. I'm not the cure to your issues and you sure as fuck won't change anything about my past," Andrew said, taking a deep drag from the cigarette and holding the smoke in for longer than seemed possible.
Neil played with a cigarette a little, thinking about what to say. "I know," he answered, stopping for a few seconds before figuring out how to say the next sentence without sounding as if he was selling Aaron out. "Aaron said some things about this earlier. He's worried about you," Neil mumbled. He wanted to get the conversation over with.

"You can't hurt me and I won't let you let me hurt you. Aaron is more oblivious than I gave him credit for if he doesn't get that," Andrew answered, looking up at the sky again. Neil frowned, looking at Andrew for a long moment. It was almost surprising that he got the point right away.

"You should talk to him," Neil muttered and Andrew shrugged, finishing his cigarette. Neil's had gone out but he didn't really care. This was way more important than anything else.

"You're even more silent than usual," he remarked after a while, but received nothing but another shrug. He didn't want to stay in silence, so Neil decided to keep talking. "So, at the Nest, Kevin had a poem on his wall. I don't remember all of it but it was nice. Something about being your own master and everything. I couldn't believe Riko let him have it…"

"Out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul," Andrew said and Neil needed a moment to understand that he was reciting it. "It's called Invictus," Andrew added, looking bored.

"You know it?" Neil asked surprised, looking at the twin with his eyebrows raised.

Andrew seemed unimpressed at his reaction, raising an eyebrow. "Everyone knows it, but it's hypothetical. 'My head is bloody, but unbowed.' If you don't bow, your head isn't bloody enough yet. It's as simple as that," Andrew mumbled, and Neil looked at him for seconds that stretched to hours.

"Is that why you don't like the word 'please'? Because it means you bow?" Neil asked very lowly but he could tell from the way Andrews jaw tensed that the conversation was over.

"Shut up," Andrew said dangerously low, and for once Neil did.

It was an eternity later that Neil put his hand between them loosely, more as an offer than a demand. Andrew didn't put his inside for a long minute, but when he did eventually, Neil couldn't help smiling a little. This was something.

Aaron looked up as his twin entered the room again, lacking the idiot that always followed him around. Nicky and Erik had gone somewhere and he and Kevin were in their room on their own, watching TV while playing on their phones. Katelyn would be back at Palmetto in an hour or two but Aaron wasn't willing to admit how much he'd missed her.

"We need to talk," he said, making Andrew shrug as he took his jacket off and went to the kitchen. Aaron followed and watched him prepare a cup of tea. "Andrew?"

"What?" his brother asked, putting boiling water into the mug. His face was red and he was sniffing, but he'd spent a while in the cold. Aaron told himself that he was still getting better, almost back to normal.

He straightened his shoulders as he leaned against the wall while Andrew sat down on the counter.

"You broke the deal with Neil," Aaron said matter of factly, making his twin raise an eyebrow.

"The fact that neither you nor him understand that it's nothing doesn't change anything about what it is," he answered, making Aaron roll his eyes.
"Yeah, right. In that case Katelyn and I are nothing as well. Is the deal on or off?"

Andrew slurped his tea and sniffed, which were the most disgusting sounds Aaron could even imagine. "What's the point in keeping a broken deal?" he asked, tilting his head to look at his brother.

Aaron had put a lot of thought into this and just hoped it'd work. "Exceptions prove the rule. What if we both got one free shot and keep the deal?" he asked, making Andrew raise an eyebrow yet again. "We're both too stubborn to give them or us up, so why not bend the rules?"

He didn't want to lose his brother, but he couldn't let go of Katelyn. The only hope he had was that Andrew felt the same as…

"Deal?" he asked uncertainly, trying to keep his voice steady. He stretched out his fist just the way they'd done it when they'd made the first deal in high school. Like when they'd renewed the deal in college…

"I'll decide that after I had a conversation with your exception," he said, sounding a little too threatening. "You can't expect me to agree after knowing the friends you picked before," he said, and Aaron's shoulders tensed. Yes, he'd been friends with dealers and addicts when they'd met. Still… he was an adult now.

"So that means?" he asked, which Andrew made a dismissive gesture to.

"Renewal of the deal is delayed till further notice," he said, jumping off the counter and going to sit on one bean bag chair.

He couldn't believe this… it was almost a solution, right?

"We're celebrating here, by the way," Andrew said pretty much out of nowhere as Aaron dressed to go greet Katelyn. He stopped mid-movement, looking at his twin with a frown. Even Kevin looked surprised.

"Why?" he asked, making Andrew shrug.

"So you owe me a favour. I'll think of something," he answered, which could have made Aaron smile in some alternative timeline. Andrew had done this as a favour to his twin.

"I'll be back in an hour or something," he announced instead, leaving the room. Katelyn's 'Will be there in 5' had arrived some minutes ago and he couldn't wait to see her again. It's been barely more than a week, but it had been a stressful week and as much as he liked to deny it, he needed her arms.

Aaron went down the stairs and left the building in the exact moment Katelyn's car pulled into the parking lot. Some spark that had gone out came to life and suddenly, he was warm again. Her mint green Mini was hard to mistake but Aaron liked how much it was like her.

He walked over as she parked and this time, he couldn't help smiling when she got out of the car. Kate looked around warily, frowning.

"Aaron? Everyone can see," she said, her body not betraying her as she walked towards the trunk past him, making it look casual. She'd understood quickly how important secrecy was for him, and never once questioned it. But with Neil and Andrew an official thing, the deal was at least partly invalid and Aaron didn't need more of an excuse.

"I know, but that doesn't matter one last bit," he said, wrapping his arms around her as she attempted to push past, and she froze.
"What happened? Is... everything okay?" She was still hesitant, unsure what to do with the sudden change of course, but she smiled already.

"It's all great. But I don't need us to hide at this point, and... I really don't want to," he mumbled. Katelyn's face lit up at that, a bright smile erupting and her arms lifting around his shoulders in seconds.

"So... let's say, if I were to kiss you in the middle of the parking lot, right in front of everyone?" she asked playfully, actually laughing when he closed the distance. He'd missed her, her body, her voice, everything about his girl.

"I'm glad you're back, Kate," he mumbled and smiled as she hid her face in his neck, pulling her closely against him.

"Me too! I have so much to tell you! My room?" she asked and they parted only for the time it took to get her suitcase to her room. One of her roommates was still at home in another state, the other one wasn't there at the moment, so they had the room to themselves.

Katelyn didn't pry about what had happened. She shared stories about Christmas, about her family, about old friends while he played with her hair or pulled her in even more closely. How could she have so much to say after only a week?

"You're everything," he mumbled against her throat after what felt like hours but probably wasn't. Katelyn laughed at that, running a hand through his hair and nodding.

"And you are the world to me."

"Neil?"

"Leave him, he's tired."

"But we don't know what he wants to order," Allison complained.

Neil sighed and moved a little closer to the warmth, not really bothered by the voices around him. His brain was nothing but a cloud of thick fog, making everything else mushy and too far away to be concerned.

He hadn't gotten any sleep last night and right now it didn't matter. Nobody could complain about him dozing off a little and catching a second of sleep...

Because of his messed up sense of time, he had no clue how long he slept, but he woke up with a flinch as someone knocked on the door rapidly and yelled. He was still at the girls' room, sitting on a sofa between the boys, and judging from the ache in his neck, he must have been leaning against one of them as he'd slept.

"Sleeping Beauty awoke! We ordered normal pizza for you," Dan said with a chuckle as Neil rubbed his burning eyes. Renee looked at him concerned as Allison opened the door and payed the delivery guy. He was too tired for this amount of people.

"Sorry," he mumbled, making both boys nudge him at the same time.

"Don't be silly," Matt said, smiling, while food was distributed.

It was the day of New Year's Eve and Neil was glad that this year was as good as over. He needed a new start and he definitely needed these people to make that possible.
"So, the party tonight is going to be super awesome! The basketball team is responsible for alcohol so we're probably all going to be dead by this time tomorrow," Allison announced, laughing a little. "Want me to take care of your face?" she asked Neil then. Dan elbowed her in the ribs, but Neil couldn't help laughing at it sleepily.

"Sure, can't go around scaring half our campus off," he mumbled, shrugging slightly as food was distributed. Neil had stopped complaining about everybody taking care of him. At this point he almost appreciated not having to do all of it alone.

The day passed in more of a blur than anything else. People rushing in and out of his room and endless preparations for this and that. He couldn't quite concentrate on the conversations around him and was overwhelmed by the abundance of actions. Why was this party so much more of a deal than all the other parties they had celebrated?

Neil was almost surprised when Allison showed up in their room, hair in defined curls and make up making her seem like a… wrong version of herself. She always looked like something was missing when she made herself look like a doll. As if she was wiping her personality right off her face.

"Hey, ready?" she asked, holding up a small bag. She was still in normal clothes which made Neil guess they had a little time left. He shrugged so Allison pulled him into the bathroom with her, locking the door. "So… we're only going to try and get you looking more alive, no major changes, not a lot of colour, okay?" she made sure and Neil nodded slightly.

"What about this?" he asked, pointing to the band aid on the place his tattoo used to be. The wound was not healed, skin taking too much time to go back to normal. Abby wasn't worried yet but he didn't like constantly wearing bandages.

"I have thinner band aids, ones you'll be barely able to see once I put make up over them. It'll look a little off, but it's going to be fine, don't worry!" Allison smiled and started working. She didn't ask if it was okay to do this or that, just peeled the badge off and worked her magic.

"So… when we talked about kissing and everything, we were talking about Andrew?" she asked as she carefully placed a new band aid on his cheek. Neil avoided her eyes. For some reason, he didn't feel like he could brush it off as easily as he usually did because he and her had talked about these matters too often. She knew…

"Yeah. Is that a problem?" he asked, voice softer than he meant it to be.

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm glad you're happy. How is everything with him?" She smiled as she started putting things onto his face with brushes and her fingers, sometimes small sponges.

"Everything's alright. I mean… I kinda screwed things up with all of you by going away, so…” he trailed off, clearing his throat and playing with his fingers a little. "I don't want to discuss this if you don't mind," he added, swallowing a little. It was different now that she knew who this was about. Andrew's privacy wasn't his to give away.

"Sure, no problem! Just make sure you get a New Year's kiss!" she said with a chuckle, working on his face further. "Okay… you know what? I think you're done!" she said after putting powder on his face endlessly. He looked into the mirror and raised an eyebrow.

"This is… interesting," he mumbled, taking a closer look. He didn't look as if she'd put anything at all onto his face, as if this was just how he looked. His face had colour again and he didn't look like a corpse anymore. If you didn't pay too much attention, you barely realised that there was a band aid. "Thanks," he told her, and she ruffled his hair.
"No problem, Neil, anytime!" she answered, unlocking the door.

"When does the party start?" he asked, making her shrug.

"They started drinking an hour ago. I'm guessing we'll go there in around twenty minutes. It's right in front of the building, after all," she said, laughing before going to her room to get dressed.

Neil changed into jeans and a black shirt before going to join the others in the girls' room again.

"You look alive," Seth greeted him while Matt poked his uninjured cheek.

"This could always be how you look but you don't ever eat a piece of vegetables!" he complained with a laugh. Neil couldn't help smiling. Allison had even gotten rid of the dark circles under his eyes, which didn't mean that he felt any less exhausted…

Some minutes went by before they all took their jackets and went downstairs. At this point, there were only twenty remotely drunk boys on the parking lot, laughing as music blared through some speaker they had managed to get outside. In a matter of seconds, all of them had beers or other drinks in their hands.

Matt and Seth went to talk to some friends while always keeping an eye on Neil. He felt strangely supervised but on the other side he hadn't ever spoken to these boys, so it was better to not be left alone.

Neil was introduced to many people he had never seen or acknowledged and was glad when, after around one and a half hours, the Monsters came out of the building and onto the parking lot. Nicky looked… sparkly? He wore a white tee with a rainbow flag out of sequins on it with a shirt that looked almost sparkly as well, for some reason.

The others looked like themselves, not really festive. Neil looked up at Matt, who just laughed and shrugged. "You can go over there, we don't mind," he said, ruffling Neil's hair before turning back to a basketball-guy. He smiled at the gesture and really didn't care that his hair must look pretty awful. He ran a hand through it and went to the Monsters, thinking of how good it felt to be with his family again.

Somehow, it made him check his phone and only when he saw no new messages, he realised he'd hoped for a text by Jean… They hadn't talked since Neil was back and he really wanted to talk to him. He definitely knew, by now. Everyone had heard of the transfer that was cancelled last minute.

"Neil?" Kevin asked, getting his attention. He just put his phone away and nodded, smiling softly at them.

"The basketball team consists of a bunch of alcoholics," he greeted them, having gained new knowledge about the people living in the Fox Tower.

Aaron raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "They're idiots, why did you think they didn't have any friends?" he asked, making Neil smile a little. He and Aaron weren't ignoring each other's existence anymore…

"Speaking of alcohol," Kevin muttered with a smirk, making Nicky laugh.

"We're getting something with you," he announced, and they went over to where the alcohol was stored, pulling Erik with them. Andrew hadn't said anything yet, which Neil understood. He barely ever said a word with other people around and today he looked almost cautiously around from time to time, which eased when Kevin and the others were back, handing bottles of beer to the twins.
Suddenly, Andrew and Aaron tensed at the same time and just as Neil wanted to turn around to see what he was missing, something hit his shoulders out of nowhere, making him suck in a startled breath and barely suppressing a full flinch. Only then did he realise that it wasn't some kind of attack but…

Marissa? That cheerleader which was way too loud and chatty all day long?

"Whoops, look who we ran into, isn't this a coincidence?" she asked the girls she was is, making Neil frown. One of them was Katelyn, he didn't know the others. Aaron's girlfriend looked visibly embarrassed, shaking her head a little and whispering "I'm sorry" in Aaron's direction while Marissa seemed pleased she'd initiated a conversation.

Aaron rolled his eyes as he looked at the girl, but his gaze seemed to soften when he saw Katelyn, while Andrew looked at the Vixens with a blank expression, apparently very unpleased by the turn this was taking.

"Uh… okay so I just… I wanted to say hello," Katelyn said, fingers pulling at her curls a little while she looked at Andrew a little insecurely.

Aaron looked between them, tension thickening as he seemed to debate on whether or not to say something.

"And?" he asked, making her eyes flicker to Aaron for a second. It seemed as if they had talked about this.

"And… hello? Hello! I'm Katelyn and I just thought it would be nice to meet you. Aaron told me about you a lot and I just thought we could talk? Or…," she seemed to get a little more confident as she kept talking, actually smiling at her boyfriend's twin. "I know that this is not the best place for a conversation but maybe we could meet some time?"

Andrew looked at Aaron for a few seconds, as if to ask what exactly he was trying to achieve. Then he looked back at Katelyn, directly into her eyes, ignoring everyone around them. "The next conversation we are having is happening when I slit your wrists open after you hurt him," he said, turning around and actually leaving them standing there.

Neil almost smiled, remembering that this was exactly what Aaron had told him. These twins were so alike and it was probably a reason for their mutual hatred. But then he saw Katelyn's shocked expression and wondered if someone should comfort her. Aaron did that a little, smiling as he ran a hand though her hair.

"Don't look like that, this went better than expected," Nicky said, making Kevin laugh next to him.

The girls all looked a little uneasy when Katelyn asked, "You're saying there could have been a worse outcome?"

Neil stopped following the conversation when his phone buzzed. For some reason he wanted Jean to text first. He didn't want to push him into having a conversation and got that he couldn't just call him after returning from the Nest. The Trojan would probably have to think about that for a little, but Neil was still glad he was writ—

"Roof?"

He bit his lip for a second. In the first moment, Neil was almost disappointed that it wasn't Jean. Then he reminded himself that this was okay. Then he saw that this time, Andrew hadn't informed him about his whereabouts but actually invited Neil over. Asked if he wanted to come. The
difference between "Roof." and "Roof?" was probably insignificant to anyone else, but Neil smiled at it, putting his phone away.

"Neil?" Nicky asked, frowning, then he smirked a little. Looking around and realising he couldn't make any too suggestive remarks about him and Andrew, Nicky just shrugged. And so Neil went inside with his crutches, almost wondering about why nobody had asked him about them yet. That was probably the Upperclassmen's influence, or maybe their demands, knowing them.

He took the elevator up and then went to the roof, smiling as he saw Andrew. "Hey," he mumbled, sitting down next to Andrew and not letting it bother him when he blew cigarette smoke directly into his face.

"You're hurting," Andrew said, eyeing him from the side. They didn't sit right by the edge today, in fear of any students seeing them and deciding they'd watch the fireworks from their spot.

"It's okay, Marissa only kinda… I don't know. She surprised me," Neil said shrugging. She'd hurt him quite a lot, actually, accidentally touching bruises on his back.

"She's into you," Andrew said then, making Neil laugh a little.

"She's not! And even if she were… I really don't care," Neil mumbled, breathing the cold air in. The sky was pitch black, only stars making it a little brighter, no moon to be seen. They could hear the music from the parking lot, but Neil chose to ignore it. He liked his and Andrew's silence too much to acknowledge anything interrupting it. "And you're giving Katelyn a chance?" Neil asked then, trying to have a real conversation. He'd missed that as well, talking to Andrew and listening to his voice. They hadn't talked about many things apart from how messed up Neil was since he was back…

"I'm thinking about not killing her before he has a chance to find out that she's a mistake, if that's what you mean," Andrew said, making Neil smile a little.

"Aaron appreciates it," Neil assured him, making Andrew shrug in resignation. He sighed, thinking of a way to make Andrew talk again. He could use a turn, but that was cheap… Exy and Andrew were not topics Andrew liked talking about, so… maybe he'd just try. "Jean hasn't called since I'm back and I really want to talk to him but I get that he might feel like he needs space," Neil mumbled and Andrew frowned at him.

"Just text him, he'll answer if he wants to," Andrew said with a shrug, obviously not getting the problem.

"After I came back the first time, it was over a month before we met and even that was unplanned," Neil argued, remembering Kathy's show and the live reunion of the Perfect Court all too well.

"You're acting like a teenage girl with a crush," Andrew said, making Neil almost laugh. He was right.

"I'll text him later. Tomorrow, maybe," he mumbled, looking at Andrew, who was looking back for once. "You're staring," Neil mumbled with a laugh, making Andrew scoff.

"You're—" he started, voice trailing off. Neil almost laughed again, shaking his head a little.

"What?" Neil asked, raising an eyebrow, unable to keep a smile off his face.

"A liar, hypocrite, problem, mistake?" Andrew offered, but Neil only shrugged.
"If you say so," he mumbled, placing his hand on the floor between them. "Yes or no?" he asked then. Neil honestly expected a no at this point, doubting Andrew would even consider it at this point.

He was wrong…

Neil only realised how cold he was when Andrew made him feel warmer again. Didn't realise he was holding his breath until he inhaled the first lung full of cold cigarette smoke that always clung to Andrew.

He didn't protest when Andrew pushed him down a little, only held on to Andrew's hand more tightly and sighed softly as he laid there, letting the pressure on his lips become the center of attention, letting his hand hover next to Andrew's head, reminding himself not do overstep lines drawn so long ago. Andrew took Neil's wrist and put his hand on his head, making Neil smile against his lips.

Neil sighed very softly, getting lost in the intensity of the moment, in how Andrew was one hundred percent security and no hesitation, all the warmth you could imagine.

It was easy to forget everything around them, the party going on down in the parking lot. Easy to forget every second spent apart when he was allowed to run his fingers through Andrew's hair, pulling him as close as he could. He'd missed this more than he'd even realised.

It was almost desperate, trying to be closer, the only thing giving each other warmth in the freezing December night.

Neil didn't care about the chanting that was so loud he heard it clearly, dozens of young adults counting down from ten. He couldn't help but smile at the thought that his was his start into the year ahead.

Andrew only pulled away when they heard the first firework exploding, and Neil smiled as he saw the sky sparkling behind Andrew's head.

"Happy New Year," he mumbled, kissing him again for no longer than a second before letting go. "Thanks for… the year and… everything. It was pretty amazing," Neil added, making Andrew scoff. But fireworks illuminated the sky and he was home and allowed himself to think of the beauty he'd found when he came here and acknowledge the fact that he couldn't fit everything that was important into a duffle bag anymore.

The past year was a year of pain and loss but had turned into this, his friends and family, this new version of himself.

Neil wasn't a person for New Years resolutions, but right then, he swore some things to himself. He would keep the Foxes safe. They would get to the final. They would win the cup.

And he would make Riko pay.

Chapter End Notes

Goooooood Guys, I'm dead!
Final exams are in less than three months and I wanna die! But i hope all of you are in the Christmas spirit!!! ITS ALMOST CHRISTMAS YALL!!!
I'm sorry that this chapter took a little longer than usual, but it's been extremely stressful over here!! But!!!!! There will be many chapters over the holidays since I'm gonna be home and have a lot of free time (or pretend to have free time while avoiding preparing for exams)

Special thanks to everyone who commented!! And to Eleftheria for the calls, they make me happy!! And Darcy because your snaps keep me alive! (And because I learn new words all the time hah)

And of course the biggest thank you to saya for talking about these broken kids with me and ensuring that you get to read the best version of the story! You're my favourite person on the planet and I love you so much!
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

First few weeks of the new year

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Days blurred into nights blurred into a week that was measured in nothing but people. More Foxes here, less of them there…

Erik left them a few days into the New Year and Neil had to stay home for that, since Andrew's car could only transport five people and he didn't even know the guy. Nicky clung to his boyfriend during the last hours they spent together, which was almost painful to watch.

Neil didn't mind staying home, since it meant spending time with the others. It was nice to have people that cared about him so obviously. Seth and Allison were on a date, so he was home with Dan, Matt and Renee, laying around in the girls' room that was way too comfortable. Christmas music was playing in the background and Neil's eyes were heavy. He hadn't slept last night.

"There you go," Dan said with a laugh and Neil looked up, blinking against the burn in his eyes. She held out a mug that smelled absolutely delicious, making him smile.

"Thanks," he mumbled, taking the mug and taking a deep breath of the warm, chocolaty aroma.

"No problem, Neil," she answered, running a hand through his hair before sitting down next to Matt. "By the way, Coach invited some journalist over for our first training so we can show that you're with us and can say something about why you were with them," Dan continued, making Neil sigh.

"And what am I supposed to say?" he asked, thinking about the reactions he'd get for the truth.

"We'll figure that out, don't worry!" Renee said with a warm smile, encouraging him in a way only she could. "Just say something about how you just wanted to see if it was a possibility but that it only confirmed your decision to come here," she suggested, which made him nod. That sounded like a plan.

"I'll do that… when's the first training?" he asked then, taking a sip from the mug. Dan was an angel when it came to drinks. This tasted of chocolate and toffee and hazelnut…

"Exactly a week from now. But don't you even dare try to move! Abby said you'd only be allowed to start the week after if she allowed it," Matt answered, playing with Dan's hair.

Neil looked down at his foot and nodded a little. He still needed crutches and whenever they were on the roof, it hurt for some reason. As if the stupid fracture was trying to make his life even more painful, as if he hadn't had enough. He'd never understand why the cold temperature had that kind of impact on the fracture.

"One of my sisters had a hairline fracture once and she wasn't allowed to work for one and a half months. Give it time, Neil, you'll survive," Dan said, making him swallow. He'd get behind and no
"I just don't want to miss weeks of training," Neil mumbled, sighing softly. Renee shook her head and smiled at him again.

"You won't forget how to play, you've played for your entire life. Don't destroy your feet by starting too early! Kevin took months before he could even touch a racquet, and look at him now," she said, sounding cheerful.

Neil couldn't believe she misunderstood him so thoroughly. Kevin had half a year before he was on another team. It took him nine months before he was on the field again. The Foxes' first game was in exactly five weeks from today and Neil just physically couldn't not play.

"Kevin didn't have a season to finish," Neil said, not wanting them to deny this or lie to him. But when Renee opened her mouth, Dan shook her head softly, making her stop for some reason.

"We'll get there, Neil," Matt said, smiling at him. "You need to give Seth and Kevin a chance to catch up with you," he joked and laughed, until Dan elbowed him. Oh well.

That was about how every conversation went. Everyone always assured him that he'd be back as good as new the second Abby allowed him to play and that was probably the reason he always bothered Andrew and Aaron with his presence. The twins didn't care about his foot or how it'd go on from there on. They barely ever even talked, and when Nicky or Kevin tried to take up the topic, Aaron's negativity was beneficial for once.

"Nicky, would you stop talking about Exy every second of the day?" he asked after Nicky had talked about the season so far and how Neil had every right in the world to take it easy in his condition. "You're turning into Kevin and we really don't need that now that his mini-ego doesn't bother us with the topic anymore."

Neil almost smiled at that. He knew Aaron just didn't want to talk about Exy, but he was doing him a favour anyways and that was enough for him.

It wasn't enough to keep his mind off Exy until their first training, though. Allison put makeup on his face again, making him look like a human being for the camera. He didn't look as bad as he had on New Year's Eve but was still not entirely back to normal. This time, she didn't hide the band aid that covered the flesh wound from when Riko had cut the number off his face. The press knew that the number was supposed to be there, they couldn't just pretend it wasn't.

They drove to the stadium in silence, Neil on the passenger seat of Andrew's car, looking out of the window and trying not to look too discouraged. He didn't want to look at them doing everything he still couldn't.

When they arrived, the boys went to the locker room, while Neil walked to Wymack's office. The door was open and when he looked through, he saw the camera team filming him flipping through files and working while answering questions. It looked so fake, Neil couldn't believe they were considering showing this on TV.

A hand touched his shoulder softly and he looked back, seeing Abby behind him.

"Want to go have a seat with me? We can watch the team for a while before they're interviewing you," Abby explained and Neil nodded as they went to the bench substitute players usually sat on as the Foxes came in. Kevin was in charge as long as Wymack wasn't there, and soon his teammates were running laps and stretching.
Neil laid his crutches down on the floor and looked at Abby then. "How long till I can start training?" he asked lowly, unable to wear a fake smile just yet. He'd have to do that in a minute anyways.

"We'll see how the fracture looks next week. It might take up to another ten days after that, this is really about how your body reacts. And if that looks good, we'll slowly start working on the muscles and bones. So maybe three weeks of slow and careful training, regaining all muscles that you're losing. Then another three weeks of you walking without the crutches but still training with me. And if everything goes as planned, you can go back after that," she said, smiling brightly, but Neil raised an eyebrow.

"What?" he asked, looking at her as he felt the temperature around them drop. She wasn't serious, right? She couldn't be. She said three weeks. That was next week.

"Neil?" Abby asked with a slight frown, looking at him as she kept her voice careful for some reason. "This was clear. Three weeks of non-weight bearing. Three of partial weight-bearing, and three of slowly building up back to your usual form. So if everything goes as we planned it, you'll be back to normal in six weeks or two months," she explained lowly, which made him nauseous.

"The first game of the year is in four weeks! The second one in six! I can't miss two games, Abby, we only have two other strikers," he said, feeling his pulse starting to speed up. This couldn't happen!

"I talked to David about this, Neil. Don't worry, we'll make it work some way. You might even be able to play the second game, okay? We'll see how you are doing by then," she said encouragingly, but Neil felt like she was making fun of him.

Riko had messed up the season for good. He'd made sure Neil couldn't play for the start of the year, in games that were essential for the end games. These games determined which teams could make it to the qualifying phase.

"Don't forget to smile," Abby whispered, making Neil look up. The camera team approached them as Wymack stepped onto the court, taking over control and starting to actually train the players, in contrast to Kevin's method of discouraging and publicly making everyone feel like shit.

So Neil tried. Tried to smile, tried to swallow against the bad feeling in his chest, tried not to break.

But Exy was what always kept him going and just being told that it wasn't allowed to be a part of his life for months? Riko had really screwed him up this time!

Still. As the team approached them and Abby left him, Neil smiled. He'd do this.

The moderator of some sports show Neil sometimes watched with Kevin sat down next to him on the bench while the cameraman needed a few seconds to get a good angle at them.

"Ready?" one of them asked and Neil nodded, smiling at the camera.

The moderator greeted the audience but Neil was glad that this wasn't live. He needed the opportunity to stop this if he wanted to.

"And as you can see, I'm at the Foxhole Court with Neil Josten, Palmetto State's striker! Some of you may recognise him as the former most promising investment of the Edgar Allan Ravens, but he's past that. Or isn't he? There was a transfer announced around one and a half weeks ago, right? What happened?" the man asked, only now turning away from the camera and to Neil.
He knew what to say. Wymack had been pretty strict in drawing the line between the lies he needed him to tell and the insults Neil wanted to fit into the interview.

"Oh, that's a funny story! I was in fact back at EAU over the holidays, celebrating Christmas with Riko and spending the holidays with him. We grew up together, after all. I also tried training with the Ravens, but there was never any thought of transferring back there. Tesuji must have assumed it because of how much I enjoyed being a backliner in the stadium I grew up in, but that was a misunderstanding. I'm a Fox in absolutely every aspect," he explained, smiling at the camera then.

The lies weighed down his heart, but he didn't allow himself to show that on camera. He'd show Riko that he was far from broken.

"Interesting! What do Jean and Kevin think about this?" he asked, which made Neil let out a fake chuckle.

"Oh, they don't care too much. We're friends and we're all spending a lot of time together, but we left EAU behind for a reason. I went there for a few days because of some nostalgic idea, but coming back is always some kind of harsh wake up. I grew up there, but it's really not for me. I think we all grew out of it," he said, shrugging a little. The commentator frowned a little before smiling brightly again.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and Neil knew he'd be in trouble with Wymack for what he was about to say.

"We grew up as Ravens and while that meant we were all good at Exy, it also meant that the uni doesn't have anything to offer. The new players have troubles with drills we succeeded at when we were eleven. Staying means remaining in a comfort zone that comes with being best at everything. I don't see how anyone could want that," he explained, which made the interviewer laugh softly, maybe nervously.

"So you're suggesting that Riko doesn't know how to leave his comfort zone and that he's staying because he will always be superior without expanding his horizons?" he asked and Neil made a gesture, shaking his head.

"I wouldn't ever suggest that! Though now that you pointed it out, there might be a little truth to that," Neil answered and smiled to himself. That person would get in trouble for saying this on TV but his response was too exclusive to be cut out of the interview.

"And what else has been happening to you? What's wrong with your foot?" he asked, making Neil shrug, working hard to not lose his smile.

"Oh, that. It's nothing, really. We were moving the fridge from one corner to another and it fell on my foot. I might not play the first game of the season, unfortunately, but I'll be back right afterwards! It's a tiny fracture, way too small for the damage it causes," Neil joked, brushing it off. "It's not like the Foxes need me for this game. We're on our way to getting the title and maybe this is a good chance for others to attempt to win against us, for a change," he explained then, smiling confidently. The smile had a bitter taste to it, and Neil realised too late it was his father's. He could never quite shake off the expressions that made him resemble Nathan so much, but right now, grinning deadly was a good thing.

Wymack would chop his head off, but Neil had a point to prove.

"The title?" the interviewer asked, obviously confused or not sure if he understood correctly.
"Yeah, we as a team agreed on the fact that the Ravens won way too often in the past. We think they might need someone to show them their place," Neil explained in a tone too innocent for what he was saying.

"The Foxes almost became a Class II team barely one and a half seasons ago and you think they have it in them to win? And what about the solidarity? You're still all members of the hypothetical Perfect Court, right?" he asked hesitantly and this time, Neil didn't have to fake his smile anymore. He couldn't help it.

"The Foxes have everything they need to win. You're referring to a down that was years ago, but this time we're fighting. And about the Perfect Court? I think we grew out of that as well. It started off with us drawing numbers onto each other's cheeks but it escalated too quickly for us to stop it. I don't think people should have numbers tattooed to their faces, to be honest. As if a single person was entitled to being number one forever," Neil said, laughing it off.

The reporter frowned at him now, eyes betraying his otherwise perfectly happy expression. "You're suggesting that you could be one?"

Neil pretended to think about that before shaking his head. "No, I really don't. But I don't think I have to stay number four forever. That's why," he paused, taking the band aid off so that the camera had a clear shot at the wound, revealing a spot of bruised skin lacking the small tattoo," I got rid of it. There were other ways, but this was the quickest," Neil explained, not laughing it off this time. He had something to prove, after all. When he looked up, he saw that some of the Foxes had stopped training, hesitating when they saw Neil taking off the thing on camera, but he wanted this.

"So... you think someone else could be better than Riko?" the man asked, not talking about the rigged edges of the knife wound right on Neil's face.

"I would never state something like that! Long live the king, right?" Neil asked, patting himself on the shoulder for remembering the Lion King reference. The best thing was knowing Riko wouldn't get it and that he'd have to go ask someone for why Neil had said that.

"Wow, that's interesting, Neil! And I'm sure this season will be full of surprises from every side. It sure sounds promising from yours With that, I'm saying goodbye from Palmetto," the man said into the camera, and visibly relaxed when it was off.

"Everything alright?" Wymack asked. Neil hadn't seen him approach.

"Your players are going to be the death of me. Good luck with them!" the interviewer asked and Wymack nodded a little, looking tired. As soon as the three-men crew was gone, he crossed his arms, looking down at Neil. "What did you do? How many people will try to sue us?"

Neil laughed at that, shrugging. "It wasn't that bad! When will it air? I think you can watch it without worrying too much!"

Wymack shook his head a little, running a hand through his hair and pulling at the roots before taking a very deep breath. "Don't look at me as if you were innocent," he said, seeming tired and concerned somewhere deep down. Very deep down, apparently, because what was on the surface was annoyance and seeing right through Neil's absolutely non-guilty facade. "Tonight. And I sure hope so. Next time you're revealing huge secrets, you talk to me about it! A PR agent is above the budget," he mumbled, going back to court only to announce that training was over early today.

"You're savage," Allison greeted him, laughing when she saw the band aid off his face. "Seriously, like, I know you're crazy, but I wouldn't have thought you'd do this! It looks good, though. Not as
bad as expected," she continued, ruffling his hair with a proud look before going to the girls' locker rooms after Dan and Renee.

Neil appreciated this, for some reason. Liked that they genuinely cared, liked that Allison was so honest with him.

Abby came up to him, smiling a little.

"Hey, did you calm down a little?" she asked, no trace of annoyance colouring her words. Only caring for what he felt in that moment.

"I might have made a death threat to Riko on TV and I told them I'd only miss one game, so…" he started, unable to suppress a small grin forming on his face.

Abby looked confused for a second before laughing. "Okay, I guess that's not my problem to deal with," she mumbled and Neil wasn't sure whether or not he imagined the proud undertone in her voice. "You'll survive," Abby added, smiling as they started to leave the stadium slowly.

"What about the game? The second one?" he asked, making her press her lips together for a little.

"I can't promise anything, Neil, this depends on how quickly your body heals. I'll do my best, though," she answered and Neil sighed. He knew that he couldn't expect a deadline, but he still wanted to be able to count the days down to his first training.

"So that's a no?" he asked, making her swallow a little. She looked uncomfortable, which made him feel bad. "I'm sorry, Abby, it's just--"

"Neil, it's okay! I just can't give the answer you want to hear. I'll do everything I can do for you, I'll talk to David about the risks and I'll make this as easy as possible for you. But I won't make promises I can't keep. To anyone else, maybe, but not to this team. You don't need any more people making empty promises or lying," Abby explained, voice calm and steady as she said it.

Neil nodded very softly. She was right, of course. "I get it, I do! It's just— two games?"

Abby stopped him before they could exit the stadium, looking at his eyes. "Neil, if you do this too quickly, you will harm your foot further. We're lucky it's a hairline fracture and not a complicated break. How fast we do this isn't about whether you're out for six or eight weeks. It's about whether this will stretch for a few months or two years. So if that's a risk you're willing to take, take it on your own. I'm here to get you back to normal as quickly as possible but not a second earlier," she said, voice stern this time. He took a step back for some reason, looking at her with a frown.

Neil hadn't ever heard her so strict and somehow, it made him feel bad. He hadn't done anything! But the tone reminded him of something so distant it took him a while to put his finger on it. She sounded like his mother had, seconds before she'd hit him over and over again, until he couldn't even ask her to stop anymore.

Abby's expression was off, confusion and concern clouding her expression when he took a step back and she brushed her hair out of her face. "Neil?"

"It's okay, I mean… you're right," he said, nodding along with his words. Abby wasn't Mary. She didn't mean any harm, wouldn't ever hurt him, but the tone brought back memories of a part of his past he wasn't ready to be confronted with. "I'm sorry, Abby. You're calling the shots," Neil said then, unable to stop himself from taking another retreating step backwards, but he tried putting on a smile so she wouldn't feel weird about his reaction. Making her worry was the last thing he wanted,
but he needed to go. He didn't want to be confronted with any of this, so he turned around and left.

The Monsters were waiting in the parking lot, engine running and ready to leave. Neil didn't acknowledge the way Andrew glared at him and he really didn't mind.

They drove back home way faster than the speed limit allowed and nobody said anything about it. Neil's head ached and he really wanted to have a few moments to himself. Cameras drained him…

They went up in the elevator in silence and Neil went to their room with them, sitting down on the sofa next to Kevin and laying his crutches down on the ground next to them.

"You okay? How was it?" Kevin asked when they had all settled down, making Neil shake his head a little.

"I might miss two games because of the fracture," looking down at his foot and letting out a frustrated sigh. The only way to heal was to do absolutely nothing, which was against everything Neil believed in. He'd grown up outrunning everything. Now he had to sit this out? He couldn't deal with it. With the way his muscles ached, the way he wasn't allowed to run. It made his entire body feel useless, as if his lung couldn't breathe properly when he was this— he couldn't even find words to describe the feeling of rigidity.

"You broke your foot and are going to play in two months? Neil, that's good news!" Nicky chimed in, making him shrug.

"I guess," Neil muttered, not putting any effort into trying to make this sound believable. This wasn't what he considered 'good news' in any aspect.

They were silent for a few seconds before a phone rang. It took Neil longer than it should have to realise it was his. The caller was anonymous.

He left the room, not wanting to bother the others with a call. "Who's there?" Neil wasn't in the mood to wait for answers, not after a day that was filled to the brim with bad news and had drained him.

Neil was leaning against the wall next to the Monsters' room, well aware of the fact that they could hear every word he said if they wanted to.

"Are you alone?" the other person asked in a rough voice with an accent Neil couldn't quite place.

"Yes. Who am I talking to?" he asked again, wanting to know if he dealt with someone from England or America. If this was his mother's, his father's or the Moriyamas' doing.

"No one. You are going to have a conversation with the heir now, so behave. Do you understand?" the person asked, making Neil frown.

"You're talking about Ichirou Moriyama?" he half stated, half asked.

"Yes. And you need to listen because this will not be a negotiation. You won't appreciate the consequences if you disobey," he explained, making Neil frown a little.

What reason was there to call Neil? Sure, they probably needed to discuss some issues, but that should have happened months ago.

"Okay," Neil answered carefully, unsure where this talk would go.
There was a pause in which Neil heard the typical sounds of the line changing.

"I've been informed about your interview today. That is the last time you talked badly about a Moriyama publicly," Ichirou greeted him, sounding final. Oh. He'd overstepped lines today.

"You are protected because of your mother's offers, but you are still your father's son, so don't think you can get away with everything," the head of the Moriyama family went on, voice deep and stern. "Your father will have to pay off his debts but you caused us harm as well and we'll discuss how you can try to make up for that when you're older. Until then you're going to keep playing Exy unless we tell you not to."

Neil nodded a little, despite the fact that he couldn't be seen. It felt fitting, for a way. "Okay," he said lowly, unsure whether he was supposed to say anything. Young men with that much power shouldn't be underestimated.

"And there has been a conversation with Riko. He will not try to harm you again," Ichirou told him then, which made Neil swallow hard.

"What if he had damaged my foot beyond repair?" Neil asked lowly. That was still an option, after all. If the rehab didn't go too well, he'd have problems with paying back the damage he'd caused.

"You have not been allowed to speak," Ichirou said before answering. "And in that case, you will have to serve other branches of the family. Follow your father's career. We will find a solution in order for you to fulfill your purpose," he went on, resulting in a small nod. Neil knew that. "Any other questions?"

Neil thought about that for a second, but he was really only interested in one thing. "Are we allowed to win the season?" he asked. Neil knew that Ichirou was able to say no, but that would crush him. They were fighting so hard and he really needed them to win. Neil couldn't ask them to give this up and he really couldn't sabotage the season.

"If you can," Ichirou answered, before the silence stretched for a few moments in which neither of them said a word. "I will contact you should there be any other incidents," Ichirou said, ending the call.

Neil looked at his phone for a second, pressing his lips together. This could have been a very different conversation had Wymack not forbidden many other things Neil wanted to say on the interview. It might not have been a conversation at all.

But somehow, he couldn't help smiling. They were allowed to push as hard as they wanted to, allowed to try to win.

Neil pushed his phone into the back pocket of his pants, took the crutches into both hands and went up to the roof. In a week or two, he and Abby would start rebuilding the muscles in his legs. Maybe, if they were allowed to win, it wasn't too bad to miss a game.

Maybe it was a price worth paying if it came with the guarantee he could make Riko pay for everything he'd done, everything he'd threatened to do.

Neil sat down near the edge, looking over campus. He didn't text Andrew or anyone else where he was. This was a moment he needed to live through alone.

This was the promise he'd made to his younger self. He was going to be the person the Neil that left the Nest for the first time needed him to be.
He'd push hard enough to dethrone Riko. Hard enough for them to win.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys? This is gonna sound terrible but… seriously? I write a lot, I spend a lot of time on this. Less than ten chapters to go and I feel like there's not as much of a response as i hope for

I know some of you say "I don't comment on WIPs" but… like a few words would be enough. I also know that the past two or three chapters were very calm after the Christmas chapters but… c'mon? A few words?

And I also know y'all are probably home for Christmas and everything! I totally get it! But I write thousands of words every week and I would appreciate a little more feedback a lot!

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND AN EARLY HAPPY NEW YEAR GUYS

And I know my notes are way to long but I haven't thanked Saya yet and that's nonnegotiable!! You're awesome and I can't wait to properly talk to you!!! And thank you so much for everything! For tagging me in memes and sharing the Adventures of the Memelord (tm) with me! I love you so much, words can't even express it! You're awesome! ❤
"Coach, you don't understand, he barely ever falls asleep in the first place, you can't just—"

Neil sat up straight in his bed when the door was opened and blinked against the bright light making his vision blurry.

"He'll want to see this," Wymack argued, making Neil groan. He'd slept for almost four hours at a time, which was more than in a long while.

"What's wrong?" Neil asked, voice raspy and head heavy. He was tired.

"Go brush your teeth and wash your face before joining us in the living room. Be sure to be there in less than fifteen minutes, that's when they'll repeat it," Coach answered before leaving the room with Matt and closing the door, leaving Neil to himself again.

He rubbed his eyes before talking the crutches and following his Coach's advice. He even took a shower, just because.

His interview about Riko had aired two nights ago and Neil hadn't checked his phone. He had actually turned it off and ignored every attempt of Wymack to contact him about it.

Feeling slightly more awake, Neil went to the living room. Allison, Matt, Seth and Wymack were there, all looking at him.

"Morning," he mumbled, unsure what else to say.

"I came to talk about the interview but there's something you might want to see first," Wymack told him while Matt handed him a mug of coffee.

" Tried to get him to leave you alone. Sorry," he whispered, but Neil shook his head.

"It's alright… it's just sleep, after all," he said without meaning to sound bitter, but stopped when he saw what everyone meant. An Exy show was on, interviewers crowding Jean on his way somewhere. The sight was painful.
Neil knew Jean hated crowds; he'd always been more comfortable in the room they shared than anywhere else. It was painful because this was Jean. Jean, who hadn't texted or called since he was back. Jean, who might and might not ever want to talk to him again because he went back…

"What's that?" Neil asked, but received nothing but silence.

It was then that a reporter caught Jean's attention by calling his name. Jean turned his head in the direction of the camera and Neil sucked in a breath.

No three on his cheek.

"Jean! Jean! What made you remove the tattoo? Does it happen to have anything to do with Neil Josten's interview?" the man asked, pretty much holding the microphone into Jean's face.

Neil felt sorry but couldn't quite understand the situation at this point. He couldn't form a single proper thought, as if all he could come up with was 'what?'

Jean started smiling, and while it was a fake smile, there seemed to be some honesty to it.

"I just thought it would be time to get rid of it. Neil's words made me realise that it's true. We're not Ravens anymore, we've become independent. There's no point in holding on to this. Good thing this tattoo was small, otherwise the removal would have taken ages. If it had taken more sessions, I might have done what Neil did and just cut it off," Jean said, making Neil swallow thickly as he turned away. Jean had let go? He'd gotten rid of the tattoo and gone public?

The scene was cut and a reporter talked about Neil's earlier interview, showing short sequences to prove her points.

Allison muted the TV and all eyes were on Neil as he stood there, staring at the screen. He'd inspired Jean?

"We'll talk about the fact that you made death threats to Riko on national television later, but can you imagine what's happening right now? People are out of their minds, Josten. The Ravens' fans are furious, others are celebrating you guys like heroes," Wymack explained, but Neil was too tired to comprehend the situation.

"Neil?" Seth asked, not too worried, though maybe a little concerned, but Neil just shook his head. Jean was following what he did. He was mimicking his actions, somehow. Neil thought he'd forgotten him, but this proved him wrong.

"This isn't a joke. There could be a very negative response. I don't want any of you walking around on your own! Especially not Kevin and Neil, understood? And Neil, you won't pull another stunt like that. You're putting yourself at risk," Wymack said, making him nod absently.

"Yeah… Can I just—?" Neil didn't finish the question, just turned on his phone and swallowed. He turned to leave the room, holding on to his mobile.

"This conversation isn't over, Neil, we have to discuss how to deal wi—"

Neil closed the day to his bedroom behind him, looking down at the screen. Missed calls by Wymack and a ton of messages in the Foxes' group chat. And a message by Jean from two days ago. Sent right after the interview had been on TV. "Call me?"

And Neil hadn't. Not until now.
He went back into the bedroom, leaving Wymack and the Foxes to themselves. Neil pressed the call button and waited, leaning against the door even though he hoped nobody would try to bother him. He knew the Foxes respected his privacy.

"Hello?" Jean sounded tired, voice raspy. Of course he wasn't up yet, the video must have been from last afternoon.

"Sorry to wake you, I just… Hey?" Neil tried, unsure how to initiate the conversation. Hands sweaty, air getting too warm and Neil felt as if the anxiety that had built up for weeks was finally getting the better of him, burying him under doubts he'd pretended to be over.

"Neil? How are you feeling?" Jean asked, shuffling and closing a door on the other end of the line.

"I'm okay, I guess. It's fine. You? You removed the tattoo…” Neil started, unable to delay this conversation. He wanted to know.

"I can't believe you went back. I know you had your reasons, but that was extremely stupid. He broke your foot!" Jean said, voice rising with each word, making Neil clench the crutch he was holding, knuckles turning white

"I didn't have a choice," he said lowly, voice a little too pressed to come across as calm. He didn't understand why his heart was beating so rapidly or why he reacted so emotional in general, but something clouded his brain.

"You did, Neil. I can imagine how it went. Some threat at the banquet, I also bet Seth Gordon's overdose was his doing, right? And then he had some fun with you and now you're broken," Jean said for him, making Neil clench the crutch he was holding, knuckles turning white.

"I didn't have a choice," he said lowly, voice a little too pressed to come across as calm. He didn't understand why his heart was beating so rapidly or why he reacted so emotional in general, but something clouded his brain.

"You did, Neil. I can imagine how it went. Some threat at the banquet, I also bet Seth Gordon's overdose was his doing, right? And then he had some fun with you and now you're broken," Jean said for him, making Neil take a shaking breath. True, true, true… "But why? Aren't you sick of it? We spent years being Riko's playthings. He can't just take you and I bet the Master won't just let him go around killing people, so why did you go back?"

"Jean—"

"No, Neil. Listen to me, I'm not done. I know why you went back. There was this reason, that one, and a ton of others. You thought you had to but you still made the decision to go back there. If you had talked to Kevin or me about it, this could have been a different story, but you wanted to do it on your own," Jean interrupted him, making Neil shake his head. This was so messed up! Jean was just invalidating every reasoning, every thought Neil had put into the decision! As if it had been a selfish one, as if he'd wanted to leave.

"It's not good, Neil, because you should have known that this would happen! Your foot is broken and I saw the interview. You look terrible, you lost a ton of weight, and I bet a bunch of other stuff is messed up as well. How are you sleeping? How is it going on the team?"

Neil sat down on Matt's bed while Jean was talking, breath rattling while he dug his fingernails into the flesh of his palm. Something inside him was burning with an intensity he couldn't put into words. As if all the sour feelings inside his body were fighting and trying to convince him to react but couldn't decide on how to do that, exactly.

His throat felt sore and his palms were sweaty while he listened to Jean's words. The worst thing wasn't that he said these things. The worst was that some of them were true.

"I went because your lives, yours and the Foxes', are more important than mine. I've been through this on my own, Jean. I've always been on my own, after all. Always there to pick up everything Riko destroyed and—" Neil stopped himself, taking a deep breath. This wasn't going where he had
wanted it to go. But now his eyes were burning and his breath shaking and he was sure he would definitely regret the words he wanted to say. Words of memories so dark, the sunlight shining through the bedroom window couldn't begin to brighten them.

He'd always been alone. Making sure Kevin and Jean would not die, bleed to death, die from alcohol poisoning or overdose — accidentally or not.

"We were always there for you, Neil, I did what I could," Jean argued, which made him scoff. Neil was on the thin line between crying and laughing maniacally, and he intended to stay on it. He wouldn't flip.

"Like hell you did. Sorry, but the only thing you did for me in years was removing the tattoo. I stayed when Renee came to pick you up. Who do you think he took it out on? Even when you were gone, I had to clean up your mess, the mess you made my life become," Neil said loudly, breathing heavily now. This was not what he wanted it to be.

"I was there for you when you cried for your mother, when you fell apart, I kept you together, Neil. I woke you when you had nightmares, and even if you seem to have forgotten it, I—"

Neil heard a shriek from the living room even before he realised he'd thrown his phone against the door as heavily as he could.

"Neil?" Matt asked, knocking at the door right away, but he could only stare at the phone on the floor, screen looking as if a spiderweb had been drawn onto it, display disconnected from the rest of the thing, pieces of it shattered in a small area on the ground.

It made him mad. The way the tears he was fighting back made him mad, the way his useless foot made him mad, the way Jean's utter ungratefulness made him mad.

"Neil?" Matt entered the room this time, locking the door behind him before looking at him and then the phone by his feet. "Wanna talk?" he asked, and hummed when Neil shook his head. "Fine. And that dinosaur is ancient, you should have gotten rid of it years ago," Matt said, kicking against the corpse of his phone slightly. "I bet it'd be more fun with the crutches," he added, walking over and pulling him up even though Neil really did not want to.

But Matt was right. Slamming the foot of his crutches onto the phone and breaking it further and further was satisfying, the weight concentrated to such a small point doing damage efficiently.

"You're better than all of this. I don't know what just happened but I'm there if you want me to," Matt said after a while, making Neil nod. He wouldn't come crawling to Matt, but he appreciated the offer anyways.

He took a deep breath and swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Is Wymack still there?" he asked, to which Matt nodded.

"But I doubt he'll discuss the interview with you after this," Matt answered, unlocking the door slowly, giving Neil the time to say "No" if he needed to.

But he'd have to face reality and didn't want to avoid these people. They were the living proof that going to Evermore had been the right decision.

"More problems?" Wymack asked, making Neil shrug. He wasn't in the mood for whatever he was trying to get to. Dan and Renee were in the room now, sharing a sofa and sipping coffee.

"In that case, we have to talk about the interview. I know all of you think it was great, but we've
been having problems because of the transfer all season. This will not—"

"Isn't it too late for that now? He'll keep a low profile and everything, but there's no point in complaining about what he did already," Allison said, taking Neil's side yet again. Dan shook her head, looking displeased with Allison's reaction, but the blonde girl didn't care, only looking at Wymack.

"Thanks for your input, Allison, please don't do that again," Wymack said, turning to Neil, which made Seth chuckle as he put his arm around Allison, who didn't look happy with the course of the conversation. "It was stupid and should have been a topic before you decided to just do it, but we can't change it anymore. Don't ever do something like that again and do all of us a favour and keep a low profile for the next weeks. We don't need any worse publicity at this point."

Neil nodded, not really listening. He didn't care after what had happened with Jean. "Okay. Renee? Do you think we could talk for a few seconds?"

Wymack raised an eyebrow but Renee looked even more surprised. "You know, everyone else would have had to make up for this one way or another, but I'm almost glad you're talking back," Wymack mumbled, shaking his head. "I'm leaving. And I said 'almost', so don't worry, I'll find some way. Extra laps when you're back in training," he added before leaving the room.

Renee was up already, fingers warming on the mug she carried. "Talking sounds great! Kitchen, bedroom, our room?" she asked, going to the kitchen with him when he merely shrugged again. He'd been so emotional when talking to Jean and the inevitable happened again. The feelings were washed away and left him with the void he'd gotten so used to. As if he couldn't feel the smallest spark of anything anymore.

She sat down on the counter after closing the door behind them, crossing her legs and smiling at him. "What's wrong?" she asked, voice not hesitant at all, only caring for Neil and his problems honestly.

"If you don't have much time, we can talk some other time," he said instead of answering, only now remembering that Andrew had said something about sparring with her last night.

"I'm free all day. Andrew and Aaron are meeting Betsy soon, so—" she started, stopping when she saw the look on his face. Andrew and Aaron… the phrase alone sounded wrong. The twins were anything but a unity. "That's your doing! It was rather spontaneous, apparently, but Aaron talked him into it. Andrew made some death threats to you, so be careful," she joked, taking a sip from her cup with an amused expression. "So, what's this about? Jean?"

"How can someone like you fight Andrew? How did you get Jean out of there, or me for all it matters?" It wasn't what he wanted to ask, but it was a start. Maybe.

Renee looked at him while Neil was leaning against the wall opposite of her, setting her mug down slowly. "I once told you I was a Fox for a reason. Andrew and I have more things in common than you might think, and I made some tough experiences growing up. There were gangs, abusers, people who took their privileges too far, and at one point I decided to take nothing of that anymore. I don't live my life for the sake of others," she started, seeming lost in thoughts of something long ago and far away.

He almost wanted to say something, but she went on. "I saw that in Jean whenever I met him. Riko taking things too far and him just not fighting back. I had to help him when he called and for some reason, I blamed you. Maybe because you lived with them and maybe because I thought maybe you were bad for him, but probably only because you were right there. And I hope helping you out of there makes this a little less terrible, but that's not my decision to make," she explained, making Neil
"I couldn't ever blame you, Renee. That was a very understandable reaction. Don't worry about that," he said, taking a deep breath. "He said I shouldn't have gone back. He's mad," Neil said then, which earned him a pitying look.

"Jean doesn't know how to deal with it. He couldn't take you with him when he left the Nest and that ate him up until you were out of there. Then you decided to go back to a place he doesn't even want to think about again. You make it hard for people to be there for you," she explained after a few moments of silence. "And I'm not saying that makes you weak, it just makes you more of a Fox in some way, which is sad but true I guess," Renee added, expression thoughtful as she looked out of the window.

"What…" she mumbled, jumping from the counter and going to the window quickly, looking down. The sound that escaped her throat sounded helpless, and then she was almost running back to the living room. "Guys!" she said, voice shrill when it was usually so calm and steady.

Neil looked out of the window and sucked in a sharp breath. You could see the parking lot from here, but that wasn't the problem. You could also see cars and while they were too far down to make anything out properly, you could see some sort of… they didn't look right.

When he went to the living room, everyone was getting into shoes quickly as they ran down the stairs, making Neil do the same. Renee was already knocking the Monster's door rapidly, explaining to Nicky that "It happened again!" which made Kevin and the cousins follow them down.

It must have been quite a sight. Snow on the ground and a bunch of teenagers in pyjamas and sweatpants standing in front of two absolutely demolished cars.

Allison's car was far from pink. There were things sprayed onto her and Matt's car, side mirrors were smashed off, windows broken, tires slashed… the truck was missing an entire door and not a single tire was intact. Allison's car was only missing half a window, which made it possible for them to hear the sounds coming from the car before they saw the thing in there.

"Is that a bird?" Nicky asked, pressing a finger to the bridge of his nose.

"Two or three at least," Dan answered with a hoarse voice, all of them too shook by the sight to actually react. Neil read the words and felt sick. Ranging from "bitch" to "die Foxes" to "4ever", with the four underlined a few times so nobody would miss the obvious reference to Neil. Words like "cripples" and "losers", words like "Worthless Court".

"Why didn't they touch Andrew's car?" Kevin asked after a while, and they all only shook their heads.

Matt pressed his lips together as he approached his car, shaking his head as he looked inside.

"They cut the seats and stole the radio," he said very lowly as he came back.

"Can someone come open the doors with me so the poor birds can leave my car?" Allison asked, not looking shook enough by this. They all went with her as she unlocked the car, then she opened one of the back doors. Black birds flew out quickly, making Dan shriek as one slammed into her, flying circles over them before leaving for good. "Oh God!"

Allison slapped a hand over her mouth and turned away, her posture finally giving in to what had happened. Neil took a closer look at her car. Bird excrements all over the seats, but the worst thing was…
Neil needed a moment to get the picture in front of him, even though the implications were clear. A dead bird stuffed into the skin of a red fox that was cut open at the stomach. He couldn't look away, staring at the animals, and he pressed a hand over his mouth when he saw that the bird was missing a leg. As if they needed to make the implications even stronger, showing Neil's broken foot. Raven in a Foxes' skin, playing pretend.

Matt called the insurance company while Dan called Wymack and Neil couldn't believe he continued to make their lives a living hell.

The twins seemed very similar in that moment, both standing with their arms crossed and in black hoodies, looking at the scene with a strangely unaffected expression. Neil wondered why Andrew's car wasn't touched but looked just like it always did. Then he wondered if his reaction would be any different, had this been his car and not Allison's.

"Why does this keep happening to us? Haven't we had enough?" Seth asked, arms around Allison while his head rested on hers.

"This happened before?" he asked back lowly, not sure what to do with the conflicting emotions. This was his fault. Only his, and only because he had to be like that on TV.

"The last times they broke into our rooms, they destroyed TVs, flooded bathrooms, burned the Monsters' kitchen. This is almost better for us," he explained, kissing Allison on the head. "It was when Kevin came here. That's why we were so cautious when you first arrived. But... well," he stopped himself and Neil nodded. His fault.

"Neil, don't you dare pity yourself for this. They broke our cars, so what? Matt and I both have enough money to buy new ones! Maybe I'll buy one for you and Seth as well, just because I can. Maybe I'll do what I did the last time and hire someone to get me the most expensive furniture or the best car the insurance will cover and then give that away. I don't care, Neil, because a car doesn't cost anything. Fuck Raven's fans, because Matt actually loved his car. Mine? Wanted to buy a new one for my birthday anyways, so this will be an early present," she said, sounding furious despite her words.

"They didn't kill animals the last time, right?" he made sure, and Renee shook her head.

"This is a new low. As if the spray paint hadn't been clear. No, they had to dress up dead ravens as foxes, trapped birds in the car, what kind of idiots—" she scoffed again, shaking her head.

Neil looked around, hoping maybe Andrew’s presence could make Renee feel better, but the twins were nowhere to be seen anymore.

He looked at the building's exit and saw them leaving it in proper clothing now. They looked different, this time. Aaron in a navy blue coat and a brown scarf while Andrew was all in black. Aaron seemed a little affected while Andrew might as well not have seen his teammate's cars.

"You can't seriously consider getting into that car! What if they did something to it as well but we just don't see it?" Nicky asked, voice almost hysterical at the thought of his cousins driving a car.

"I think they know how much we hate Neil so they didn't consider doing anything to it," Andrew said, opening the car and climbing in. Aaron got into the passenger seat and Neil looked after them as they left the parking lot, Andrew driving way too fast considering the amount of snow on the streets.

"Wymack is on his way," Dan announced after a second, putting her phone back.
"So are the insurance company and the police," Matt added, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. Kevin, Nicky, Neil and the Upperclassmen looked at each other in silence before Nicky sighed softly.

"Twenty on Wymack being here before the police," he tried, and for some absolutely nonsensical reason, it worked.

Allison actually smiled and nodded. "I'm in," she said, "it's not like these twenty bucks make a difference now."

Kevin looked from the cars to their owners and shook his head a little. "I'm sorry about that," he said, but was brushed off.

"We'll live. At least it wasn't Andrew's car, he couldn't exactly buy another one," Matt answered with a shrug, but Neil was cold. He had a bad feeling about Andrew and Aaron. Even if the car was fine, they were on the verge of murdering each other all the time. A high speed car in these weather conditions weren't exactly where he wanted them to be. Especially with the prospect of spending another hour trapped in the same room, forced to talk to each other and a woman Aaron couldn't stand.

"Ten on the police officer being really fat," Seth said, making Matt chuckle.

"Fifteen on at least one of the officers being female," Dan added, and Neil wondered how they could go from worried to carefree so quickly. These people had seen the worst the world had to offer and kept going, kept seeing even worse things, and they kept fighting. And when fighting wasn't necessary anymore, they brushed it off.

Wymack got there first, which didn't come as a surprise. He looked tired as he considered the cars only minutes after the call, and sighed. "Insurance company and police?" he asked, not bothering with too many words when all he wanted to say was able to be put into few ones.

"On their way," Matt answered and Wymack nodded, taking a closer look at the cars before joining the Foxes again.

"This is what I meant when I said there could be a negative response. What you did was provoking but Jean's reaction made it worse," Wymack said, shaking his head a little. "We can be glad Kevin isn't participating in your little 'Screw Riko' campaign."

He looked at his team, from Seth with both arms tightly around Allison over Matt's arm around Dan, frowning at Renee's cautious expression, taking in Kevin and Nicky's tees and Neil's outfit. "You guys should get dressed before anyone gets here. You're freezing to death. Where are the twins?"

Renee crossed her arms, nodding a little. "They're at Betsy's office. And you're right, we shouldn't talk to the police looking like this," she answered, leading all of them inside. They went to their rooms, getting into proper pants and jackets. When Neil left their bedroom, he heard Renee's phone buzzing on the sofa, making him frown. He went closer and only saw Andrew's name for a second before the screen went black. He took it and saw that there were four missed calls, all by Andrew.

Neil took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down, taking the phone and walking over to the girls' room. "Renee," he called, knocking along with the name.

The girls all left their room at that, wrapped in warm clothes. He handed Renee the phone and pressed his jaw together when her face went pale. "Oh no..." she mumbled, calling Andrew back while her other hand wrapped around the cross hanging from her neck. "Andrew? Where are you?"
she asked, standing close enough for Neil to hear Andrew's answer through the phone.

Close enough to hear "On the way to the hospital. Where is the idiot?" and feel cold all over.

Renee ran a hand over her face and shook her head. "I'm putting you on speaker. The girls and Neil can hear you," she explained quickly, before putting the phone louder.

"Can you talk to Nicky before he gets a heart attack? They wouldn't let us talk them out of calling the emergency contact," Andrew explained, voice almost calm. But only almost...

Neil wanted to ask where they were, why and what exactly had happened, but Nicky stormed out of the Monsters' room and almost ran into Allison.

"Is that one of them? The hospital called, Aaron is injured and they couldn't take a look at Andrew, and I have no-" Nicky started, sounding hysterical, but he fell silent as Andrew's voice came through the speaker.

"We're okay. The breaks didn't work, a car crashed into Aaron's side of the car when we couldn't stop at a redlight. A few scratches and something minor with his rib, but he's okay," Andrew said, more talkative than he usually was. All the tension fell from Nicky's shoulders and Neil found himself breathing properly again as well. They were something close to fine.

"What about the car?" Neil asked, now knowing that the twins were okay.

"We'll see about that, but I don't think it's worth repairing. One car hit us from the side and one from the back, it's probably too damaged," he explained, making Neil swallow.

"Did the breaks not work because of the ice and snow or because someone cut some wires?" Allison asked then, voicing Neil's thoughts. He was responsible for this.

"They'll investigate. Nicky, you need to meet us at the hospital so they'll release Aaron?" Andrew didn't wait for the answer, but they could hear a nurse or a doctor in the background, asking "Mister Minyard, could you help us out with some..."

The beeping sound filled the silence when Andrew hung up, but it also woke them and they hurried down the stairs. Wymack was standing there, talking to a police officer that must have just arrived as his team approached him.

"Coach?" Nicky asked, and something in his voice made Wymack turn around and look at them. "I get that this is a very inconvenient situation, but could we borrow your car? The twins are at the hospital and they need me to be there," he explained, making Wymack shake his head a little.

"Why is it never only one problem with you guys?" he asked under his breath, looking past Nicky to Dan and Allison. "You got this?" he made sure, almost looking proud when they nodded. "I have four seats left. Two for the twins, who else is coming?" he asked, already turning around. Nicky was on his heels while Neil, Renee and Kevin looked at each other.

"He called you, I think you should go," Neil told Renee, who shook her head.

"Kevin and I can take a cab if you really need us, you should go," she said and because both Wymack and Nicky looked impatient, he did. Neil doubted anyone wanted him there or that he was close enough to have any right to come, but he wanted to and Renee allowed it. He climbed into the backseat of Wymack's ancient car and put on the seat belt for a change. Neil felt sick. Yes, Andrew had assured them that they were fine, but he still worried a lot more than he cared to admit.
"They're in the one just a few streets down?" Wymack asked, making Nicky nod. He looked as if he was on the verge of tears, arms crossed and fingers pushing into his arms brutally.

It barely took them fifteen minutes to get to the hospital, but these moments stretched to eternities. All of them were silent as Wymack pulled into the parking lot and as they entered the building. "Don't worry too much, they're tough," Wymack assured them just before Nicky told the receptionist who he was. Turning around with directions to his family, looking a lot more alive.

They went up, ages passed as they were waiting for an elevator, but Neil really couldn't climb five stories worth of stairs with his crutches, so nobody complained. Nicky let out the loudest sigh of relief Neil had ever heard when he saw Andrew sitting on a chair opposite to a door, staring at it as if it contained the answer to every question remaining unanswered.

Nicky almost ran there, sitting down next to Andrew and having a conversation way too silently for Wymack or Neil to understand a word. They gave the two of them a few moments before approaching slowly, not saying a word as doctors and nurses pushed and hurried past them. None of them went into Aaron's room, though.

"Any news?" Wymack asked, making Andrew shrug.

"I guess he's alive," he answered, making Neil clench his teeth. Andrew wanted to know what was happening to his brother.

Nicky looked relieved, though, so Neil figured he'd gotten more information than this. In that moment, a doctor left the room, looking at the bunch of people that hadn't been there before.

For some reason - maybe because all the others of them were children and he expected Wymack to be responsible - he turned to their coach.

"We're running some tests before you can see him, but it doesn't look serious. There might be a minor concussion, so I'll come talk to you again soon once the results are up. Just be sure he is up and moody, that's usually a good sign," the doctor explained before looking at Neil, Nicky and Andrew. "You can see him in around half an hour, one at a time. Is there anyone we still need to contact?" he asked, which made Nicky shake his head.

"We're all here, thank you," he answered, taking a deep breath to calm himself. "Are there any news on why the accident happened?" he asked, burying his hands in he pockets of a hoodie that was way too baggy on him.

"The officers will talk to you about that. But as far as I am concerned, they're sure this was someone deliberately cutting the wire," the doctor said, vanishing after that.

"I told you not to get into that car," Nicky mumbled, hugging himself closely. His voice was soft and high, which made something inside Neil ache for him. They were the only family he had left.

"I'm getting coffee in case we're staying longer. Can I get you anything?" Wymack asked and while he adressed all of them, he only looked at Andrew.

"Something strong," Andrew answered, resulting in a slight sigh by Wymack, who still left. They knew Andrew wasn't talking about strong coffee.

"I'll go see if I can find reception to call Erik," Nicky announced after Wymack had vanished, patting Andrew's shoulder very softly. "Call me should you need anything, okay?" he added, not getting any reaction whatsoever.
Neil took the seat by Andrew’s side, unsure what to say. Unsure whether he should say anything. "I understand if you want me to go. This is my fault," he said after a while, resulting in a glare.

"You wish. Saying stupid stuff on camera does not mean you're responsible," Andrew said, still strangely talkative. Something was wrong.

"Andrew?" he asked, frowning a little.

"I drove thirty miles per hour over the speed limit. He yelled at me to stop," he answered, making Neil's stomach feel way tighter than it had any right to. No...

"This is not your fault. He's fine, right?" Neil asked, swallowing against the lump in his throat.

"I know it's not my fault. Still. And we don't know that yet. For all we know he might be dead and they just don’t want to break it to us yet," Andrew said, voice low but steady. Neil felt terrible for him, not knowing how he might feel because of this. He never had real siblings. After his conversation with Jean today he also wondered if he ever had something close to it in the first place. "Why didn't you pick up?" Andrew asked after a while, making Neil frown. He'd called Neil before Renee?

"I broke my phone this morning, I'm sorry," he mumbled, not feeling like explaining himself right then. Andrew raised an eyebrow but didn't press, which was something Neil was unbelievably thankful for. He wasn't ready to talk about Jean yet.

His thoughts were interrupted by the clack-clack-clack of high heeled shoes on the floor. Looking up, he saw Katelyn approaching them. She smiled for a second when she first saw Andrew, but the smile faded off quickly when she realised that this wasn't the twin she was hoping a second later, a step closer. Worry was clouding her face right away again, steps slowing down.

"Where is Aaron?" she asked, looking unsure whether to sit down next to Andrew or just keep standing. She made the best decision for her health and remained standing.

"None of your business," Andrew answered, not even looking at her. His hands twitched from his knees to his sleeves, scratching the wrists covered by black bands. Neil wondered if this was a typical gesture he still hadn't noticed of if this was even more upsetting to Andrew than either of them could admit.

"Is he okay? He hasn't texted since they took away his phone a while ago and I'm worried. Can we see him yet?" she asked, making Andrew clutch a hand around his lower arm tightly while he ignored her. Why was he doing that?

"I drove here from lunch with my dad, I think I deserve to-"

"We don't owe anything to you. Drive back there, for all I care, but leave," Andrew said, and Neil saw him pulling at something. That's when he understood the nervous fiddling and clutching. Andrew was taking out his knives...

"Hey, Andrew?" he asked, almost whispering, making sure he wouldn't touch him in that moment. "Can we talk somewhere for a second?" Neil added, trying not to sound too concerned and being too silent for Katelyn to hear.

Andrew just looked at him, fingers still playing with the hem of his sleeves, looking as if he was evaluating Neil, trying to get some sense into whatever was happening. "Talk."

Neil stood up from the seat and raised an eyebrow in question. He wanted Andrew away from the
girl that seemed to cause emotions welling up inside him, knowing how frightening that could be and knowing how Andrew could react.

Katelyn shook her head as Andrew got up and seemed absolutely shook. "You're leaving while Aaron is in God knows what condition? What if they let us in? This is your brother," she said, looking absolutely heartbroken for some reason. What was her problem?

Andrew looked at her for three seconds before turning to Neil, waiting for him to lead the way. But his left hand gripped his own arm and Neil didn't doubt he was ready to silence Katelyn if she didn't shut up.

Neil led the way, not sure where to go. He found a room with the sign "Staff only" on it and figured it'd work as he went inside, knowing Andrew was following.

"You gave them your blessings. She hasn't done anything wrong," Neil said in a steady voice, trying to talk some sense into Andrew.

"She's retarded," Andrew answered, and Neil might have laughed if this had been another situation.

"She's annoying, but that's no reason to hurt her. Would you give the knives to me?" Neil asked, holding his hand out and waiting. The light was dim but he could see Andrew well enough.

Andrew looked at Neil for a long moment, frowning very slightly and seeming too concentrated. "What do I get for it?" he asked, making Neil pull at his hair.

"Andrew, I just don't want you to kill her in the middle of the hallway. What do you want for that?" he asked, voice audibly frustrated. Why was this even an issue?

"Your scars in exchange for the knives," Andrew demanded so quickly, Neil wondered if he'd thought of that before. He frowned, uneasy for a moment. Then again, this was probably the reason Andrew had said it. To throw Neil off guard, to get a reaction.

Then he reminded himself that this was Andrew. The boy who'd promised to protect him and had done so whenever Neil let him. The only one who hadn't flinched away from his past. And Neil knew so much about Andrew, maybe it was okay to share a piece of his past.

"Now?" he asked, keeping any reaction from showing on his face.

"If you want the knives now," Andrew answered, so Neil shrugged out of his jacket. He eyed the door, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. Andrew got the hint, leaning against it and keeping a hand on the door handle.

"This is– don't–" Neil started but stopped before he could say anything stupid. Neil pulled his shirt over his head in one move, not granting himself the opportunity to hesitate. There were still a hand full of bruises, but no band aids or bandages covering him anymore. Many scars added to his collection, many new reminders of what he'd been confronted with and survived. His father, his mother, and many years at Evermore.

Andrew's expression was blank as he reached out, digging his fingers into the round marks on his shoulders.

"Cigarettes or lighters?" he asked, and Neil swallowed when he thought of how quickly Andrew had identified the wounds. It made him worry.

"Both," he answered, glad about the dim light. He remembered Abby's reaction to his scars, how
she'd looked at him, how he'd felt the emotions spilling out of every move she made.

Andrew merely raised an eyebrow at his answer. "How can you hold cigarettes after this?" he asked, looking at the way Neil's entire shoulder was covered in the wounds.

"How can you kiss me after what happened?" Neil asked back, making Andrew nod with an almost thoughtful expression.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing at very uneven skin near his hip.

"The biggest holes of a kitchen grater," he said, making Andrew raise an eyebrow.

He took the rest in, all the knife wounds, all the scars on his back, the marks shattered bottles or glasses had left, the various times bare fists had managed to leave physical reminders. Andrew looked at Neil's wrists, still visibly bruised from the ropes and handcuffs Riko had used, but he didn't bat an eye.

"You're messed up," he concluded, making Neil scoff at the blunt way he said it.

"What else is new?" Neil asked, putting on his shirt again. The room was too dimly lit to see Andrew properly, but Neil saw him taking off the armbands. He frowned when Andrew dropped them into Neil's hands, heavy with the knives hidden inside.

Andrew's sleeves were long, loose enough to easily cover his entire arms, but Neil frowned at them anyways.

"Do you want the bands back?" Neil asked, already fiddling with the black cloth, but Andrew shrugged it off.

"Don't," Andrew said, opening the door and shoving past a doctor that probably needed something out of it. The woman looked after Andrew and frowned when Neil followed him, shaking her head but not saying anything but "Excuse me?"

Neil adjusted to the bright light as they went down the hallway. Katelyn was leaning against the wall next to the door of Aaron's room, Wymack and Nicky sitting next to each other on the chairs.

Their coach handed a cup to Andrew when he was close enough. "It's Irish coffee. I added two shots for good measure," he said, making Neil wonder if Wymack and Andrew had some sort of history with... alcoholically influenced bonding?

Nicky frowned at Neil and the armbands in his hands but knew better than to say anything. "And you're sure you're okay? The nurse asked for you and wanted to make sure you don't leave without being checked on," he said, looking worried, which made Andrew glare as he sipped said coffee.

Katelyn fiddled with her fingers, looking at the door and sighing softly. Neil knew she wanted to say something, ask all the questions she had, ease her worry somehow. But Andrew had apparently shut her up for good.

"Erik says he hopes you're okay," Nicky mumbled, looking at his cousin in an lazy attempt to make some sort of conversation, but in that moment the doctor left Aaron's room, catching all of their attention. He talked about this and that, about conditions and blood pressure, about an injured but not broken rib, a slight concussion, but they all exhaled in a very relieved way when he finally said that one of them was allowed to come in now.

Katelyn looked so relieved, Neil was almost sorry for her. Even more so when Andrew got up and
pushed past the doctor, vanishing into the room and locking the door behind him, which made Katelyn's lower lip shiver.

Neil held on to Andrew's armbands. "They're brothers, he gets to go inside first," he said, making her nod very slightly.

"I'm just worried," she mumbled, looking heartbroken while playing with her necklace. It had a heart charm and Neil was pretty sure Aaron must have gotten it for her.

"We can go in together if you want to? I know they don't want that but this was we can both see him as soon as possible," Nicky offered, making her nod very slightly. She looked miserable.

When thirty minutes had passed without as much as a sound from the room, Nicky knocked softly. Andrew was standing in a corner of the room, arms crossed tightly while staring out of the window as Aaron was dozing off. And while Aaron woke up from the sound, smiling and sitting up as Katelyn and Nicky joined them, Andrew wouldn't leave.

Maybe he wanted to glare at Katelyn whenever she said a word, making her feel bad about her presence, but maybe he didn't trust them enough to leave Aaron with them.

And even though they hadn't made it to a session with Bee, something seemed different. Something about the way Andrew wouldn't leave the room until Aaron was allowed to, being released only after a thorough discussion about his condition and a call in which Abby promised to watch over him to the doctor. When he was fully assured someone was watching over the patient at home, he allowed him to leave.

The twins didn't exit the hospital as brothers but Neil supposed something had changed. Maybe they'd never be especially friendly with one another, but today was proof enough that they cared.

It wasn't enough to take anyone's mind off the cars. Not enough to make Neil forget about Jean and not nearly enough to turn them into a decent family.

But it was something and in that very moment, it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

HEY
Sorry this took ages :( wasn't supposed to :/

I still hope you enjoyed it! Jean!! Cars! Renee! Twinyards! Scars! Everything was in here ❤ Hahaha I'm kidding. But the length is a part of why it took ages to write and edit, still, sorry!

I'm dead tired, just got home from a really nice show I had, and wanna go to bed, but i gotta say thanks first!

1. everyone who bitches about Katharina with me. I love you guys and I hate her way too much
2. Eleftheria because I suffer from withdrawal whenever we don't talk for a week! And because 1. and because you ship Jax with me

And biggest thanks to Saya. You're at Uni studying to save lives and keep up with my
nonsense 20 page monster chapters and stupid messages. I love you and I couldn't be more thankful! Youre ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ !!!!
Neil has never had money growing up. His parents didn't believe in "pocket money" and being property, he never got any money by the Moriyamas either. When his mother had given him a bank account with half a million dollars on it, he hadn't even cared. He hadn't bought any clothes or other pricey items, merely food and sometimes cigarettes for himself and Andrew. The interest made up for it by far, and he didn't have any plans to spend the money on anything but maybe buying himself free of the Moriyamas one day.

So now that Neil had money, he wasn't too interested in it.

He and Andrew were spending the evening of the accident on the roof, probably since Aaron was gone with Katelyn and Andrew didn't want to be in the the empty room as the reminder of his twin's absense. Then again, maybe they were only here because that was what him and Neil always did.

"How much did the car cost?" Neil asked into the silence. The stars shone so brightly, the way they only did in winter, when the air felt like a crystal itself. No cloud to be seen, no moon, but its own kind of nice.

"Aaron's trust and his mother's life," Andrew ansered bluntly, making Neil smile very slightly. Helpful as ever.

"How much money would you need to get a similar one?" he asked, looking at Andrew now.

"You're not buying a car for me," Andrew answered, turning Neil's lips into a full smile this time.

"Not what I asked. I'm taking a turn," he answered, knowing the way he threw his turns away was one of the things Andrew hated most about him.

"Twohundred ten- or twenty-thousand," Andrew answered, not reacting physically to what Neil was asking.

"And if you bought a new car, which one would it be?" he asked, laying back on the cold cement, looking at the night's sky.

"It's not your turn and you're not buying a car for me," Andrew repeated, making Neil sigh.

"I don't have a real license, neither does Kevin, and we have to get to training or Columbia somehow," he answered, not understanding why Andrew made this a deal. That wasn't what Andrew was usually like.

"I don't care," was all he got as an answer.
"I know that, but I care. Let's be real, it is the best solution. We can say it's the second favour I owe you," Neil suggested, making Andrew finally look at him.

"Just that you throw your own turns away doesn't mean you're wasting my favours," Andrew answered, and Neil was almost satisfied with himself when he saw Andrew's annoyed expression.

"What if you got three turns in return? I can't believe I have to bribe you into letting me spend money for you," Neil muttered, obviously not annoyed.

"What if you shut up for once?" Andrew asked, looking away again and lighting another cigarette for himself. Neil did what he was asked to, maybe because he wanted Andrew to say yes and maybe because he doubted that pressing would get him much farther.

Andrew took some drags from the cigarette before handing it to Neil, not feeling like finishing it. "Bring it in cash," he said, before getting up. "And I get five turns," Andrew added before leaving. Neil took his time, taking in the sky and the lights covering his surroundings, the smoke and everything that made up this small glimpse of his very personal universe.

For the first time since he'd come home from the Nest, Neil felt as if he had fully arrived.

Days went by and it became apparent that neither of the twins was really hurt. Aaron missed two days of training before he started again, not lacking strength or condition. When the Foxes went to the parking lot that morning, Matt was the one to react first.

"What the actual fuck?" he asked, eyes wide as they could get, awe clearly displayed on his face.

He and Andrew had gotten cars by their insurance companies, Allison hadn't needed one desperately so she was buying one as soon as she had the opportunity. Matt already talked to some old guy who'd driven a car like his pick up truck, and he'd take a look at it this weekend.

So when they saw a huge, metallic-black Maserati in the middle of the parking lot, it was quite a shock. Matt looked even more confused when Andrew pressed a button on his key, unlocking the car. He looked like a little child, absolutely astonished and almost in love with the vehicle. The other Foxes pushed past him, and Seth raised his eyebrows, looking between Andrew and the car a few times before nodding a little impressed.

"I had this as a model when I was a kid! Like, you could paint the seats and everything, I've..." Matt started but trailed off, absolutely astonished.

"How did you get that? The insurance didn't even cover the full hospital bill," Nicky asked, not letting himself be too happy about a possibly stolen car.

"Someone owed me a favour," Andrew answered, before walking across the lot and sitting down in the car.

"I sure hope I won't ever owe you a favour... What did that person even do?" Nicky asked as the other Monsters made their way to the car. Neil sat down on the passenger seat while the others pressed into the back. The car smelled the way all new cars did. Leathery and of the factory, in a way. New and like a fresh start, somehow.

"The roof is pretty low," Kevin complained, making Aaron chuckle softly.

"Won't be a problem once it's warmer outside. Covertible," Andrew answered, making Kevin shut up.
"How much money did the poor guy owe you?" Nicky asked, shaking his head a little. "How legal was this?" he went on, voice audibly suspicious, but Andrew drove them to the stadium in silence, and Neil couldn't be entirely sure, but he thought there might be a satisfied expression on Andrew's face.

So they drove to training in silence, the Monsters for Exy and Neil for his private training with Abby.

But when Abby said "training", Neil hadn't thought of… well, this.

He went to her office, she took him to another room with gymnastics balls and hoola hoops and other things, making him frown. Even more so when she asked him to lay down on a matt, kneeling down beside him. She walked him through stretches, helped pushing and pulling or straightening his leg, making Neil almost growl in frustration.

The problem wasn't actually that they did nothing but stretches for a day or two. His issue was that it hurt. That he knew he needed this. That this wasn't progressing as quickly as he wanted it to and to be honest, it hurt.

He wouldn't ever tell her, obviously, but she didn't need him to. Abby knew when he needed time and when it was okay to go on. Neil didn't understand how that worked, but she didn't buy into his lies.

One morning, after a few weeks, she didn't enter the gymnastics room with him though. They went to the gym where the other Foxes were training for once, to build condition and strength, since you couldn't do that all too well in the stadium. He and Abby went past the team into a separated room, which Neil was thankful for. This way his team didn't have to see his miserable condition.

"So, I thought today we might be able to start walking slowly?" she suggested, lifting an enormous weight off his shoulders. Finally!

It wasn't what he'd expected. A treadmill, hands on the handles at all times, taking steps at the pace of what felt like less than half an inch per hour. Neil thought they could have done this in her office, not on a device but maybe by walking along some kind of bar, but he wasn't complaining.

Abby watched him closely, taking notes and nodding to herself. His foot was starting to ache and five minutes later, it was almost burning, but Neil didn't want to stop. If he managed making her believe he could run again—

"Okay, that's enough for today. Rest for a bit, then we can continue with stretches," she said with a smile, but Neil didn't want to.

"It's fine, we can go on with this," Neil tried, panic rising inside him.

"I said it was enough. Neil, please," she said, lowering the pace of the treadmill until it came to a standstill and handing him the crutches again. Their sight made him feel sick.

"I need to play, Abby, you're— it's like you don't want me to get better," he almost snapped, frustration rising inside him as he thought of the game next week. Without him…

"Neil, I said we were going to stop, and we are," Abby said, voice stern as she stretched out her hands with the crutches. "Have some water and calm down, we're continuing in five minutes."

"Sure, Coach," Neil said a little snottily. She shook her head for a moment before leaving him in the room for said minutes. It frustrated him; he just wanted to play and she was weighing him down! But his foot was burning for some reason, almost making him worry.
He was putting effort into this and it kept failing. When they were little, Kevin had always explained to him that failures were important on the way to success because you learned from mistakes, but this was different. He wasn't making mistakes but putting everything he had into this.

And it was something as mundane as walking. Not a new drill, not some complicated subject at school, it was something he needed to stay sane. He couldn't sleep properly without a run and he was the fastest striker of college Exy

Not being able to do anything about it but keep failing drove him insane. He couldn't even walk without feeling as if his foot would burn off. How could anyone expect him not to snap at Abby?

When she came back, she pretended nothing had been wrong, or maybe she was actually not mad, but Neil felt as if he'd been reckless. He was very close to being sorry.

A week of school and "training" went by and it had taken some begging — he had started to walk longer distances and higher paces while she supervised him closely, but wasn't allowed to take as much as a step without her or the crutches by his side — but on their first game, he was allowed to enter the stadium without either of them. Matt had an arm around his shoulders whenever they moved anywhere, always there, always ready to keep him up straight. It frustrated Neil, but at least there was no footage of him depending on crutches. At least Riko wouldn't be too pleased with himself.

They were in Wymack's office, talking through the other team's line up and different strategies, but Neil felt a little nauseous when he saw the statistics of his team. One less striker to score goals. Seth and Kevin would have to play the entire game, no matter how exhausted, no matter how injured…

"If one of you really can't make it for some reason, Dan is going to substitute as a Striker. That means Allison will be the only Dealer in case one of you screws up, so be careful," Wymack said, looking at the Strikers sternly. Neil almost apologised, but since this wasn't even remotely his decision, he decided not to. He'd do everything to play again.

And so they did what they always did; got into gear, ran laps, did stretches, and then waited to be called onto the Foxhole Court. Renee, Dan, Aaron, Nicky, Kevin and Seth started playing, and Neil sat on the bench with the substitute players, staring at the field. No rush of excitement, not even hoping they'd win. He guessed they would, the Alligators weren't a very strong team, but there was nothing of the usual fire Exy filled him with.

"You know, you could at least pretend to care," Allison said beside him, looking at the field as the captains shook hands. "They'll play and they'll need someone to cheer on them," she added, seeming too disappointed of Neil.

"I don't feel like it," he answered, making her sigh.

"This is your team. You can't just sit around doing nothing. It's the twins' job," she said, shaking her head slightly when she got no answer. "So it'll be just Matt and me smiling," Allison mumbled with a shrug, running a hand through his hair. "I get it, Neil, okay? But there are going to be many games you miss. Sick, maybe some wedding, some games just aren't for you. This is the first game you're missing, don't let that eat you up. You're more than Exy, but you're still a part of the team. Do you think you could show that?" she asked before getting up, standing in front of the plexiglass wall next to Matt, who was already whooping, even though the game had started mere seconds ago.

"Bullshit," Andrew mumbled next to him, making Neil chuckle softly. They sat on the bench, aware that cameras could see how utterly bored they looked, not caring about it.
Neil would have preferred staying home. Sure, he loved his team, but he didn't want to see them perform without him. Didn't want to see the score in the Alligators' favour, didn't want to see Kevin and Seth soaked in sweat and out of breath as they got slower and slower over time.

He was nibbling his fingernails at this point, staring at the field and close to wishing he was religious so he'd have anyone at all to pray for this to turn out good. They were close to the half time and the score was 4-3 against the Foxes. With no new Striker on the field, Neil didn't have too much hope for the second half, them facing a new set of Backliners.

That was when he realised there was a solution for the issue. At least if Kevin and Seth weren't failing miserably in the second half.

"Can you put a little effort into the game today? Kevin and Seth look terrible and I don't want us to lose. Riko would use the opportunity to make fun of us and-" Neil started, stopping when he realised he was babbling. That wouldn't get him far with Andrew.

"I'm not working for you to please a Moriyama," Andrew said dryly, just as the crowd booed loudly. Neil frowned at Andrew. That wasn't what he'd said! But three minutes before the half time, an opponent striker was pulled from the game. Neil hadn't seen what he'd done wrong, but Aaron and Matt switched, since the blond boy's nose was bleeding. It must have been an ugly situation, considering how Abby was right there, taking care of the twin. However, it didn't look too severe.

"Andrew?" Neil asked, frowning at the way Andrew went still next to him, eyes not leaving his twin as Abby took care of him.

"I said no," he answered, not looking at Neil right then. He didn't say anything about how he wasn't talking about the game. Neil doubted Andrew would appreciate the sound of his voice right then.

The game went on, they had a conversation in the half time and resumed playing, Neil still feeling down, considering his helpless situation.

He sat on the bench, other than his teammates who screamed their lungs out, cheering on the team and every move they made. It was a back and forth, the game seemed to be getting faster and faster, but Neil barely followed the actions.

"Josten, there are cameras all over the place. You should at least pretend to like the team," Wymack said, sitting down beside him.

Neil glared at his coach, arms crossed and obviously annoyed. "I want to play," he said, which made Wymack smile very slightly.

"You will. A few weeks and you're back on court. But at the moment you could try being useful and maybe tell Minyard that he'll be pulled from the game if he keeps attacking the opponents like that," his Coach said, making Neil look up. He hadn't been following the game properly, frustrated because he couldn't take part and thoughts running in circles when he saw them perform. Would he be able to play again soon? He really hoped so, couldn't even think of 'not playing' as a possibility.

And even if he didn't want to admit it, being inside the stadium without protective gear on made him uneasy, remembering the times Riko had made him play. He wouldn't tell anyone, obviously, but even if he knew he wouldn't be forced to play, a part of him was worried.

"You're not even looking at them, are you? He's throwing the balls against the other team's strikers' shins. One of them left," Wymack explained, making Neil smile a little. "Is this your doing?"

Neil shook his head, watching the game now. "I think he just doesn't like them," Neil mumbled.
"Maybe they're rude," he added, remembering how one of them had gotten into a fight with Aaron. Maybe Andrew cared about his team? Or maybe he just really hated the other one.

He followed the game a little from then on, mainly focusing on Kevin and Seth and their exhaustion. The game ended with a 6-6, which felt like a failure. Perhaps, if the Foxes' strikers hadn't been as exhausted, they'd have won? Perhaps he'd have been able to shoot the winning goal? The Foxes left the court with their heads held high, but Neil could clearly see the scratch in their facades.

Especially Kevin, Dan and Seth seemed disappointed. It was Seth's last season of college Exy, after all. Neil understood him, he'd been on the team since it first came into being. Neil didn't like that he felt so disconnected from the event, but things seemed to happen without his doing.

Aaron and Allison had press duty for some reason, talking to some interviewers outside, making sure to support Neil in his words about making it to the national championships and their potential win this year.

Neil waited while the others showered and got dressed, lurking around until the Monsters finally exited the locker rooms and they were free to go. Usually, the mood was wonderful after games. Neil wasn't sure if today's issue was that he didn't take part, that they didn't win, or that the others didn't want him to feel left out, but they didn't seem happy.

As always after games, Wymack announced that there wouldn't be training on Monday, and they were free to go. They went outside, entering the Maserati and waiting for Andrew to start driving.

"We're getting drunk tonight, right?" Kevin asked. This was tough on him. He'd played a full game and they lost. Neil understood the feeling of helplessness and uselessness, even though he had a valid reason for it, other than Kevin. At least he'd fought.

"Not in Columbia," Andrew answered, making Nicky and Neil frown. Both of them had kind of just assumed they'd go there, as always.

"It's her birthday, stop being so annoyed," Aaron answered from the backseat, making Neil close his eyes for a second. Why did he have to provoke Andrew?

"Shut up or you're walking home," Andrew answered, and Neil was glad everyone complied. For whatever reason, Andrew was displeased, and he didn't see why anyone would worsen the situation.

The evening was weird. Neil didn't feel like socialising, so he only went to his room quickly, changing into comfortable clothes, before going to the roof. He didn't take his crutches, hoping extra practice would mean he'd be able to get back to playing Exy more quickly.

In the hallway, he saw Katelyn climbing the stairs and coming to a halt in front of the Monsters' door. She stopped when she saw him, not knocking yet. She wore a thick layer of make up and orange eyeshadow, her hair was in huge curls around her head. Apparently, she hadn't gotten a chance to really calm down after their performance on the game yet.

Katelyn looked at him, then back at the ground, fiddling with her phone as she texted Aaron she was outside. "He told me what you're doing. Thanks," she mumbled, making Neil nod dismissively. He only wanted to go to the roof, after all.

"I didn't do anything. Their deal isn't what they wanted it to be," Neil said, walking past her to the roof-door. "And happy birthday," he added, when it crossed his mind.

The door to the Monsters' room opened and Aaron got out, frowning between his girlfriend and Neil. "Everything okay?" he asked, keeping some distance between him and Katelyn for some reason.
"Sure. And thanks, Neil," she muttered, stretching out her arms to Aaron. He didn't want to see it, so Neil climbed the stairs to the roof slowly, closing the door behind him. He sat down carefully as he reached the edge. His foot wasn't perfect, but it was alright. He'd manage.

Some time went by before Andrew came, but Neil had been sure he'd come. The boy sat down next to him, making Neil smile very lightly.

There was no need for words yet, as the sky was pitch black, clouds covering every inch that might have contained light spending stars. It wasn't entirely dark, considering the soft yellow hue the streetlights from below projected, which meant their features looked strangely distorted.

"I think she really likes him," Neil said, making Andrew shrug.

"As long as she leaves everyone else alone," he stated, apparently unbothered by the amount of time Aaron spent with her.

Neil wanted to say something. Maybe about how glad he was that Andrew had recovered from the illness or maybe something about the game, but he couldn't find any words.

So they smoked and looked around, close in distance but far from each other's minds. Neil's thoughts were racing from Exy to his team to the Moriyamas. From Andrew to Kevin to Jean, back to Riko. From the smell of a cigarette to the taste of one.

Placing his hand between them, Neil asked for a no but received a yes, and as Andrew complied, time stopped yet again. He didn't understand how it worked, but for some reason, it did.

Neil had missed this. Fingers intertwined, being pushed down, slowly losing grip of reality but being unbothered. Lips feeling numb as if he'd drunk a glass of wine too much, every inch tickling. Holding on to Andrew's hand and later to his hair, hearts pounding against each other's chests as if they were trying to win a race.

And suddenly there was a "yes or no?" and Neil didn't panic as one of Andrew's freezing hands slid unter the hem of his shirt. He knew the scars, had seen them. This wasn't a reason for fear anymore.

But there was a hand on his skin and Andrew's face was too far away, watching his expression closely as he kept his features blank, but Neil could see himself in Andrew's face. Could see that this wasn't "nothing" the way others said it, but their personal interpretation of the word.

And Andrew's eyes spoke of so much truth, it became unbearable for Neil, living a lie. So intense and undeniably, terribly honest for a second, Neil closed the distance.

The hand on his waist tensed but the other one clenched his for a moment as Neil kissed the warmest spot on Andrew's throat, then again, then again. He couldn't hear Andrew's shallow breathing anymore, when moments before, that had been the only sound around.

Andrew moved away, shaking his head very slowly, but Neil had gotten a reaction. A real and honest and totally positive reaction, for once.

But both of them knew better than to make a deal of it, so panting breaths returned, and kisses, and the all-consuming taste of nicotine.

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Abby turned the intensity of the treadmill higher one last time, the ever present frown on her face making him nervous. He was running while practicing with her during the sessions, he wasn't using
crutches anymore, he did many exercises, he was allowed to go to the gym, but all he ever got as an answer when he asked when he'd be allowed to play Exy again was "eventually". It drove him insane.

Today, Monday before their game against the Hawks, Neil knocked on her door, waiting for an answer. She opened a second later, smiling at him. "Hello Neil, how is the foot?" she asked, opening the door for him to go through while pointing at the couch.

Neil sighed, sitting down and stretching his legs out. He knew the procedure too well by now. "Perfect," he answered, because she knew what he wanted to know. When?

In addition to that, Neil wouldn't tell her how it felt strange whenever he spent too much time on the roof. The cold seemed to do something to the fracture, but Neil wasn't ready to admit that. A month. He'd been training with her for a month.

"Okay, awesome! Excited for the game?" she asked, before silently ordering him what to do with his foot, when to flex the leg, when to stretch, when to push against her hand.

It was cruel. He tried ignoring the game the best he could but Wymack was constantly telling him to analyse the players techniques while Abby seemed more excited about it than the team.

"Maybe if I was allowed to play, I would be," he answered, not looking at her. She didn't deserve this treatment but for some reason she was always there when it was worst.

"Neil, we talked about this," she said, voice stern as he sighed softly. He really only wanted to play.

Around twenty minutes later, she nodded, telling him to follow her. Neil saw it coming, they'd be in the training room, he'd run, walk and maybe jump until she'd tell him they were fine for the day. She went down a different corridor, though, but Neil didn't care too much. He wanted to get this over with.

Still, he frowned when they were in front of the locker rooms. What?

"Okay, I talked to David about this, and we both thought it would be a good thing to let you train again. You'll still always come to my office first, after that you can go here. If everything goes right for the week, I'll only check on you every once in a while to make sure you're properly healed," she said, smiling at him as she said it, but Neil frowned deeply.

"There is a game this weekend," he started carefully, maybe even cautiously, unsure how to go on. She got the question anyways, as always.

"No. Not for you at least. You will not play for that long at a time," she said, and his shoulders fell. Of course he wouldn't receive any good news.

"What's the point in training, then?" he asked, but Abby crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow.

"You either get into gear and train with your team, or you come back with me and do some more stretches," she said, making it sound almost like a threat, so Neil vanished into the locker room. He'd missed wearing all the gear, the weight of the racquet, this whole situation. And as he stepped onto the field, he became more anxious but also more excited. He'd be back out there. Training with his team!

Wymack looked up and Neil saw the smile on his face as he moved his head, indicating for Neil to get to the field. Kevin looked at him from wide eyes before a proud smile formed on his face, and Neil had to look away. Nicky yelped and Allison whoo-ed when they saw him, but everyone
seemed happy or something close to it. Except for maybe the twins but Neil could live with that. Matt hugged him quickly while Dan explained the drill they were practicing, and they were finally back to normal.

He loved this, even though he knew they were all going easy on him. Still, he was playing Exy, he was home, he was alive.

Neil knew it was only practice, but he also knew he had something to prove. To them, to his mother, to Riko, even to his father.

He'd lost some of his condition, but managed. Neil was NCAA's fastest Striker and had absolutely no intention of losing that title.

By Thursday, Neil was so integrated into practice again, Kevin finally started yelling at him.

"What do you think you're doing, Neil? Get your head in the game, we learned that drill when we were ten!" he almost screamed, assuring Neil he was finally considered healthy again. He was so relieved for a moment, he almost forgot answering.

"I was a Backliner then," he argued, and Kevin just shook his head. Neil was stressed, but he knew Kevin was crazy about the game. He'd analysed every single player of their opponents, had watched at least two of their games every evening, and wouldn't shut up about statistics. Kevin wanted to win this game and Neil knew he was not ready to do as bad as he thought he did the last time.

They trained on and after a while, they were alright. New drills this close to a game meant that Kevin was hopeless, which made them all a little moody.

After training, Wymack stopped Kevin before he had a chance to go to the locker rooms. The others weren't bothered, but Neil sticked around, maybe wanting to see whether Kevin had lied again, hoping to overhear something showing him Wymack knew of his son.

"Day, I know you want to win the game — so does the rest of us — but don't go as hard on them," he said, shaking his head a little.

"All eyes will be on us, we didn't win the last game, Neil made the whole Exy-world pay attention to us. We have a title to win, we can't lose now," Kevin argued, but Wymack shook his head.

"You're not their coach anymore, Kevin, and I am telling you to go easier on my team. Because for once, this is a team. Don't destroy that," Wymack said calmly, almost bored, but Kevin shook his head.

"Neil told the whole world we'd win the title this year. Maybe you don't mind, but I do. We can't lose a match while Riko watches Neil on the sideline," he said, and Wymack only looked at him, seemingly unimpressed.

"You're going crazy, and you're taking it out on them. So I'd suggest you either find a way to get their attention off Neil or you live with it," he answered, and Neil saw Kevin's frustration growing.

"Kev? A word?" Neil asked in French, making both of them look up. Kevin seemed so surprised Neil wanted to talk to him, he forgot to be angry for a moment.

"What?" Wymack asked, and Kevin sighed.

"Okay," he answered, maybe not wanting to waste a chance like this. So Neil looked around, frowning, until he saw the room with spare equipment. He nodded his head towards it, not wanting
to leave Wymack too far, since he wanted to achieve something with this.

"Are you serious?" Kevin asked, sighing at Neil's childish behaviour, but he followed him, and seconds later they were in the room, door closed and standing directly in front of each other, only centimetres apart.

"The door is not even an inch thick, he can still hear every word," Kevin whispered, though he didn't know why he was having a secret conversation with Neil in a storage room.

"Why are you so hard on them?" Neil asked in French. "Because if there's only the problem of publicity, I have a simple solution," he went on, looking up at the closest person he had to a family. This would hurt, but Neil thought perhaps it was necessary.

"What are you talking about? All eyes are on you, on your performance, on whether we'll live up to your promise or not," Kevin said, answering in French, making Neil sigh.

"He's your father, how about dropping that bomb? He has every right to know and it'd shift the attention from me to your personal matters," Neil said, making Kevin arch an eyebrow. He didn't like this any more than Kevin did, knowing that this was a bitter reminder of how they weren't really brothers, after all. How Neil's real family would always be some twisted part of him, no matter where he went.

"Sure, afterwards you'll tell them about your scars and how you got them. How about gossiping about the Japanese mafia, when we're talking about all the rest already?" Kevin asked sarcastically, shaking his head. "You're out of your mind."

"You should tell him anyways. Why did you come here, Kevin, when you only admire him from the distance? He should know, he has the right to," Neil hissed, crossing his arms. Kevin massaged the bridge of his nose before shaking his head.

"I'll think about it, okay? But… I don't know. We'll see," he said, letting out a sigh. Neil didn't mind as Wymack opened the door and shoved past him leaving for the locker rooms.

Wymack looked after him, then at Neil. "One of these days, I'll understand if you're messing this team up or gluing it together, Josten. Make sure you're on the right side," Wymack said, but it didn't sound like much of a treat.

"Sure, I'll try," Neil said, at which Wymack only raised an eyebrow.

"Try harder," he said, but Neil didn't think he was actually annoyed. Not more than he usually was, at least.

And so, as the days passed, Neil became a Fox again. Matt bought a new pick up truck, this one a rather dark blue in contrast to the old one. It looked old and rusty, just like his former car.

Allison, on the other hand, came driving into the parking lot with a new Smart in bubblegum pink, looking every bit like her mother's daughter when she got out of it.

So when they drove to the next game, it was back to normal. Andrew's car still smelled of leather and the seats felt different, but it was pretty much the same. The Monster's in Andrew's expensive black car, the Upperclassmen in Matt's truck, driving to the stadium in as much of a unity a team like the Foxes could be.

Neil wasn't allowed to play yet, because Abby didn't trust him to take it slow, but at least this time he didn't have to lean on Matt to enter the stadium.
He hated this so intensely. Walking into the stadium, his stadium, theirs, that was already filling with students and fans, and not feeling anything. Not that thrill when you saw the place from the street and knew this was home, the rush when you walked in, the smile he couldn't keep off his face.

He felt as if he was walking into some building that didn't mean anything to him, felt as if he didn't belong.

Abby and Wymack were in the office already, and since Neil didn't have to change into gear, so was he. The team followed after some minutes, and Wymack handed out line ups and statistics they'd gone over multiple times already, talked about what they had to put special thought into, and managed to motivate them with words on the thin line between insults and praises.

"And we're going in with two strikers again, so try not to hurt yourselves too severely. And Dan, go easy on yourself in the first half, you're the only one who could sub for either of them," he said, making Neil raise his eyebrows.

"I am here, you know?" he said, but Wymack only looked at him blankly for a second or two before going back to encouraging the players.

And soon, they were on the court. Dan, Kevin, Seth, Renee, Aaron and Matt were playing, Allison, Andrew and Nicky had their gear on and were supporting their teammates more or less.


"I can walk, I can train, I did everything Abby said, and you still won't let me play," he said, glaring sideways at Wymack.

"There are cameras everywhere and that team is aggressive. This match decides a lot about the rest of the season, whether we'll make it to the final round, whether we'll be allowed to compete in the quarter finals or not. Be a good teammate and make them feel better," Wymack said, making Neil suppress a desperate sigh.

"I'd support them by playing," he answered. His coach turned around, shaking his head slightly, watching the game with furrowed brows.

Neil turned his attention to the game as well, crossing his arms and following the events. The pace was almost violent, people running and running, the other team outplaying the Foxes when the first fifteen or twenty minutes had passed. It was cruel; his team facing an entirely new one, knowing they had to finish this half and even the next one.

The score went from 2-2 over 2-4 to 3-5 against the Foxes, and there were ten minutes left in the first half. Dan had the ball, ran for the ten steps allowed, and passed to Seth. He and Kevin performed one of the routines that had made the world love Riko and Kevin as a team. It made Neil proud, almost as proud as Dan, who was smiling at them across the court. That was probably the reason she missed the Backliner that had been trying to get the ball from her slamming into her side roughly.

"Those were at least six seconds!" Nicky almost yelled, but Neil pressed his lips together. Dan was on the ground and it took her some moments before she even attempted getting up. She made a gesture to Wymack, and he nodded. The referees punished said Backliner, showing a yellow card.

"Allison, switch with her. We'll talk the rest through in the half time," he said, and Matt helped Dan off the court as Allison got ready to substitute for Dan. They hugged quickly before the game went on, and it was more brutal than before.

Players of both teams stretched and bended the rules, checked each other with full force, making Neil
flinch ever so often. Renee was doing her best, fighting even harder, pushing and trying to hold the defence line.

Neil's heart was pounding and he finally felt something while watching. He stared at the game playing out in front of him and buried his hands in his hair. Kevin was arguing with a backliner, Matt with the dealer, and Allison was checked roughly by her backliner every time she was in possession of the ball.

It was 4-5 against the Foxes in the half time, and as they left the field, referees were separating Matt and another man as Allison shoved against the backliner. She seemed to be yelling at him, but Neil couldn't hear it. He did see the guy push back until she stumbled, almost losing her ground, and clenched his jaw. What an idiot.

They went into Wymack's office, where Abby distributed water before she looked at Kevin's face. There was one hard punch that had landed on his chin, the rest looked okay. He'd live.

"You guys should calm down! There were four or five fights in the first half! This is non-negotiable; you'll take a step back," Wymack said, looking around and frowning. "When did we lose Gordon?" he asked, and Kevin shrugged.

"He went to the toilet or something, I guess," he said, just when the door opened and a referee came in, followed by Seth, who had a bloody nose but seemed satisfied.

"Get your players back in line! And think over your strategy, you're missing another striker," the man said, making all of them look up surprised. He left, though, leaving it to Seth to answer.

"What happened?" Abby asked, already there with two wet cloths, cleaning his face with one and putting the other one onto his neck. Allison was by his side already, hovering around him like a satellite, only moving when Abby needed her to.

"That backliner said things he shouldn't have said. He's not playing either," he said, and Allison crossed her arms, seeming less worried already.

"This is about me? Seth…" she mumbled, but Wymack cut her off.

"The difference is that they have a backup for him and we don't. Dan is injured, how are we supposed to play?" he asked, looking around his team, calculating visibly. "Okay, Matt, you're in as a Striker by Kevin's side. Allison, you'll deal, Nicky and Renee will hold the defense with Andrew in the goal. So we have one substitute player for the whole team, and—"

Neil pressed his lips together. He'd receive a no. He knew that. But… "I can play. We'll follow the usual plan. Just me instead of Seth," he said, and Wymack looked at Abby for a long moment. They exchanged tiny expressions and Neil couldn't read the twitches of eyebrows or slight movements of lips. It drove him insane!

"David—" Abby started, turning away from Seth for only a moment.

"Forty five minutes and I'll take it slow," Neil answered already, knowing what she'd intervene.

Abby looked at him, top to bottom, and massaged the bridge of her nose, shaking her head very slightly. "Change into gear, Neil, but please do me a favour and take it easy," she said, and Neil couldn't help smiling.

"Seriously?" he made sure, and she sighed loudly.
"Leave, before I change my mind," she said, and Neil was out of there in seconds, running down the corridor to their locker rooms and locking the door, almost ripping his clothes as he changed into orange.

He would be back; Riko had failed.

Neil was back in the office in record time, feeling like himself again. His jersey and the shoes! Gear and his racquet!

Nicky's eyes almost shone when he saw Neil and Matt patted his back. Even Wymack couldn't help a small smile. All of them looked tired, exhausted and drained, but Neil was radiating enough positive energy to brighten the room a little, feeling absolutely like Neil Josten again.

This wasn't the weird kind of belonging he'd felt when he'd first played at Edgar Allan again this winter. This wasn't the harsh reminder of what he'd left behind and what price he continued to pay.

As Wymack explained everything, all the statistics and specialties of players, Neil felt home. As if he'd arrived from a long journey and found everything just as he'd left it.

And when the announcer called out Neil's name, when the crowd let out a disbelieving and then an enthusiastic yell, he wasn't just home. He was a Fox.

Abram, Junior, Nathaniel, Four, none of them was left when he played by Kevin's side, when he was running across the court full speed, when he body checked people almost two heads higher than him. He was just himself, and that was enough.

Enough to make the fans proud, enough to make Riko pay, enough to be a Fox, and above all, enough to score three goals in thirty minutes.

With fifteen minutes left on the clock, Neil's body was burning in the most positive of ways. They'd turned 5-4 against them into 9-9, Kevin and Allison scoring once each.

But they were facing a refreshed and almost new team, players from the first half only coming back slowly now, pushing hard as ever. This was important to both teams.

Still, they might play as if they had nothing to lose, but they were competing against the Palmetto State Foxes, the personifications of 'nothing' and 'loss'. They were facing players pushing harder than should be physically possible, and they were facing Neil, who couldn't feel pain. He felt the rush, the buzz of adrenaline like vibrations under his skin, and he didn't stop pushing.

It was close, a very exhausted Kevin scoring once, a dealer from the other team evening out the score again, and there were three minutes left. Blood was rushing in his ears as he received the ball by Allison, and he debated on what to do for a second. Kevin wasn't free, so he could pass back, hoping Allison wouldn't make the hopeless shot at the goal from her position. He could try scoring, but the goalie was looking into his eyes. He could keep the ball and hope he'd manage…

Neil ran the ten allowed steps as he made these thoughts, then he rebounded the ball. It was cheap and foreseeable, but he didn't shoot at the goal. He relied on the backliners storming towards him, wanting to block the shot, and passed to Kevin.

They won 11-10 because of that goal, and Allison had him off his feet as she hugged him when the buzzer blared, and soon they were nothing but a pile of sweaty but laughing Foxes on the ground, getting drunk on their fans' cheers and chants sounding through the entire stadium.

They'd won the game, thereby officially qualifying for the final death match.
He'd lost so much, so often, so thoroughly, but right then, he felt as if he'd won already. Something perhaps even more important than winning against Riko.

That was, until they left the court and Abby forced him into her office, taking a worried look at Neil. Until the rush wore off and he felt the hot pounding. Until he realised he wasn't in control at all.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first of all: sorry this took so long! I am just super stressed because I am taking my A levels at the moment and it's kind of a lot / I took my last English exam last week, Math follows tomorrow and the last one is next week… and don't get me started on the Rookies in training, it's oeicshofujejndcjfs

Second of all: YES YOU READ THAT CORRECTLY!! ONLY 45 CHAPTERS IN TOTAL. THAT MEANS THERE ARE FIVE MORE AND I ALREADY WROTE ONE AND A HALF OF THEM. (Updates will ~hopefully~ be very frequent)

Thanks to everyone who keeps reading and commenting! I love every single one of you so much!!
Thanks Free because I wouldn't survive without videos of you making near death experiences and fangirling about Jax together!
Thank you Saya for keeping up with me! I know I am really stressful at the moment. I will even admit that Motorcrossed was a good movie (maybe even better than She's the Man but…) and thank you for not getting tired of me!
Neil shot off from the world for a little. When he left the office with crutches, the Monsters decided not to go to Columbia.

The last death match would be in exactly a month, Neil knew he'd be fine until then, but he hated it anyways. It was February and he missed a full week of training just because his idiotic foot wasn't working the way it was supposed to.

Neil didn't train with them for some days, staying in the empty room and trying to study. He wasn't as good at Math as he used to be, but his grades in languages were pretty high. English and Spanish went well, and while he didn't even bother catching up on the reading material, his Freshman year went surprisingly alright. It wasn't Aaron's level of grades, but it was good enough for him.

The week went by and finals were about to take place. The Foxes were all too stressed to be bothered with his moods, but they did make sure he was eating. Abby told him to come to training on Friday, one week after the game, and he did. He didn't like that Wymack was there instead of training the Foxes, but it wasn't as if he had much of a say in it.

"Good morning," she greeted him with a bright smile, and Neil only barely stopped himself from raising an eyebrow. At least he didn't have to use crutches anymore…

"So, you know the drills," Abby went on and Neil took his shoes off, sitting down on the bench while going through all the stretches again. Same old song. Wymack watched him closely but Neil refused to think about that in any way. "David and I have been talking about you, and we both believe it would be beneficial for you to have a conversation with Betsy. You should have talked to her a few weeks ago, but we didn't want to push you."

She pressed against the sole of his foot with her flat hand, checked how much he could stretch it, and gave him a few commands.

"And why do I have to do it now?" he asked, laying back and staring at the ceiling, arms flat beside him as he did as he was told.

"We worry about your condition. I could lie to you, but as a matter of fact, your foot was healing rather slowly. And perhaps you should have a proper conversation about your experiences with someone who can help," she explained, voice steady as she talked. Neil crossed his arms.

"And?"

"And you have to talk to her if you want to play games. We'd go as far and forbid training before you have a conversation with her," Wymack stepped in, and Neil froze for a second before doing what Abby told him to.
"Blackmailing people into therapy doesn't usually do the trick," he tried, not sure if he actually wanted to argue. Neil was tired and definitely not up for a real discussion.

"We'll see about that. You can talk to her on Monday morning, if you'd like. Whatever your decision, the Foxes will be a player short if you don't work this out," he stared, making Neil sigh. He counted to ten internally, then went to counting in Spanish. Italian. German. Japanese. To five in Greek. Then he counted Foxes, more slowly, and took a deep breath.

"If I see her today, can I participate in today's afternoon practice?" he asked, and Abby's movements stilled on his leg for a second.

"That was easier than expected. Wouldn't have needed backup for that, I guess…" she mumbled, even chuckling a little while returning to work on his foot. Neil could feel them exchanging glances, but he wasn't ready to give in and look up.

"Yes," Wymack said finally, and so he nodded.

Whenever Neil was in one of these dark places, in one of these stormy clouds of numbness, there wasn't much that could pull him out. It was Exy, usually, but lately the taste of nicotine usually did the trick. Especially when he hadn't smoked the cigarette himself.

"You're clear, Neil, the foot is okay," Abby said, and he sat up. "Should I call in and tell her you're coming or do you want to do that yourself?" she asked, and Neil merely shrugged.

"I'll take care of it. Is there something else?" He'd sit through that hour and could finally train again. Therapists couldn't help him, and he knew that all too well. It's not like he'd tried, but he knew. Exy was the real thing he needed, and he was finally getting the crutch he could rely on back.

"No, that's it," she said, and Neil nodded. He left the room slowly, not really paying attention to Wymack following him outside.

"You lost muscles," he pointed out, and Neil scoffed a little.

"I wasn't allowed to train for a week. And for weeks before that, if you remember. How wouldn't I have lost muscles?" he asked, and Wymack shook his head.

"Watch that you're eating enough, kid. And try sleeping more, you'll scare the other team out of the stadium if you step onto court like this," he added, and Neil frowned at him for a moment. Was he… no. No. Wymack didn't care about anything but their performance.

"Yes, Coach," he agreed, and they went to the field together. Neil stayed outside and watched them play for the rest of training.

As they were approaching the last games, they trained twice a day, making it hard to concentrate on finals. Even Kevin was slowly burning out.

Neil watched how Kevin and Dan both straightened their postures as their Coach stepped onto the field. He'd never realised how both of them gave up control so readily as soon as he was there.

The Foxes did drills in groups of three, while Kevin's group was pretty far behind due to Andrew's refusal to play with Allison, the third member of his group. It made Neil smile, for some reason.

He waited by the Maserati as the Monsters changed and drove back to Fox Tower with them. Wymack was blackmailing him into doing this, but he didn't even care. If it meant he could play, he'd go through just about any obstacle. For some reason, he still attended class.
Neil called the secretary as soon as he got out, making sure he'd be able to talk to Dobson, and when that was settled, he went back to the dorms. It was one of those periods when everyone else had classes, but Neil didn't especially mind. He wondered if there was any obligation for him to have an actual conversation with the woman or if his attendance was enough to get back to training. Maybe he shouldn't push his luck.

He laid down on Matt's sofa and looked up at the ceiling. He could take the bus, but he didn't especially want to check the connection. Or take the bus.

Maybe he just wanted to run again. He hadn't dared to yet, but since he knew Abby was just holding him back there was nothing stopping him anymore.

The others would be back in around an hour. They would probably not even realise he was gone, too accustomed to the way Neil was constantly moving, never comfortable in one place.

He got his running shoes after a few more minutes, even pulled a hoodie over his head before leaving, and went.

As soon as he left the building, there was something in him feeling as if he'd come home. The air was chilly, wind howling around the buildings as it was so cold, he thought he might burst into a thousand pieces. But he didn't. He started walking more quickly and the low temperatures made his lungs burn.

He loved it, loved how he didn't have to think about it. He was present in the moment, took over his life again. Neil finally had the feeling he wasn't watching a movie anymore, but playing a part, having an influence on what happened to him.

In a few hours, he could train again!

It felt like an hour but was probably a lot earlier, when he arrived at the medical centre. Neil told the secretary his name and she smiled at him before telling him to enter the office already, Doctor Dobson was waiting for him. He didn't know she had a PhD.

He was still breathing heavily when he opened the door to her office. His muscles were burning in the best way possible, vibrating and radiating heat with every beat of his heart. He'd missed running!

"Neil! You look exhausted, would you care for some water? I also have juices and hot cocoa," she offered, and Neil checked the clock on the wall as he fell onto the chair opposite to her. He was a few minutes late.

"No, it's fine," he said, looking around the room. He'd been here half a year ago, and the place had not changed one last bit. Even the curtains looked as if she hadn't touched them once.

"Alright then. I must say, I was surprised to hear you'd made an appointment. Is everything okay?" she asked, leaning back in her chair and smiling warmly.

"Abby and Coach said I could only train after talking to you, so here I am," he said. There was no point in lying to her. Or maybe there was, but he wasn't too keen on it.

She smiled when he said that, nodding a little and not seeming to take offence. "That sounds like a good motivator for you. Is there anything you'd like to talk about now that you're here? When you were here the last time, there were some issues, did you work that out?"

Neil resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest defensively when she asked this. The last time he'd spoken to her, Neil hadn't been sleeping. He'd just come here from the Nest and was physically
and mentally a wreck. He and Jean hadn't talked yet and he had troubles working the situation out with Kevin.

It almost hurt to think of that time, and Neil felt cold suddenly. For some reason, it didn't especially feel distant anymore. Had his life really just repeated itself like that?

"It's alright. Fine. I'm good," he answered, really not wanting to discuss his emotions with her. She was Andrew's therapist…

"That's great, if you're being honest. However, if there's something you need to talk about, I'm always here. So, tell me about something. We need to get the time over with so you can go straight to training, right?" She actually winked at him. Winked. He stared at her blankly, not entirely sure what reaction she expected.

"I don't know what to say. Nothing's happening," he said, shrugging softly. Dobson took a sip of her mug that was probably full of cocoa, and Neil sighed. He couldn't believe anyone was voluntarily doing this job, sitting around all day and listening to fucked up teenagers. How wasn't she insane yet?

"Okay, so tell me about how school is going," she almost demanded, but kept a smile on her face. He didn't know how to react to her cheerful attitude, especially since he knew she was only trying to help, but it was exhausting.

"It's alright, nothing happens," he said, not understanding why she was asking. Neither of them cared about this.

Dobson let out a small breath that could have been a sigh or a laugh. He knew he had the ability to make people regret starting to talk to him, but he hadn't expected it to work on Dobson. He hadn't even tried, this time. "Alright, makes sense," she tried, never losing that smile. "What about your team? Wait, no, that's too open for you, you won't answer that. Your roommates! How is it going with them? Who are you in a room with?"

Neil might have laughed at the way she specified her question so much, because it was true. He wouldn't give answers if she didn't ask specifically and she was too much of a therapist to ask about the Nest.

"I share a room with Matt and Seth, and it's good. They're great, I guess. But the girls are always in our room anyways, so it's almost — it's going good." Neil frowned, looking out of the window for a second, swallowing back a weird taste. How had she done this? He hadn't meant to start talking freely.

"That's good news! What about the others? The cousins and Kevin?" she asked on, and Neil frowned. She had decided to put Andrew into 'the cousins' as if he wasn't the one she talked to most.

"I don't know what to tell you. It's alright, but the team consists of a bunch of fucked up kids. Of course it's not all great all the time," he said, unsure what she expected him to say. He wouldn't pretend to like Aaron.

"Tell me what you're willing to share, I don't mind. I won't push you, Neil, because my curiosity is not your concern. Of course I want to know what happened during the Christmas holidays, and of course I want to know why you're not training with the team, but I won't push you. I'm glad you came and I appreciate everything you say!" She was smiling the whole time she said it, but Neil felt sick. Why did everyone around him care so much?
"I don't mind talking about it, I'm sick of people pretending I need special treatment. So I had a fracture, but I'm still a Fox. The fact that Riko is still figuring out what to do with a number lacking a scale is not my problem," he answered, actually annoyed with her attitude right now. As if she appreciated any word at all. She didn't care and he hated that she pretended.

"What does that mean? Being a Fox?" she asked, apparently actually interested in his thoughts. This was worse than pretending. He didn't want others to get emotionally invested in any way.

"You know all of us well enough to know it. It's about unlikeliness, about chances we don't even deserve anymore, but it's also about being something just because you are. It's letting go of all the things we've been through," he said. He couldn't form words for what being a Fox felt like. It was like… like a new kind of family. One you were comfortable with. More comfortable than with the family you were forced into by birth or sold off to.

"That's a nice way of putting it, Neil! Is that what it is to you? Finding closure?" she asked, making him frown. That's not what he meant! Though… maybe there was some truth to it? Not entirely, but somehow. Being a Fox meant more than letting go of your past, it meant taking strength from every time you were shoved to the ground. It meant finding the power within yourself and turning it into the most destructive force manageable.

"I guess you could say that," he answered instead, not ready to give up as much information about himself.

The rest of the conversation went more to Neil's liking. He told her about the season and how his fracture had healed, about how they were sure they had a shot at the title this season. And soon, the hour was over and Neil was free to train with his team again.

"Remember that my door is always open for you," she said in lieu of goodbye, and he nodded.

"Sure," he mumbled, leaving as quickly as he could without running off.

He only wanted to do that when he got outside, but stopped in the entrance hall, staring out of the glass doors for some seconds. He'd seen a few raindrops hitting the window behind her at the office, but he'd been so busy talking and avoiding personal confessions, he hadn't realised that the world was ending. It had gotten considerably darker, lightning flashing across the sky, and he heard the loud thunder even as he stepped through the door. Sure, it was only a storm, but for some reason it made him feel uneasy. Maybe because this was what it had looked like when he'd encountered Drake, maybe because his father had made him stay outside at night to cure him from his fear of thunder.

And maybe it was just that his fracture still hurt a little when it got too cold.

Neil pulled the hood over his head and started running home. It was freezing and his steps sounded too loud, but it didn't take too long. Sure, he was soaked and on edge when he finally saw the Fox Tower on the end of the street, but he let out a relieved sigh. Home.

He went inside, pulling his sweatshirt off before entering the building so he wouldn't drip onto the floor too much. It didn't help much, but he managed, and for some miraculous reason, Matt and Seth were in the girls' room, so he could change and shower in peace.

Afterwards he looked around for a minute, not sure where to go. He knew he was letting the Upperclassmen down, lately, but he couldn't stand all the colours and noises, all the words. Sometimes, they were just too much as a group.
So he decided to go over to the Monsters, knocking against the door they always kept locked for some reason.

Nicky opened it, frowning at him but looking relieved anyways. "Neil, seriously, what the hell?"

He frowned a little, going in slightly more slowly than he usually would have. Everything seemed normal. "What's up?" he asked, and Nicky shook his head.

"I'm telling them you're okay," he mumbled, leaving the room, and Neil frowned.

"We were kinda worried because no one knew where you where. And it's not like we have any way to reach you, considering that you still didn't replace that phone," Kevin said, patting his shoulder softly as Neil sat down on the sofa next to him. "And when Matt came over asking where you were, we— whatever. Where were you?"

Neil stared at Kevin for a moment, blinking in confusion, unsure why everyone was so worried all the time. Why did everyone care so much, lately? It felt weird and he wasn't sure if he liked people caring about him. It got a little much sometimes, considering that he hadn't mattered to anyone but Kevin and Jean in years.

"Coach told me I could only train once I had a talk with Dobson, so I went there. Didn't want to miss more practice," he answered, not wanting to get into it too deeply. Therapy, of all things.

"Can you tell one of us when you decide not to be home? Because you vanishing is usually bad news, just saying," Kevin mumbled, and Neil was about to answer when something hit his arm. He frowned from the white box on the sofa next to him to Andrew sitting on the beanbag chair.

Aaron looked up from the textbook for a second before deciding this wasn't worth his final grade, so he buried his nose right back in there.

"What's this?" Neil asked, but Andrew just shrugged, looking back at the book on his lap. That's when Neil saw the handwritten notes all over the couch-table, all in Kevin's scribbly way of writing. Were really all of them preparing for finals?

He decided not to get caught up in procrastination and opened the box. Then he sighed, shaking his head. A new phone, and a nice one. It didn't look much different from the last one, same size, still all black, but this one seemed to be a little more modern and maybe lighter, if he wasn't fooled by the weight in his hands. The touchscreen took up more space of the front of the phone and Neil wondered why there was barely any frame around these things anymore.

"I don't want it," he said as Nicky entered the room, looking confused by the scene.

"Who got you a phone?" he asked, frowning, but Andrew didn't react.

"The way all of you make a fuss when you can't reach him is annoying," Andrew answered as if buying a phone for hundreds of dollars was a reasonable response to that kind of situation.

"This is why we're poor, Andrew, because of the car and because of your sudden need to spoil your boyfriend," Nicky exclaimed, making Neil raise an eyebrow. Nicky of all people should know the difference between a relationship and this absolute nothingness.

Andrew didn't look up from his book, but Neil still wasn't sure what to do. "I really don't want it," he repeated, not wanting to have Andrew spend this much money on him. And anyways, it's not like he couldn't buy it himself.
"And I didn't want the car, so live with it," he answered, and even Aaron looked up at that.

"You bought the Maserati?" Nicky asked, literally squealing at the information.

"I— well, technically I only gave him money," Neil argued, but Nicky laughed.

"Whatever. Wow," he mumbled, sitting down in the second bean bag chair and taking the notebook between him and Andrew while he still looked at Neil with a frown.

Neil didn't care too much, although it made him a little uneasy to see even Andrew taking a look at the material. He didn't seem to study as much as he skimmed the text, going through pages at a quick pace.

He spent the time turning on the phone and setting everything up until it was pretty much exactly like the last one he'd owned. He'd only need to save contacts to the sim that seemed to be his old one, considering how the number hadn't changed. Andrew was efficient.

Just when he'd decided to go over and maybe get some reading done, they had to leave for training already. Well, there was nothing Neil could do against that, he supposed.

And so they went. The car ride was surprisingly silent and Neil was slightly concerned. He couldn't imagine the Monsters of all people to be concerned with finals.

Neil didn't have it in him to care too much about their concerns when he finally saw the stadium, because everything else was pushed into the back of his mind as he finally saw it. He loved that this was where they trained, loved that he could feel the rush of a game every time he stepped through these doors.

They got in, Neil changed into gear in the showers, and Matt hugged him when he first saw him. "Don't just run off without telling anyone, Neil, I was worried," he said, and Neil couldn't do anything but nod. Should he be worried about their concern? Apologise?

Before he had a chance to make up his mind, Wymack called them together. He asked Dan and Kevin to start the warm up with the team and then told them to 'get the hell started'. When they turned to leave, his hand was on Neil's shoulder, almost pulling him back but not quite. "Not you."

Neil shut his eyes, not sure if he wanted to roll them or fight back the panic at the sudden touch by someone his father's age. "What is it?" he asked as the team left, making Wymack shake his head.

"You're draining, do you know that?" he asked, making Neil frown. He had his racquet and was allowed to train! Why wouldn't he just let him? Neil hoped he hadn't done anything wrong, this time.

"Alright, I just want to have a quick talk with you. I am glad you talked to Betsy, but I want to have a conversation with you as well. I'm going to be honest: it would suck if you couldn't play, and that's why I want you to take it slow."

Wymack seemed concerned, slight frown on his face as he said this, and Neil couldn't help but fiddle with the racquet almost nervously.

"I'm good. I can play and I want to," he answered, not ready to be talked over like that. He had a say in this, right?

"Yes, I know that, and I am glad. Neil, when you first got here I didn't have too much hope, but you made progress and you're a great striker. I wouldn't have thought that this was even a possibility, and that's exactly the point." He stopped, looking at Neil sternly, seeming way too serious.
"I want to remind you that this is not the Nest. You can take your time and it's okay to work up more slowly. Nobody expected you to play well on that game last week. Nobody even expected you to play. Don't make this worse because you won't take the time necessary for your body to catch up with your ambition," he demanded.

Neil wasn't sure what to make of this. He didn't like everyone constantly caring about him, always worrying.

"I'm okay. Thanks, Coach," he mumbled, not really keen on keeping the conversation going. He wasn't at the Nest and he knew it. He wouldn't have fought like this for Riko, he would have been forced to. Right now, he made the conscious decision to give them his everything, and nothing could stop him from that.

They went to practice after that, and Neil was glad to train with his team.

The thing about the Foxes was that they were awesome. They took the final tests of the semester and still went to the stadium twice a day. Neil passed every class and Matt made fun of him being a nerd when it came to classes, but he really didn't mind.

All of them did it. Some not as good as others, but it was okay, after all. They managed. And it was college, the important thing was that all of them passed.

Neil could spend time with the Upperclassmen again and he was glad their bursts of emotions didn't drain him as much anymore.

It was the start of March and Neil felt like his world was slowly turning into the right direction again. He and Andrew spent most afternoons on the roof now that the sun shone a little brighter and he started to feel as if perhaps this wasn't actually nothing.

They were working towards the final rounds and Christmas was a memory that didn't haunt him all too often anymore, his bruises healed, the foot perfectly fine. Nicky was already planning on leaving for three weeks in the summer, and then bringing Erik with him for the rest of the holidays. Aaron and Andrew still went to Bee once a week and Neil realised that Andrew went twice a week now. He liked knowing that they were working things out.

Neil found everyone around him a little more relaxed now that finals had passed. Seth was graduating this year and Allison was still always by his side, but not in the overprotective way but perhaps more in the way she was supposed to be, considering that he wouldn't live in the same building anymore in just a few months.

Everything was working out and somehow, Neil felt like more of himself than he had in months. Maybe ever.

And now things were getting serious. They had qualified for the the death matches. Up until now, it was all fun and games, but today? Today they'd write history.

The Palmetto State Foxes had never made it to the death matches before and it seemed as if every single student was at the stadium tonight.

They had never played against Texas, but the Foxes knew the team inside out. Ever since their opponent had been announced, they'd studied every move they made, making sure they would not be surprised during the game. Kevin had stayed up all night, noting down dozens of weaknesses of every single player on Texas' lineup and they all hoped to profit from that tonight.

The Texas Turtles hadn't brought many fans, but there was a little green mixed with the orange
masses. The ones that were there were loud and motivated, posters and costumes and everything else that might come in handy while supporting the players.

When they got into gear and met in Wymack's office, Neil could see a shift in all of them. They were standing a little straighter, faces determined. They wouldn't fail, they had practically forgotten how to lose.

"Before we're discussing anything regarding the game, I want to make an announcement," Allison started, getting the attention of all of them. "I wasted a hell lot of money on this, so let's just all make sure we won't have to put a silver or bronze solatium on it," she went on, while Abby brought in a huge wooden… thing? It looked fancy, brown with a flat surface, ready to function as a stand for their golden trophy as soon as they received what they had earned already.

"Wow, you're not overestimating us at all, I'm glad there's no pressure on us," Nicky said with a chuckle and Neil couldn't help smiling. They had a shot at the title, they really, really did!

"I'm hoping this will motivate you enough so I don't have to give a long speech on how I want this to end. If we don't win tonight, the season is over for us. We're being watched by the whole university and a bunch of people all over America, and I am not telling you a secret when I say that most of them look forward to you getting your asses kicked. They want to see you fail miserably, but I don't want them to have that satisfaction. I know you have everything it takes, and I am hoping you'll make tonight worth it!" There was so much pride, so much honesty and almost a trace of satisfaction in his voice. For him, they'd won already.

They went out there, warming up with the other team quickly, and Neil glued himself to Andrew's side as they did laps.

"Can you put some effort into playing tonight?" he asked, heart racing. The stadium was usually not even halfway full when they warmed up, now it was almost filled to the brim already.

Andrew looked at him while they ran, though he wasn't actually running. It was more walking with your arms in motion to give off the impression of a jog.

"Why?" he asked, and Neil looked away. Because of Riko, because of his father, because of everything. But Andrew didn't care about any of that.

"To prove everyone wrong. All of them, to show that we can," he answered after a few seconds, making Andrew arch an eyebrow.

"You'll ask in the other games as well," he stated, and Neil shrugged. It was true, after all. "What do I get for it?"

Neil took a deep breath and shook his head a little. "I don't know what you want, but I want nothing more than to win this. Andrew, anything you want, I am serious. Four games in exchange for everything I can give."

Andrew scoffed at that and shook his head. "That's idiotic and you of all people should know it," he answered, making Neil sigh. It was true, but — "You're buying the cigarettes until the next game. I'll think of my prize until then."

If Neil had even an ounce less of self control, he'd have hugged Andrew right in front of every single one of these people. Instead he was beaming, smile so bright he could barely stop himself from leaving him behind and running across the field at full speed.

They went back behind the plexiglass walls and waited for the audience to calm down. That was
when the announcer started yelling into the microphone, exclaiming how this was the last death match, how this was all or nothing, and then almost yelling out their lineup. It was fantastic!

Neil and Seth went out first, with Dan, Matt, Aaron and Renee on the field. The backliner that was up against Neil was twice his width and probably also twice his height, but Neil refused to let himself be intimidated by that as the game started.

It was cruel, three yellow cards given out in the first ten minutes, a red one in addition to that. Neil really tried favouring his foot, but when adrenaline made up more of him than pain, how could he? And how could he not use every opportunity to check the backliner when the one tried doing exactly the same?

Neil considered it a miracle that he only had two yellow cards by the time he scored the third goal during the first half but wasn't too surprised when Nicky was substituted for Matt after a fight with a Striker. Even when Seth was banned from playing the first half because of an encounter with the opponents' dealer, Neil could only smile widely at Kevin by his side.

Of course it wasn't easy, but they fought with everything. The Turtles played dirty, just nice enough for the referees not to punish them, but still draining the Foxes. But Kevin and Neil played like a unity and the same could be said about Aaron and Nicky. Neil always liked seeing how the boy didn't care about Exy but could be such a strong part of a team.

His legs were burning as much as his lungs when the backliner checked him unnecessarily hard. He might have not lost his balance if he'd dared to use his foot properly, but something in him had told him to catch himself with his hands instead of risking a twisted ankle. He'd live, taking the hand Dan offered and getting up, passing the ball and running as if his life depended on it because it felt as if it really did.

Maybe this was everything there was, and maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

Two fistfights and another red card for the Turtles later, they went into the halftime drenched in sweat. Renee took her helmet off before even taking a step towards the door, strands of hair clinging to her head heavily.

Neil's ears rang from the times he'd heard the buzz, saw the wall light up red from the goals he'd managed scoring. They went into half time with a score of 7-4 against the Foxes, but Neil had high hopes.

That was, until he saw Nicky leaning against the wall, head hanging limply with his hands in his hair, until he saw Aaron sitting on the ground with his head leaned against the wall, panting heavily, until he saw how Matt used the table in Wymack's office for support and how greedily Kevin drank from the water bottle, spilling nearly a third of its contents.

About then he realised how dizzy he felt. Sure, he'd fallen a few times and had an opponent that sure as hell knew where to hit him, but he felt incredibly weak for some reason. Worn out.

"Alright, Allison, Andrew, Matt and Seth, you're our hope for the second half. We need a strong defence and an even stronger offence. A three point gap is definitely not beyond our capabilities and all of you know that, right?" Wymack asked, looking around.

Andrew and Allison were in fact the only players who hadn't set a foot on the court so far and Neil couldn't help looking at her. Allison looked so much like herself when she had her hair pulled into a tight ponytail, ready to go out there and crush everyone's dream beneath her sneakers. And Andrew… Andrew looked bored, but he'd promised and Neil knew enough about him by now to be
sure this was something he could rely on.

"Okay, Kevin, Nicky, you'll do your best to not drag them down, I'll get you out as soon as Aaron and Neil are a little farther from fainting than now," he said, and Neil wanted to protest, but he really couldn't. He didn't like to admit it, but he'd lost some condition because of the stupid fracture. And he and Aaron had just played for an entire half, it wasn't something you could usually expect from players.

"Let's do this," Allison said, smiling in a way that reminded Neil of Mary Hatford a little. She could emit danger, superiority and confidence in a way Neil had only ever seen in his mother before, and it almost creeped him out.

The game started again and he, Aaron and Renee stood by the plexiglass wall, hitting against it to support their team. When Kevin scored, it was the first time Neil had heard Aaron whooo in support, and it almost added to his rush. If even the twins could put emotion into this, maybe they really could make it.

Abby tried talking to him, probably wanting to check on his foot, but Neil refused to let her, too focussed on the game that turned from 7-4 to 9-9 in a matter of twenty minutes. Andrew was being incredible, moving so fast Neil couldn't believe this was happening. He put effort into it!

It came as it had to, and Seth threw a punch as the game went on. The backliner had to be substituted for, and Seth was banned from the game this time. With only eighteen minutes left on the clock, nobody minded. Neil was actually kind of proud he didn't fight Kevin for a change.

And Kevin… they hadn't sorted everything out. The Nest stood between them like a wall made of concrete and the windows were sealed shut by Kevin's refusal to talk to Wymack, but on court they weren't only friends, they were a family. Allison was always running, never blocked by another player, always a safe bet, and Kevin scored so well Neil couldn't help yelling along with the crowd.

Five minutes left on the clock, and it was 10-10. Three and Nicky slammed his whole weight into a girl half his weight, getting the ball back to the Foxes. Two and they lost possession yet again as Kevin's backliner got the ball. Andrew yelled at Nicky, telling him to move faster and apparently actually giving some sort of advice.

Neil ran towards the Foxes' goal, more focussed on blocking the shot than scoring for now, but the Turtles passed and passed and the ball flew faster than Neil could run.

The last sixty seconds, and Andrew made an unbelievable move, almost laying flat on the ground but still catching the ball with his arms stretched, barely getting it into the net of his racquet. He got up quickly, passing to Aaron. To Neil. To Allison. He ran, ducking between two players and probably hitting one of them too hard… but he wouldn't be punished for this game anymore, anyways. Penalties this late in a game were either only carried out in the next game or simply ignored, even by referees. Red cards in the last minutes would only delay the game further.

Allison passed the ball to Kevin, and Neil was free when he got the ball, debating for only a second whether to try or give them a better chance to get closer. He decided to shoot.

Ten seconds left, and the buzzer blared through the stadium. The wall lit up red and the stadium exploded into screaming. And then, it was all over.

The Foxes won the last death match 11-10 against one of the best teams of the Southern league. They were one of the best teams themselves now.
Allison screamed and hugged him and he couldn't help feeling proud, feeling home, feeling as if this was what it was all about. And soon, the other Foxes were on the field as well, all hugging, all totally ecstatic.

His life couldn't get any better. He'd arrived at the top of the rollercoaster and knew that even if they'd go down, the rush would be what this was about. But they wouldn't go down anywhere but in history.

When they finally left the court, Wymack had a full smile on his face. Not even he could hide his pride in that moment. They had won this game and they would win the three that were yet to come.

The Foxes were on their way to the locker rooms, Abby all around them, trying to see if any of them needed her help.

They were in the locker rooms, slowly changing and showering and smiling a little too much. Even Kevin seemed proud with what they had accomplished.

"Are you staying here this weekend?" Seth asked suddenly, making Neil shrug with a glance at Andrew. He had no clue whether or not they were going to Columbia.

"I don't know. Why?"

"The girls want to throw a party in the study rooms on the first floor of the Fox Tower. The Vixens will be there," Matt answered, not looking at Neil but at Aaron as he said this.

Just the way Neil had, Aaron looked at Andrew, who seemed unimpressed and not in the mood to answer.

"How much alcohol is there?" Nicky asked, making Kevin laugh a little while Neil shook his head.

"Enough, even for you," Seth answered and Kevin seemed unsure as to whether to take offence or not.

"I don't need to go to Columbia if you'd rather get drunk around people you see on a daily basis," Andrew answered before leaving the room, and Matt smiled brightly.

"That's awesome! We haven't celebrated a win as a team in ages," he exclaimed, at which Kevin raised an eyebrow.

"We didn't because after the last game Neil was close to death because he didn't know his limits and because we lost the game before. I'm just saying if all of us put a little more effort into—"

"Kevin, I've been trying not to pick fights with you because of Neil, so can you please shut up?" Seth asked and Aaron actually chuckled a little at that. They were finally a team.

The Foxes left the locker rooms and went to their cars, and while the car ride took ages, no one seemed to mind. Neil's muscles ached in the best way possible and he felt adrenaline in every cell of his body. He was home.

They arrived back at home soon and Nicky threatened he'd personally drag them back up and make them change if one of them decided to show up in inappropriate clothing. He seemed to be addressing Neil for some reason.

Whatever the issue, they went to their rooms and Neil smiled when he didn't only see Matt and Seth but also the girls in there already. How did they always make it back so much more quickly?
They didn't look especially festive, even Allison only wore blue jeans and a nice but plain shirt. Her hair wasn't straightened or curled but looked as if she'd merely blow dried it after showering, making Neil figure this would be a rather casual occasion. He went to their bedroom and changed into jeans and a hoodie before joining them. Neil never understood how the three girls could always look like this after games. So naturally relaxed and at ease. It might have something to do with make up but maybe they were just really natural phenomena.

"Are you waiting for the rest of the Monsters or are you coming with us already?" Matt asked, ruffling Neil's hair as he walked by, which made him smile for some reason. This was what they had done all the time, but since his time at the next these carefree touches had lessened.

"I'm coming with you," he decided. Nicky would make them wait for half an hour before going there, anyway, and Neil didn't mind spending a little time with the Upperclassmen. He kind of missed them after being shut off from the world for so long. Then again, that was his own fault. They went downstairs and Neil was surprised to see some of the basketball players there already. "We asked them to prepare everything so we wouldn't be so stressed after the game," Renee explained and Neil nodded. So Kevin would have company while getting blackout drunk. Neil helped them preparing a little more and was so proud of literally everything going on around him. Seth brushed his hand through Allison's hair whenever he passed her and Dan seemed too joyful considering the hard check she'd received towards the end of the game. She was bringing her team to the finale after all.

There were snacks in bowls all over the tables and the guys seemed slightly drunk already, which Neil almost considered some sort of accomplishment. Matt, Seth and some guys stood in a circle with Neil and he almost laughed when Matt pushed one of those typical, red college-party-cups into his hand. Then he thought of how half a year ago, he hadn't even known this cliché existed and couldn't hide a smile anymore. The Foxes had given him so much, he couldn't ever pay them back.

A group of girls entered the room and Neil raised an eyebrow. Allison froze and Renee smiled brightly as the Vixens entered the room in nice clothes, orange eyeshadow still on their faces and hairs styled in a way that suggested it had taken hours to keep in place. Neil would never understand how the cheerleaders could look like this after a game full of dancing and doing deadly stunts. They all shattered into groups, but Neil stayed with Seth and Matt. Allison and Renee joined them after a while as Dan and some of the boys and girls started talking. Neil spotted Katelyn with their captain Saya and a few of the basketball boys and just as he wondered why she was always nervously looking around, her face seemed relieved and he looked up. The Monsters entered the room and Neil couldn't help smiling when he saw that only Nicky broke their all-black-with-a-side-of-dark-grey colour theme with a bright yellow jacket over a shirt that seemed to be nothing but sparkly fragments. His attention shifted back when there was a hand on his shoulder and he looked back at— Marissa.

"You were so good today! I mean all of you were so amazing," she exclaimed, dragging two girls that seemed more than uncomfortable with her into the circle, making the mood in the entire group shift.
Neil didn't need to see Allison's obviously calm face or the glances Matt and Seth exchanged to know that one of them was the girl he'd cheated on Allison with. He briefly wondered why it seemed to be mainly her fault now, considering that it was Seth's mistake more than hers, but he didn't say anything.

"Thanks," he said, not sure if it did anything at all to improve the mood, but turned to go to the Monsters instead. The Foxes would understand that Marissa was nobody he felt like talking to most of the time.

Kevin had already attracted some of the basketball jocks and was talking to them about both of their seasons while the cousins seemed a little out of place. Neil knew that as the night would continue, they'd all go into different groups, but it was almost nice to see them together for a bit.

"Marissa will never stop bothering you, will she?" Nicky asked, making Neil shrug with a glance over his shoulder. The Vixens had left the group already and Seth had an arm wrapped around Allison's middle. They'd live.

They got drinks and the twins remained relatively silent while just about everyone talked to Nicky or Neil at one point. Andrew looked rather annoyed while Aaron didn't even seem bothered, considering how his eyes never left Katelyn for longer than three seconds.

Around an hour into the evening Nicky mumbled something about how he couldn't watch this any longer, took Aaron by the wrist and pulled him along to a group of girls including Katelyn. Neil didn't spare them a second glance when he saw how they seemed unsure what to do now that they were in such close proximity.

He knew Aaron had issues with this in front of Andrew, but why couldn't they just work it out? It wasn't as if Andrew would explode if anything didn't please him, yet people were still constantly afraid, hiding their panic over everything behind mockery and jokes about the 'monster'. Neil sighed and shook his head. He hadn't even emptied two cups yet and his thoughts were already running too fast for his sense of reason to follow.

"Cigarette?" Andrew asked, looking at Neil for merely seconds before leaving the room and of course he followed. He understood that Andrew might not want to look at Aaron interacting with Katelyn, considering what he knew about their past and about which kinds of people Andrew was trying to protect Aaron from.

They took the elevator to the top floor, went through the heavy door and up the stairs to the roof. The night was chilly but the sky was clear, only a few small clouds hiding the skies. It was so cold he could barely feel much else when they sat down, but he knew Andrew felt something up here, and Neil smiled again. He wanted him up here, even if he didn't feel as secure as he liked, and it was the biggest compliment Neil could ever receive.

Andrew lit a cigarette for Neil and one for himself, one leg pulled to his chest loosely while the other one dangled from the edge. His features were dark and only slightly illuminated by the light from the streetlights below, turning Andrew's pale skin into something rather yellowish.

"You're staring," he said, making Neil shrug as he turned his eyes to the cigarette slowly burning down between his fingers.

"So? You were pretty amazing tonight, Andrew," Neil answered, not wanting to get into the other topic too much. Not with his brain slightly affected by whatever had been in those cups.

"They were bad at aiming. I didn't have to move a lot," Andrew argued, but Neil shook his head.
"They scored seven goals in the half Renee was in the goal and three in yours. You were fantastic, Andrew, I am serious. Thank you," he repeated, making Andrew shake his head.

"Just shut up," he muttered. Neil blew against the tip of the cigarette, watching it burn brightly before dying down to a soft glimmer while burning down to the filter.

He looked up after throwing the stub off the roof and saw Andrew frowning at him, which made him smile a little too much. "You're staring," Neil said, making Andrew roll his eyes.

However, the response wasn't some snappy remark but a question both of them knew the answer to and Andrew was so close so quickly Neil wondered when he'd even had the time to move.

He would never understand what shifted when they kissed and where everything else went in these moments, but it seemed as if there was nothing left but this, these moments in which distance was an abstract concept neither of them wanted to consider.

Neil was on his back in a matter of seconds, hands in Andrew's hair or slowly, almost not moving at all, making their way to his shoulders. Neil knew he shouldn't push Andrew or force him into anything, but right now he couldn't help but pull him close and from the way Andrew's freezing hand was under the fabric of his shirt moments later, he figured neither of them minded.

He couldn't begin to understand what they were or how much it mattered, but that was exactly the point. What they labeled it as didn't matter at all, everything that was important was this moment, this kiss, this touch.

And this time, Andrew let Neil kiss his throat without complaints, without remarks, without anything but a shuddered breath Neil really didn't mind.

But as always, they couldn't spend all their time like this, even though sometimes he wanted to. Sometimes he didn't want to let go of the broad shoulders but keep him close just because. Just because a runaway needed someone to ask him to stay, sometimes.

Neil tried calming his breath as he looked over the campus of their university while the thoughts were spinning in his head. "Thanks," he mumbled again, but Andrew only lit two more cigarettes.

"For what this time?" he asked after handing one to Neil, who wasn't sure how to put this into words. He was thankful for so many things Andrew had taught him about himself, about everything Andrew had let him be part of, every time he'd protected him. He was thankful for the key to the house in Columbia and the one for the Maserati, for the phone and for every kiss and every word, every turn taken and every night wasted, every cigarette shared.

"For giving me more than I could ask for," Neil mumbled, making Andrew shake his head as he took a deep drag from the cigarette.

"You ask for all the useless stuff. Not anything real," Andrew answered, definitely thinking of the times Neil wasted turns on stupid truths and asked for nothing but Exy performance.

"I wouldn't ask anything else of you. Not if you're not willing to give it," he said after a few moments of consideration, really not sure why he did. Maybe he wanted Andrew to know and maybe he would thank him every single time he could, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that tiny frown on Andrew's face that was proof he felt something.

They stayed outside, conversation very low between them as if they couldn't bear to be too loud in such a still environment.
"We haven't been to Columbia in ages," Neil remarked after a while, which made Andrew glare at him.

"So?" he asked, not seeming bothered by the way Neil talked about these things anymore. Somehow, they'd gotten used to one another.

"I just thought we should go there again because it's been a while, but I don't mind all of us spending time together," he said, making Andrew shake his head.

"We're not with them," he stated coldly, and Neil held back a remark about how Andrew had said 'we'.

"Yeah but still. We could go somewhere over spring break as well," he said, smiling at the thought. He could ask his mother for money or they could try only using what he had left, only he, the cousins and Kevin somewhere else, away from all the responsibilities Neil was still only growing accustomed to.

"As long as the place has wifi. Nicky won't shut up about calling Erik otherwise," Andrew said with a shrug, which made Neil feel some weird sort of warmth spread in his entire body. He liked when Andrew talked about his family even a little, for he knew how much this meant to him.

"I've never been anywhere but Baltimore and the Nest except for this," Neil mumbled then, frowning as the thought only came now. Tesuji didn't like his precious players away from court so Neil and Kevin didn't leave Edgar Allan for longer than half a day. When Jean had joined them a couple of years later, time off was granted to Riko and only Riko.

As a kid, he'd stayed with Lola or his mother, depending on who his father could bear to work without more. He'd been too important once, too much of a weak spot of his father to be left alone. Neil almost scoffed thinking of a time when someone could have blackmailed Nathan with his offspring.

But the thought was gone as he thought of everywhere he'd been in the past year. Away games with the Foxes, every inch of the city while running, Columbia. The walls were gone and Neil had barely even realised it.

"Pathetic," Andrew mumbled, and Neil rolled his eyes, nudging him carefully.

"Yeah, right, I am the pathetic one. You pretend to hate everyone around you because of your reputation," he said without any heat or seriousness, making Andrew blow smoke into his face with a slightly annoyed expression.

"I don't hate everyone, I could just not care less about any of the people I have to interact with," he answerer, and Neil arched an eyebrow.

"You like most of them. Bee, Renee, Kevin. And you care about Aaron and Nicky," he said and Andrew shoved against him again.

"Even if I did, I still hate you," he muttered and Neil bit back a remark on how Andrew must care a lot if it was enough for such strong emotions.

They stayed on the roof for another eternity after that, sharing kisses and truths, wasting cigarettes and time until the sky wasn't as black anymore but had a light blue hue towards the horizon. Neil couldn't believe they'd spent all night up here.

"C'mon," Andrew said and Neil's joints cracked when he got up after so many hours. He stretched
and shook his legs a little before they made their way away from the edge after Andrew had thrown the empty pack of cigarettes down.

Neil's legs were heavy as they went down the stairs to their rooms and he sighed a little, thinking of going to bed now. Sure, he was tired, but he'd feel way better after a run.

He headed down the other set of stairs but saw Andrew on his heels, which made him bite back a grin.

"I'll get a pack of cigarettes, won't take long. I need to move a little," he explained and couldn't help smiling at the way Andrew had moved to follow him. Nothing…

Andrew looked at him for a very long moment, arms crossed and frowning at Neil before shaking his head almost too little for him to notice. "Okay," he answered and Neil turned to leave before Andrew even unlocked his door.

Stepping outside, Neil smiled as he was hit in the face by the cold air of the night. Usually, if made him feel more present, but he felt absolutely there after the time with Andrew. He felt real.

Neil started to jog slowly as a car pulled into the street, but he couldn't mind too much.

That was, until it stopped by his side of the road and he was almost blinded by the headlights while the car's doors opened.

He debated whether or not to change the side of the street when he saw the silhouette of a man getting out of the car. He stopped when he heard the voice.

"Neil Josten?" he said with a mocking tone in his voice and Neil frowned very deeply. The voice was low and familiar, but he wasn't quite sure who…

"Oh well, that was easier than expected," the woman climbing out of the car now said, and Neil froze.

Lola.

Chapter End Notes

Hey!!! Guess who's back to posting regularly!! It's ME!

Updates: I'll try updating again asap in order to finish this soon hahaha. I hope you liked it!

And as always: what did all of you think of today's chapter?

Thanks to the Veterans sticking around and continuing to support me and my Monster-child hahah! No I'm serious, GayW1zardsAndF0xes, you're the literal love of my life! And Elfo you make me so happy!

I don't know who else is still around but I'm hoping you didn't all just abandon me hahahah

Also FREE I LOVE YOU AND THAT I'M ABLE TO TEXT YOU ALWAYS!

And we have a new recruit in our ranks! Thanks Lena for picking this up and reading
through the entire thing!!

Now! Saya! You read this chapter so often and I kept failing you! But both our hearts are lonely and they need — no I'm stopping, sorry hhaha
No lbr I love you and would have abandoned this monster if it weren't for you!
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Baltimore

Trigger warnings: a lot of them. It's Baltimore!
if you're having issues with graphic descriptions of violence or forms of silent torture
you might wanna skip the chapter!

(For those who want specific warnings: they're on top of the end of chapter notes, but
they are spoilers, so I didn't put them here)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He ran before he was sure where to go. Away. Nowhere but away. But there was one more person
in the car and before he got the chance to hide somewhere it couldn't get to him, it was in his way
and when he tried to go past, Romero Malcom had his hands on him already, a heavy blow to Neil's
head throwing off his balance. Neil ducked, trying to get away, but Lola was there and in a matter of
seconds there was a knife against his throat while she held him in an iron grip.

"I would comply if I were you, Junior," she whispered into his ear when he slammed his foot down
on hers. Shatter a bone or two, that would be all it needed. He'd fight Romero and leave before the
last person could make it out of the car.

"Fuck you," he answered and struggled against her. He could do this! He was way stronger and
faster, he could…

She and Romero worked together as he was punched in the stomach twice before they put cuffs on
him.

"You're not as strong without the little psycho," she mumbled, breath humid and warm against his
ear as he shook his head, trying to get away. This wasn't happening. Matt would wake him up soon.
Would stay up with him until the memories would have faded.

"Get him into the car before he gets ideas," someone barked from the driver's seat. Jackson Plank,
last remaining third of the trio. Neil was dead.

It was a good thing to be aware of, because he realised he could do anything he wanted.

Neil screamed at the top of his lungs while he was slapped, punched and dragged into the car, he
fought and struggled and thrashed out with his legs trying, really trying, to get away.

In the end, he sat on the passenger seat and with Jackson and Romero's help, they opened the cuffs
just to refasten them behind the seat. He fought again, slamming his head into Romero's face, smiling
his father's grin as he heard the crack. At least he went down with a fight.

He was slapped twice for that and closed his eyes when he felt dizzy.
The panic he'd been trying to swallow down clung to his feet like heavy cement blocks dragging him underwater. Maybe Andrew would realise he wasn't coming back, maybe…

Neil screamed at the top of his lungs when Lola pushed a blade into Neil's underarm and twisted the dagger. He saw stars and couldn't think, couldn't feel anything but this, he was…

She stopped and he tried breathing against the pain, but his breath was shallow and he felt sick and dizzy.

"So Junior, let's go through the rules. Nathan wants to play with you a little before killing you, but he won't be too mad if we show up with your corpse, so be nice," she chimed, voice in a sing song.

"Why?" he pressed out.

This time, he heard the sound of a lighter out of context and shook his head a little.

"This is a warning, Junior, since we understand that you forgot the basic rules. Here's a little reminder: you are not to speak unless spoken to. Do you understand?"

Neil closed his eyes and nodded, not wanting to feel the burning metal on his skin, turning his flesh into coal.

"I do," he pressed out, making Lola laugh very softly.

"Great. I'll do you a favour, Junior, I'll make sure the wound won't be infected. And maybe this'll help against the bleeding as well," she considered, and Neil couldn't say anything, holding his breath, not knowing what she'd do. The pain was in every cell and he couldn't think straight.

That was, until she pressed the lighter to the fresh cut, singeing the skin and flesh underneath. He cried out, pulling at the handcuffs and trying desperately to get away. He clenched his entire arms, kicked with his legs, shook his head, tried and tried and tried… there was no escape, no secret route, nowhere to hide, no one to seek security with. Andrew was gone. Kevin and Jean weren't here.

Neil wanted to be stronger, to keep looking for a way out, to fight, to be strong for them, for himself, and maybe just because he needed to prove to himself that he could be.

As always when it came to his father — when it came to accomplishing anything at all on his own —

Neil failed.

•

The idiot headed down the other set of stairs, and Andrew went to follow him. He didn't know where Neil wanted to go, but he wouldn't let him do it on his own.

"I'll get a pack of cigarettes, won't take long. I need to move a little," he explained and smiled at him in the way Andrew hated. Neil had only four kinds of smiles, and this one was the worst. The one no one else ever saw, the almost dumb expression. Neil had one for the other Foxes, one for the cameras, and one for people he absolutely hated. The latter came surprisingly close to Neil's father's smile.

But this one was terrible. It made him want to hit a wall or that face. It made him want to do many other things, and that was worse.
Andrew hated this, hated Neil, hated that he wanted to follow him down. He crossed his arms and shook his head slightly, annoyed by how long he was thinking about this. "Okay," he answered and Neil turned to leave before Andrew had even unlocked his door.

All of his roommates were asleep already, so Andrew went to bed as well. It was late and he was tired. His muscles ached a little from the game and from all the hours spent on the freezing roof. It took long to fall asleep with all the heavy breaths around him, but eventually, he couldn't resist the pull anymore.

Lola went on until the whole cut was sealed, until the smell of burnt flesh filled the car and Neil was sure he'd either throw up or faint.

His head hung low, breath shallower and shallower, until he was so dizzy that everything around him turned and twisted. His throat was scratching from the screaming and he wanted to die. If he had any opportunity to, he would.

"Worn out already, Junior? That's a new low, even for you. We used to have so much fun with fire and knives! Remember when Nathan left us at home for a weekend and at the end you were crawling towards him, begging to never leave you with me again?" she asked, voice almost cheerful in the silent car.

Neil remembered. He remembered the first time being tied to a chair, remembered a room with the heating turned on in full summer, remembered no water or food, remembered begging until she pushed the chair over and left him with a concussion in the middle of the room, sweating and pathetically trying to fight against the ropes.

When he'd told his father, Nathan had laughed and went away. When he'd told his mother, she'd asked what he'd done wrong. He said he didn't know, and she slapped him. He admitted that he'd sneaked out, and she'd hit him again.

Lola had a black eye and smashed in cheek bone after the conversation about educational measures with Mary.

Neil swore and fought against the restraints when he felt a different, jagged blade against his skin and made pathetic sounds in an attempt to keep his begging to a minimum.

"I asked you a question, Junior," she whispered into his ear, and Neil felt worse.

"I remember," he mumbled, making her laugh behind him.

"Do you also remember what I told you back then? About burns?" she went on, and Neil's mind was racing. Did he?

"Four degrees," he bit out, voice raspy and scratchy. Talking hurt.

"Good, go on," she demanded, and he laid his head into his neck, trying to think. There was so much pain...

"You showed me how they felt. The degrees of burns," he pressed out. She'd also dehydrated him and made sure he was in a room with no way to cool off so the pain would linger.

"Yes, great. I showed you how the first three would feel. You know what we left out, Junior? The
fourth degree and chemical burns. And I've been thinking about it. I think you need that experience before you die. And I've been debating on how to introduce you to the feelings," she went on, fingertips running over the cut and burnt flesh on his arms. "I was thinking about putting some chemicals into your hair, I've been thinking of using one that's harmless and spraying it all over you before letting it react with water. Think of how pathetic you'd look outside in the rain, cramping on the floor and yelling and trying to get away. That's my favourite scenario," she explained, and Neil pressed his eyes shut against the pictures.

The Foxes. Something… the Foxes gathered on the sofa! Watching movies with Matt and Seth, both of them with an arm around him. He didn't need to think of…

"But that's kinda hard with all the movements of the car. I wouldn't want to get any on my skin…" she mumbled, and then she was pressing the lighter into the burnt flesh more deeply, forcing it down until Neil saw nothing but stars.

Neil felt the pain in every cell he consisted of. He found the world stopped turning as the pain clouded everything else, sharply cutting into the wound like a thousand needles constantly pressing in with full force, feeling like a knife drenched in acid that kept twisting and digging in more deeply.

He lost everything. He screamed, begged, begged more, started crying and kept kicking and shaking his head until he became nothing but a broken and sobbing mess. He wasn't forming coherent sentences, only "Please, Lola, please don't" various times in a hundred different ways.

Before the pain stopped, Neil's brain shut down. It wasn't sleep pulling him in, but he didn't even mind fainting. At least he got a break, at least he was done being all pathetic.

He was a failure anyways.

Andrew woke up and was annoyed right away. He heard Nicky in the living room, talking on the phone. He heard Kevin in the bed above him, watching an Exy game without headphones, and he heard the shower running in their bath.

He got up and shut Kevin's laptop before leaving the room, not bothering with his protests. The nerve…

"Morning, Andrew," Nicky called, but he only went to the kitchen. He hated waking up to that many sounds. He hated even more that his heart raced a little whenever they were too loud. Idiots.

He made some food for himself before sitting down on one armchair. Nicky had hung up, fortunately.

"You alright?" his cousin asked, making Andrew take out his phone.

He didn't mean to ignore Nicky all the time, but Neil used up most of his words and sometimes it became almost rough to keep the guard up. He didn't talk to anyone after time on the roof and the morning after, maybe because of the memories that lingered but probably just because he wasn't comfortable with something inside of him trying to break out.

"So, Erik won't be able to make it this spring break, but I think I'm gonna fly over for a couple of weeks in summer before spending the rest here. I asked Aaron already and he said he wouldn't mind," Nicky explained, and Andrew looked at the screen of his phone without doing much.

"Wouldn't mind what?" he asked. Staying behind? Joining him? The fact that Nicky went?
"Coming along. And I'd like you there as well. We'll obviously take Kevin and Neil as well, so—"

"Don't say that as if it was relevant to my decision," Andrew demanded, making Nicky's eyes flicker to his armbands for a split second. He hadn't threatened him with his knives in quite a few months. There hadn't been more than three instances since he got off the drugs a year ago.

"I thought it was important to you. Sorry. So? I'd like to book the tickets soon," Nicky explained, making Andrew think about it. He'd been to Germany exactly one time, and it had been disastrous. Erik's parents were very touchy, constantly offering food and caressing arms, ruffling hair, patting shoulders.

Andrew had heard Nicky cry the night he'd broken Erik's father's wrist after he'd woken him up a little roughly.

Then again, that was years ago and it didn't matter anyways. At the end of the day, neither him nor Aaron could decide where they'd stay. Nicky was still the guardian.

"Ask Neil, I don't care. I'll snap every Exy stick Kevin tries bringing along," he threatened, dead serious, and Nicky smiled. He hated this, too. How Nicky was always happy, no matter what happened. There should be a limit to these things.

Aaron got out of the bathroom a while later and actually smiled when he checked his phone. Andrew would smash it if he ever saw that girl texting him.

When he'd eaten, he went to smoke by the window. It was freezing and the roof was windy, and he even annoyed Nicky by smoking inside. It was a win-win situation.

Kevin was the last to exit the bedroom, as he had probably finished watching the game on his laptop.

After a while, Nicky handed a controller to Andrew wordlessly while smiling a little too much. Andrew didn't usually like starting the day with games, but he didn't mind today.

They played for an hour or two while Aaron watched the screen, actually giving advice in tricky situations. Andrew wasn't bothered enough to tell him to shut up.

And Kevin sat with his feet on the table, frantically typing an essay that was probably due by Monday. The mumbled curses were almost amusing.

By noon, there was a knock on the door. Aaron got up to open it and Matt looked over him, frowning when his eyes found Andrew.

"Hey, has anyone seen Neil today? At first I thought he was probably out for a run, but it's been a while and we're starting to worry," he explained, seeming too concerned.

"The last time I saw him was when he left the party with Andrew last night," Nicky replied. Andrew glared at him.

"Do you have any clue where he might be?" Matt asked him, making him shrug.

"He got permission to use his feet again only yesterday. I wouldn't be surprised if he went for a run until tomorrow," Andrew answered, making Matt cross his arms and frown.

"But I got up an hour ago, he wouldn't—"

"It's Neil. Of course he would," Kevin answered, and Matt seemed dissatisfied when he nodded.
"Okay… can you come by if he shows up?" he asked, and Nicky promised before Aaron shut the door again.

It took exactly fifteen minutes until the low voice in the back of his head bothered him enough to press pause and throw the controller at Aaron.

"Where are you going?" Nicky asked, and he shrugged.

"Smoking," he answered and rolled his eyes at the proud expression on Nicky's face when Andrew left the room. He hadn't meant to please anyone by not smoking inside. He just needed to go to the roof.

When he opened the heavy door, Andrew rolled his eyes. Of course Neil wasn't up here, why would he be?

He still opened the pack and lit one of his two remaining cigarettes when he stood by the edge. The idiot cost way too much money, considering how many cigarettes he wasted.

Andrew looked over campus and blew out smoke slowly. He was rarely standing this close to the edge anymore, usually sitting or laying close to Neil.

He'd almost forgotten how much he could feel when he looked down. One wrong step and he'd be nothing but a pile of skin and bones in a puddle of blood. Still, he wouldn't take a step back.

He decided to smoke the other cigarette as well, throwing the empty pack down the building. It took quite long to hit the ground and he couldn't take his eyes off the falling lump. This could be him.

Andrew looked over their uni another time before deciding to go back to his room. The junkie's whereabouts weren't his concern, after all.

Neil blinked and looked around. The first thing he saw was his hand on the cold floor directly in front of him. His wrist was still bloody from his fight against the restraints and it was still cuffed to a long chain, but the arm was okay. His hand was okay. There were bruises from the game yesterday, which was normal. Dark shades on his light skin.

But the pain was biting its way into Neil's consciousness and he turned his head a little. It was a mistake. His neck ached and the view of his other arm made him feel sick. Long cuts from the elbow to the bloody wrist and circular burns that still felt hot. Everything was leaking blood and something else and looked absolutely sickening. His breathing went more shallow and the world started turning.

"You're awake," Lola said behind him, and Neil took a deep breath against the pain as he pushed himself up, sitting with his head held high, staring into her eyes.

But the only light came from the tiny windows directly under the ceiling, and Neil's eyes needed a while to adjust to this. Lola sat on a wooden chair while he was on the ground, chained to one of the hooks with an arm, probably not even able to reach her if he wanted to.

"Don't you remember this place, Junior?" she asked, smiling at him with that cheerless expression. He looked away from her for a second, taking the bare walls in. The underground tunnel connecting the basement to the garage, the rusty sink, the wooden set of stairs leading up to a pale brown door, the single light bulb hanging loosely from the ceiling.

And suddenly, he wasn't Neil Josten anymore. Nathaniel Wesninski wanted to take over, wanted to
spear Neil. He'd grown up in this house. He'd watched Lola and his father chop off people's feet or fingers down here. He'd seen murders and suicides in this basement, but Neil Josten hadn't. Neil Josten was a pure part of whoever this person chained to the floor was. He wasn't meant to see these things, he should—

"Junior? Anything to say before I get Nathan? I'm counting to ten, then the nice part will be over," she announced, and he shook his head. Who was he? He needed to get away, needed to—

"One."

One. Dan Wilds, first female captain of any Class I Exy team. Dan, who'd taken one look at him and written the season off. Dan, who'd made sure he didn't flinch at the number anymore, because it wasn't Riko's anymore.

"Two.‖ He thought of Kevin, pressing his eyes close against the image of him passed out on his bed as Neil had taken care of the fracture that night. The night before he'd left. Neil had been sure he'd never see him again, the first person he'd called a brother. He wouldn't ever let him down.

"Three.‖ Her voice was cold, but he didn't hear her. He heard Jean's voice, lowly teaching him French, heard whispers about the country, about his little sister.

The thought of a little girl gave all of them hope. If she had a shot at a nice life, they would hold on.

And he thought of the best goalkeeper any team could wish for. Andrew had something no Raven had, no other player could ever acquire, and he still wasn't sure if he'd figured out what it was exactly.

He stood up on wobbly legs, going over to the sink and letting cold water run over the wounds. He didn't want them infected. And Lola resumed counting slowly, strengthening him with every mocking tone, every new number.

He thought of what Matt had done for him, of the nights staying up, of the hugs and first healthy friendship he's ever had. He thought of Aaron and of how spite could be enough of a reason to hold on. Memories of Allison as a catwalk model and as the athlete with bruises and bloody teeth, sweat trickling down her face and hair in a messy ponytail showing that you didn't have to let go of your past to overcome it. Seth, who'd showed him that you could lose as many times as you wanted to, as long as you kept fighting.

His arms burned and the water dripping down them had an ugly shade of brown.

Nicky, the most positive person he ever had the pleasure of meeting. Nicky, who'd showed that happiness was a choice, sometimes. Renee, who'd let go of the demons instead of cutting herself on the broken pieces of her past.


"What would I tell you, Lola? I learned the word 'pathetic' when I was four years old and Mary watched you go over yourself to serve Nathan well. You really are. Try to kill me, but I've died so many times that rumor has it that doesn't work," he said, and she looked at him expectantly.

"You're proud for someone who begged for his life only a few hours ago, but that's not my concern," she said, getting up and walking up the stairs.

She came back, staying behind as he walked down slowly. Nathan Wesninski.
He looked exactly the way he had when Neil had seen him the last time. Not even nine months ago, and he remembered his father on his knees as Andrew had a blade on his throat.

Neil smiled.

Icy blue eyes settled on him and the fear in Neil was gone. Maybe he accepted his fate, but maybe he was just not afraid of this man anymore.

"Hello, Junior," Nathan greeted him, and Neil's eyes flickered to Lola. The woman smiled as if she knew something Neil had yet to find out.

The stairs creaked as his father walked down, and Neil's heart started beating more quickly as the man approached him.

Maybe he was afraid. Maybe fear screamed in every fibre of his body as he tried not to take a step back. Maybe he only clenched his jaw because he didn't trust his lips not to shiver.

He steadied his stance, straightened his posture, and looked up at his father, preparing.

Neil still lost his balance when Nathan pressed him to the wall by the throat, pinning him against it and watching Neil choke until he was satisfied. He crumbled to the ground, gasping for air and holding his throat where Nathan had gripped him. Then he got up again quickly. Nathan didn't allow something as disrespectful as not standing in his presence.

"I said hello," he repeated, and Neil took a breath before nodding.

"Hello," he answered this time, and the man shook his head.

"You're more of a disappointment than your mother was," he said, making Neil press his lips together. "You really should have stayed with her if you wanted to avoid death, Nathaniel. Though, let me tell you a secret now that you're about to die: by the end of the year, she'll join you in the grave."

Neil stared at the man and wanted to do something. He knew better than to punch him, which didn't mean he didn't want to do it anyways. But he thought of his mother in England, how she considered herself safe, how she thought her empire protected her.

And he thought of this pathetic excuse of a man telling him he was a disappointment.

"Neil," he said lowly, and Nathan crossed his arms.

"Excuse me?" he asked in a mocking tone, and Neil pushed his shoulders back as he looked into the man's eyes.

"Neil Josten. You killed Nathaniel when you sold him to the Moriyamas," he said, and Lola started laughing behind Nathan.

"Can I tell him?" she asked, and Nathan arched an eyebrow.

"You can chain his hands together. And his face needs some work, you should take care of that as well," Nathan said, as he left them.

"What's wrong with my face?" Neil asked, and Lola bound his hands together with some cuffs, making him flinch as she tightened them around the deep wounds on his wrists.

"You look too good. Actually, Junior, one or two more years and you'd have grown into a very
attractive man," she said, taking out the lighter from her back pocket. "This should have been treated when the young Moriyama slammed a knife in," Lola resumed, turning on the lighter. He took a step back, but she came closer. He stared at the flame and shook his head. The chain ended and he stumbled to the ground, making her laugh.

"Who is pathetic now, Junior?" she asked, kicking against him, and Neil laid on the ground, still shaking his head when she kneeled down on his shoulders, lighter in front of his face.

"See it as a form of flat ironing," she said, and the lighter went off. She pressed the hot metal into his cheek, where Riko had cut the number off. Neil cried out, trying to move away, but she pinned him down and flickered the lighter whenever he got a chance to breathe.

"Hey, I have a fantastic idea," she exclaimed excitedly, and Neil wondered how his father could talk to her on a daily basis. He felt his sanity trickling down the drain whenever she said a word.

But her smile was cold and Neil was sure he was about to die.

"Remember when you sneaked in on one of the sessions I had with a client? When I wanted him to die of thirst but decided it was taking too long?" she asked and Neil pressed his eyes close.

"I remember," he pressed out, and she started laughing. He swallowing against the memories. Seven. He'd been seven.

"What do you remember?" she asked into his ear, letting her tongue glide over it as he shuddered with disgust.

"You came back with a bottle of clear fluid. He took a sip and… I didn't understand. He started spasming and vomited and begged and there was blood running down his chin and from his nose," Neil said, not wanting to continue. He hated the memories, hated that he heard her laugh all the time through them. She had enjoyed the suffering.

"It was a severely caustic acid and he was so devastated that he drank of it. It burned the inner lining of his stomach and oesophagus. He choked on the blood. And I wouldn't want to kill you just yet, but imagine how helpless you'd be if I were to drop even the tiniest dose into your eyes…" she whispered, and Neil wanted to spit into her face. However, he knew he wasn't in the position to do so.

He lost it when she took out something that looked too close to a chemical pipette. He felt panic rise, his heartbeat quickened and he couldn't think of anything but the liquid so dangerously close to his eyes. He'd never get away if he was blind.

"Lola, please, you don't have to— Lola please! Please let go, Lola, I'm begging you, don't," he was sobbing as she raised the pipette, tears running down the side of his face as he pressed his eyes together. He had no dignity left, nothing of himself, he just wanted it to stop.

"Lola, I want him conscious for a while," Nathan's voice barked and Neil's eyes were still leaking tears when Lola stood up.

"What a shame," she mumbled, backing off a little, and Neil swallowed. He was dead anyways. Why didn't they just do it?

"You should know better than not to stand up when I enter the room," Nathan said, and Neil took a shallow breath, trying to get rid of all the clouds in his mind. Maybe there was a way… his mother had gotten away, so maybe he could too. Maybe, if he kept fighting, Neil could do what Nathaniel couldn't and survive.
He got up slowly, standing up straight and looking at his father, who took slow steps down the stairs. There was another, smaller figure behind him, and Neil frowned. It wasn't one of his father's men, at least not one Neil remembered. He was too small to be one.

Nathan reached the bottom of the stairs and took a step to the side.

Neil knew he was dead.

Riko Moriyama stood next to his father, barely reaching his shoulder but looking absolutely intimidating with the toothy smile on his face. What a maniac.

"Can you imagine my surprise when his offer reached me? Tesuji has no chance of getting to you, but him? He's practically free and very eager to help," Nathan said, and Neil shook his head. This couldn't be happening. It really couldn't!

"Hello, Nathaniel," Riko greeted him, and Neil felt as if he was choking. He was dead all along, but now? Now he was doomed.

"He greeted you," his father reminded him and Neil could physically not look up. He bent his head and stared at his feet. 'My head is bloody but unbowed' was a line that had helped him through his winter at the Nest, but confronted with his father, Neil could not hold on anymore. He lost his grip on Neil Josten already...

"Hello, Riko," Neil choked out.

Lola started laughing somewhere in the back of the room, and his vision was blurry when they approached him. Riko stood so close, Neil could smell the sweat on him.

"If Ichirou finds out about this," he started lowly, unsure where he was going with it. He just really needed to talk in order to stay sane.

"Then what, Nathaniel? By then I'll have smashed your knee caps. I'll have broken both of your feet for good, I'll have broken in your skull open with an Exy racquet. Your corpse will reek of all the pathetic decisions you made by the time he finds out, and I know he would never actually care about you," Riko whispered into his ear, breath hot and humid while Neil stared past him with teeth pressed together. He hit rock bottom all over again, but this time his grave had been dug and he was laying in it. And these two people stood over him with shovels in their hands, making sure he'd choke on the mud before it would even begin to cover him.

"You don't have to kill me," Neil whispered lowly, and Riko had his hands around his wrists, digging into the deep wounds the cuffs had left.

"You chose to leave the Ravens twice, Nathaniel, there is nothing I could even imagine feeling better than watching the look on your ugly face as you realise that it is finally over," Riko whispered, fingers digging into the wound. Neil took a step back, then another, and then the rope ended and Neil was sure he would pass out from the pain, but Nathan came closer this time, making Riko retreat a few steps.

"I do not understand why you're doing this. You sold me, I am not your problem anymore. Why would you-" The rest of the sentence ended in a choked out moan as Nathan slapped across his cheek.

"You ran. You made it my problem, and don't understand how you could even think that hiding in the spotlight would do you any good," he mocked him again, making Neil look down. He was no fighter. He had long since given up.
"I wasn't hiding. I am done hiding, I don't live at your mercy anymore," Neil said with his eyes locked to the tips of his shoes.

"This is more oblivious than I gave you credit for, Nathaniel," his father said, tone too low. Neil shook his head.

"I'm Neil. Neil Josten, I'm number ten at Palmetto, I-" His breath went unsteady and he was losing grip of reality faster than ever.

Riko started laughing, Lola let out a sigh and Nathan smiled at him coldly.

When Neil finally passed out, his arm had filled the room with the burnt smell that only came from human tissue and his throat was hoarse from the pathetically weak yells as he was begging for his life. They hadn't touched his legs yet, but as he laid on the floor in the middle of the room, Neil couldn't find it in him to be relieved. They had burnt down everything he'd built over the past year and the smell of the ruins clouded everything else. He could not move, couldn't even breathe properly, his lungs were burning and he just wanted to die.

But he didn't even have the power to do that.

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Maybe he was concerned about the junkie's whereabouts, after all.

It was six pm when Matt knocked again, and Nicky pressed his teeth together. The Upperclassmen were concerned about Neil and Kevin asked if someone had gotten a text every few minutes.

"Andrew?" Nicky asked, but he only grabbed his keys and pushed past the giants at the door. "Where are you going?" his cousin asked, but he shook his head.

Andrew climbed into the Maserati and called Wymack on his way to the stadium.

"Andrew?" the man asked, and he went twenty miles per hour over the speed limit, just because he could.

"Have you heard from Neil today?" he asked, and heard a sigh on the other side of the line.

"I'll ask Betsy and Abby. How long has he been missing?"

Andrew could hear the concern and went faster, faster, faster, trying to feel something against the numbness.

"Last night," he answered and Wymack sighed again.

"Has anyone checked the stadium so far?" he asked, and Andrew rolled his eyes.

"I'm on my way," he said before hanging up. In a matter of minutes, he parked in front of the orange arena and unlocked the doors with the code all of them had.

It hadn't been properly cleaned after the game last night, plastic cups and food all over the ranks, but that didn't matter. It was dead silent, the locker rooms were deserted and the court was empty. Nobody was here, all of the places Neil usually lurked around when he wanted to be alone were absolutely blank.

Andrew kicked the door on his way outside, punched the plexiglas wall for good measure, and made the thirty minute drive back home in twelve minutes.
He also checked the roof again for some idiotic reason before going back to his room. Andrew almost froze, but wouldn't give them that kind of satisfaction.

All of them. The girls and Neil's roommates were in this room, Allison's face was red from yelling and Kevin looked pale.

"Thank God you're back. Where were you?" Nicky asked, and Andrew only glared.

"Stadium. What's going on here?" he asked coldly, looking around. Renee looked at him with a frown, considering his face for some long moments before tilting her head.

He hated that she didn't try looking past the walls he'd built. She just did. He shouldn't have let her in.

"None of them is ready to call Edgar Allan to see if he might be there," Allison complained, and Kevin shook his head.

"They wouldn't kidnap him twice," he argued, arms crossed as he turned his face away.

"Can we stop just assuming that he was kidnapped? I mean, maybe he just went somewhere, he might—" Matt started, but they all glared at him.

"I called every hospital in a thirty mile radius, Matt, where else would he be?" Dan asked, seeming distressed and frustrated.

"What if Matt is right?" Aaron asked after a minute of silence. "Just saying, maybe he's sick of us. It wouldn't surprise me, I mean, we are probably going to face the Ravens soon. Maybe he doesn't want this anymore now that it's getting serious."

"Have you exchanged even a sentence with the kid?" Seth asked, obviously annoyed. "He wants nothing more than to be with us. And even if he wanted to leave, he wouldn't do it with the season still going."

Andrew glared at him annoyedly. Seth was right.

Something in him wanted to keep the thoughts from running. Get in the car and look everywhere. Call him for the seventh time today. Burn down the world until there were only ashes and coals left.

It made him hate Neil incredibly much. He thought of the red curls and the blue eyes and fiddled with the keys in his pocket, trying to ignore the… pain? Fear? Anger?

He hated that there were too many feelings, that they were intense enough to mess with his mind, hated that he couldn't do anything about it.

He needed a cigarette.

Andrew ignored the Foxes, going into his room in order to get the last remaining pack he had. Neil had wanted to get new ones, last night.

He still went back to the living room and smoked by the window. The itch in his fingers grew less prominent but the idiotic feelings remained.

"We could go looking for him," Nicky suggested, and Dan shook her head.

"Where? If he was anywhere we could get to him, he'd be getting to us," she argued, and Andrew knew she was right. Something was wrong and he didn't like it.
"Why don't we call his mother? She was the one to tell us about him being at the Nest," Renee chimed in, and their eyes were on him again. Andrew thought about it for a second before shrugging. Why hadn't he done that as soon as Wymack had told him neither Abby nor Bee knew anything about Neil's whereabouts?

He pulled out his phone when Kevin said "I guess it's worth a try," and dialled, putting her on speaker.

It was idiotic. They hadn't seen him for sixteen hours and were already panicky. It made Andrew even angrier.

He put his phone on the table and the Foxes stared at it as if they hoped something would come from it. Andrew didn't understand how they could be so naive.

"You better have a good excuse to call me," Mary Hatford said into the phone, obviously displeased by the call. It must be after midnight in England, but Andrew didn't care.

The Foxes looked around uncertainly before Kevin started talking.

"Hello, it's Kevin Day, I— we're worried because Neil went missing and we can't reach him. You wouldn't happen to know anything about his whereabouts?" he asked and Andrew rolled his eyes. What was he hoping to get as an answer for being this polite? Chocolate?

"Isn't this Minyard's number? He said he'd have his back, what happened to that?" she asked, and Andrew held Matt's gaze when the boy looked at him. He wasn't sure if Matt was surprised at the revelation or mad that Andrew hadn't kept the promise, but he didn't care.

"Neil is missing. Your son. Do you have any clue where he might be? He's not answering his phone," Kevin repeated, and there was a sigh at the other end of the line.

"I'll find out, you'll hear from me. Tell the psycho he won't get away with losing my kid twice in three months," she said in lieu of goodbye and hung up.

"What a bitch," Allison said, rolling her eyes. "I bet this is why Neil hated women when he first got here."

In the absolutely unique way in which humour worked during times of pressure, this loosened the tension.

The Upperclassmen decided they'd stay over for some reason, and at some point they decided to order pizza. Andrew hated how all of them were okay with this, with the waiting, when he felt as if his phone was buzzing all the time. He didn't want to wait for answers any longer.

He wanted to go out and save the idiot from the trouble he'd gotten himself into.

Neil's lungs filled with water and he yelled. He was drowning and there was water everywhere, filling his airways to the brim. He was dead, but he couldn't stop thrashing around uncontrollably, trying to get to the surface somehow.

And then he was coughing up water, gagging, spitting, trying to regain his breath while still crying like a child. He tried getting away from the wet cloth of water and Riko, who kept the water running over it until he was so close to death he almost accepted his fate.
"Why are you doing this to me?" Neil asked lowly, trying not to give in to the Panic as he turned his head to the side. Maybe Riko would stop now…

"You destroyed my reputation, you messed with the Ravens a few times too many, you sided with the wrong members of the Perfect Court," Riko whispered, and then his hand was ripping at Neil's head until he was facing him and Neil saw the dirty cloth again.

"But let me tell you about the best part, Nathaniel. It's you today, but as soon as you're finally dead, I'll get Jean back and will break him as much as I'll break you," he whispered, and Neil had to take his eyes off the cloth. This wasn't okay.

"Just let go of us, Riko, this is over," he pressed out, voice hoarse as he tried fighting. Not Jean, he couldn't let Riko do this to Jean.

"Someone should take a video so I have something to watch when I'm in a bad mood," Riko mumbled as Neil kicked, fought against the restraints. If he could only get an inch further, if he could turn away, he might not…

But the cloth was on his face again and Riko ran water over it until it wasn't a game anymore.

Neil knew Riko wasn't killing him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew. Knew that Nathan wouldn't allow it, knew that he'd want to see his face when he did it.

But water was everywhere and he pulled at the cuffs. He held his breath as long as he could, but at some point that came earlier than he would ever admit, he couldn't hold it anymore. Water in his lungs, in his stomach, in his nose and mouth.

He was drowning. Riko would kill him accidentally and laugh while doing so. Neil ripped at the cuffs, kicked, yelled while he still could, and was sure this was the end.

It wasn't.

And Riko stayed with him for the rest of the night, going on and on and on. And when he left, the room was dark and cold and Neil's entire body shuddered with exhaustion and the freezing temperature.

He wished he was dead. He prayed for someone to kill him so it would be over.

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Allison was chewing on her fingernails and Matt constantly went to the kitchen or bathroom, unable to stay still. Nicky pressed his lips together and Kevin got a bottle of vodka for himself and one for the rest of the team to pass around.

Seth had his arms crossed tightly and all of them looked stressed and concerned.

None of it could begin to describe how Andrew felt. When they'd found out that Neil had left for the Nest, he felt like the biggest fool in the world. How could he have missed Neil's absolutely childish concern goodbye?

But this time? Andrew played the last night in his head over and over again, unable to stop the repetitive cycle. Neil had been absolutely normal. He hadn't been especially clingy or distant, hadn't said anything surprising or weird, but it was still not enough. He must have missed something.

Still, no matter how hard he thought, it remained the same. Same hands, same words, same kisses,
same looks. Nothing was off, nothing was alarming.

His phone rang around an hour after they had called Mary, and all of them flinched. Even Aaron leaned closer to the phone as Andrew put it on speaker again.

"Hello," he said, and the woman at the other end of the line shushed him. What a bitch.

But his pulse betrayed him and Andrew took a deep breath against the emotions welling up. He knew he could shove them all the way back down, but it got harder when he didn't force them away for a while. He'd gotten lazy with this over the past weeks.

"You are never laying your eyes on my son again. The only reason I'm calling is to let you know that he's none of your business anymore. As soon as I get him out of there, he's moving to England, so consider this a goodbye," Mary said, sounding absolutely frustrated and angry. The Foxes seemed concerned but none of them could begin to understand what this did to Andrew. He'd promised to protect the idiot and now something had gone wrong again. This was not his fault but his responsibility, and some part of him felt cold.

"What are you talking about? Where is Neil?" Matt asked, and Andrew swallowed against the lump in his throat. Why did this move him so much?

"He's with his father. Neil is in Baltimore, and I'm flying over to take care of the catastrophe you created," she said, and Andrew turned away when she hung up. That woman pretended she could help them with anything at all when she hadn't supported her son over the past decade. It made him so mad that he fiddled with the knives in his armbands, wanting to get the anger out somehow.

"Do you know where his father lives?" Andrew asked, making Kevin flinch in his seat.

"I don't--"

"Can we just talk about this for a second?" Allison asked, seeming annoyed by their reactions. "We know that Neil's father works for the Moriyamas. Do we really know that he's in danger? I mean, maybe his mother is overreacting," Allison asked, and Kevin laughed in the most insane way there probably was. Laughed in the way every smile had felt when he'd been on his meds.

"His father is the Butcher of Baltimore for a reason, Allison. He's dead if he's with him," Kevin said, sounding hopeless, and Andrew wanted to kill someone.

"Why would he be with his father? No offence but didn't they sell him?" Seth asked, and Andrew shook his head. How could they be discussing these things?

Kevin, do you know where he lives?" he repeated, and Kevin let out a frustrated sigh.

"I'm… we didn't talk about these things, Andrew, but how many Wesinskis do you think there are?" he asked, and Andrew shook his head. Absolutely not helpful.

Andrew got the keys and started going, when Aaron of all people stood in his way.

"Leave," he said, but his brother raised his eyebrows.

"Andrew, where are you going? You won't go there on your own, this isn't some messed up college kid with an inferiority complex like Riko, this is a real, full blown murderer," he said, but Andrew tried pushing past his twin.

"Let me go," he demanded, pushing Aaron to the side as he opened the door.
Aaron pulled him back by the shoulder, and Andrew barely had enough self control not to break his wrist when he grabbed it.

"Andrew, you can't do this," he whispered, and Andrew was sure he would kill him.

"Don't you ever touch me again, Aaron. And why do you care?" he bit out, resisting the urge to hurt Aaron, to claw at his wrist, to make him regret touching him just like that.

"Because you're my brother," Aaron hissed at him, breath going heavy.

"That's not a good argument," Andrew said with his bored expression, attempting to shove past him again. He didn't want to let him know that this got to him.

"It is! You don't know what it means, but whatever these bastards at foster care taught you was not what being a family is about, Andrew. And you'll never realise that if you don't let us show you! Go ahead and ruin yourself, go ahead and burn the world down, blame it on everyone else, but don't forget that we gave you a chance! Nicky and I are right here, ready to take care of whatever mess you make, and you—"

Aaron turned away, taking a deep breath. Brother... that was what they were, after all. It sounded twisted and wrong, but it was true.

Families weren't pretty, they weren't what kids' books made them seem. Families were rough around the edges, so sharp you were always in danger of hurting yourself.

Aaron had been just like Andrew, and those drugs had been more important than everything else. Than food, money, friends. Than his body, than his morals, than what he was willing to do to get another dose.

It was this ugly and broken family that had pulled Aaron out of the grave he'd dug for himself, but Andrew had a promise to keep.

"Leave me alone," he said, hand on the door handle as a knock sounded.

The Foxes looked at each other, all of them obviously uncomfortable with the situation, but Aaron opened the door and they saw Wymack with Abby and Bee there. Something inside Andrew felt wrong when he saw them, when the emotions inside were still too much. He didn't want them to see him like this.

"Any news about Josten?" Coach asked, and Andrew pressed his teeth together.

Neil woke up with a jolt as something hit his ribs and choked out a groan.

"Rise and shine, Junior," Lola's voice said above him, and his teeth clattered with fear and cold. His clothes were still wet from last night's session with Riko, and the basement was freezing. He could barely move.

"Lost your fight already? What if I told you that we got hold of your tiny goalkeeper friend and that you'll have some company from now on?" she asked, tone almost maniacal.

Neil felt the temperature drop further and pushed up, ignoring the pain in his arms. He felt pure terror.
"Let him go, he doesn't have anything to do with this!" he almost yelled, ready to fight her even with his hands cuffed.

But Lola's face twisted into a disgusting smile as she looked at him. Then she started laughing.

"Oh Junior, the look on your face! Have you lost all of your humour? The orange minion is still happy and glad that he has one less problem to deal with. We didn't take him yet," she said, rolling her eyes and ruffling his hair mockingly.

When she walked back up the stairs, she started laughing again. "Or did we?"

And then he was alone.

Neil hugged his legs to his chest and hid his face as hot tears trickled out of his eyes. He didn't know why he was crying, when he knew he was dead. Why would he bother?

But he thought of them doing this to Jean, to Andrew, and his shoulders shook as he sniffed. He needed to protect them, he couldn't let this happen to anyone else!

But Andrew wasn't stupid enough to come looking for him, right? The Foxes had probably not even realised that he was missing yet. Neil himself had lost track of the time, but he figured it had been no more than about two days. Maybe more. He wasn't sure.

Then again, he wasn't sure of anything but the agonising pain.

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Neil woke up because of the knife in his arm, screaming and moving away. The chain on his cuffs that tied him to a central spot of the room prevented him from moving away too much, but he ripped at it to get away anyways.

He'd long since given up on the attempt to keep his wounds clean.

Nathan stood over him and Neil pressed his lips together. He had to get up, he'd regret not standing when his father was in the room. That was where most of the cigarette burns on his shoulders came from.

He took a deep breath, pushing himself up with the less injured arm while the other one was bleeding, warm fluid running down his arm slowly, soaking the sleeve of his pullover.

His knees were wobbly, but he stood, eventually. His father looked into his eyes and seemed more deadly than usually. Maybe it was something about the satisfied smile as he took in Neil's condition.

"I haven't meant to keep you alive for this long, but this is starting to be amusing, Junior," he started, and Neil swallowed. He couldn't hear that name anymore. It was more of a mock than anything else and he felt as if the Fox in him died a little more every time someone called him this.

"Neil," he said, voice hoarse as he creaked out the word. At the Nest, "Abram" had been the truth he clung to. The little piece of himself he'd chosen to keep.

Here, Neil Josten was the only part of himself he tried desperately to preserve. He couldn't lose it!

His father slashed him with the knife again before he saw it coming, making Neil flinch to the side as he held his cheek, feeling sickness and nausea spread through his entire body.

"We named you Nathaniel for a reason, stop this," he demanded, and Neil straightened his shoulders,
"And I chose Neil Josten for a reason," he answered, careful not to sound too bratty or stubborn. He just wanted to say it, to make this man understand what this was about.

Nathan's hand was in Neil's hair in a matter of seconds, and Neil backed off as much as the chain let him. But he could barely move his hands, so he was on the floor soon, Nathan holding his head in place and the knife in his other hand, repeating himself again.

"You're Nathaniel Wesninski, even if you don't deserve the name. You will die as a useless excuse of a son, but that's not my problem."

He closed his eyes, counted to ten, and took a shallow breath.

"I'm Neil Josten and you can't change that," he argued, voice so neutral that it would have been close to apathetic if it weren't for the hoarse tone.

Nathan slashed across his cheek again, and Neil yelled.

He went on until Neil didn't answer anymore. Until he pressed his lips together as tears kept running from his eyes.

Nathan pressed deeper and pulled away more slowly with each time Neil denied his name, and after an hour of agony, he whispered a yes, and no more than five minutes later, he said what his father wanted to hear.

He lost himself.

Neil Josten was dead and he didn't even have enough brain capacity left to mourn the boy he had always wanted to be.

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He stood over the sink later that day, washing his hands, wrists and arms carefully. Maybe he was worried about a possible infection, but he probably only needed to feel a little cleaner. His clothes were drenched with sweat and blood and there was dust and mud all over them. In addition to that, they reeked from the constant dampness in the room and the multiple cold showers Riko gave him.

There was no mirror over the sink and he was glad for it. He didn't want to look into the mirror.

Carefully, the boy tried cleaning his face, but as soon as it made contact with his skin, he froze, letting the water trickle down the drain. He couldn't. Not with the memories of Riko's torture.

His hands shivered when he sat down in the farther corner of the room, still cuffed and chained, waiting for his eventual death.

Who was he, at this point? He didn't dare to think of himself as Neil, sure his father would somehow realise he'd need to repeat the lesson. Nathaniel was too disgusting to even consider. Abram? Abram was as dead and rotten as the rest of them. If his mother found out about this, she'd probably be glad that he wasn't her problem anymore.

Maybe he was no one. Probably.

For a split second he thought of a movie night with the Foxes, the one about a kid named Charlie, whose friend was called "Nothing" by most people around him for some reason. He didn't remember
why, but he'd liked the movie. Allison, Matt and Nicky had tears in their eyes and Aaron had smiled at the ending. They had grown together that night.

Then he remembered where he was and let out a scoff. He was as good as dead and thinking of this absolutely idiotic moment as if it had meant anything at all.

He was gone and they wouldn't ever see him again. Better let go of it before Riko got any thoughts again.

"Hey Nathaniel," Lola greeted him, and he looked up, swallowing hard. How long had he been here? It hadn't even been a week, maybe half of one, but it felt like ages.

"How much longer is it going to take?" he asked, making her laugh as she closed the door behind her and came down to him.

"Maybe a few more days, depending on when you'll lose your fight for good. Don't worry, we'll manage to break you," she said, standing next to where he was sitting.

He stared at the small door that was only used for transporting corpses from the basement to the garage so he wouldn't have to look at her. He couldn't see that grin anymore.

His heart picked up pace but he forced himself to be still. Maybe she had something on her he could pick the locks of his cuffs with. Maybe he could make her open the door, maybe…

"Don't you have anything to say? Hey, it's more fun if you talk back," she complained, but he remained still. Lola would do what he needed from her, she had to.

And she did.

She started laughing and kicked him, but he remained frozen. Then she leaned in, hand in his hair and ripping his head back.

"We could also have a little fun, Nathaniel. I mean, now that you're almost dead—"

For a single second, she screamed. He jumped to his feet, adrenaline rushing through his veins as he used the chain to wrap it around her throat, pulling at the end as well as he could with his hands still cuffed.

She choked out a pitiful sound as her hands tried getting a small gap into the chain, but she failed. It was too tight. He pulled some more, and her face turned red already. It was too easy.

"Keys. For the cuffs," he demanded, but her face turned into a disgusting smile. She was absolutely insane!

"You wish."

It was barely audible, but the sounds were there, and he pressed his teeth together, pulling the rope more tightly. She had to give in! Otherwise she'd skin him alive or… he didn't want to imagine worse scenarios.

Lola gasped and tried breathing, but he wouldn't let go. If he only tugged more tightly, she'd be dead. He could kill her, he wanted to, but—

The door opened and Nathan looked surprised for exactly a second before he took out his pistol,
aiming at his son's head.

"I'm counting to three," Nathan announced, looking absolutely serious.

The boy stared at Lola, then at the gun, and before a single number left his father's lips, he heard the shot. The bullet connected with his arm and he crumbled to the ground, the chain fell with him and Lola choked out another miserable sound before she hit the ground, but the chain was loose enough with the boy on the ground, so she got away. She wore a red necklace of bruises as she kicked him in the face, and he heard a crack.

He knew he should feel pain in his shoulder or the newly broken nose. In the bruises and cuts and burns and leaking wounds. But when his father slowly walked down the stairs, pulling a cleaver from one of the tables that were out of the boy's reach due to his chain, he didn't feel anything.

"I'll cut off your legs and watch you crawl away like the disgusting creature you are, Nathaniel," Nathan announced.

He tugged at the chain, wrists screaming as he tried. He just… he needed to do something!

He got to his feet, backing off as much as he could. Nathan came towards him and he went into the other direction as much as the stupid chain let him, but he had less than a one meter radius and Nathan walked freely. And in contrast to his own, Nathan's legs weren't wobbly from blood loss and the adrenaline rush.

The boy was on the ground in seconds as Nathan kicked his knees away, and then he was over him with his cleaver, and he knew he was dead.

Whatever lies he'd told himself, whatever truths he'd pretended to be, it was over now. He just hoped he'd die from blood loss before his father decided to kill him.

But he didn't hear a laugh. He heard a scream outside and some other sounds, and Nathan barely looked up as the door was ripped open and a bunch of men stormed the cellar. He heard a shot and the sound of the cleaver clattering to the ground. He felt his father's heavy weight on him as the grown man dropped, head right next to his son's, the one who was supposed to die at his hand. Neil couldn't look away from the hole in his head, couldn't help memorising every disgusting detail of blood, skin, bone and organ matter.

His ears rang loudly and he couldn't hear anything else. Couldn't feel anything but the weight and temperature of his father's corpse. Couldn't breathe.

Nathan's blood leaking onto the ground was the last thing he saw before everything went black, blood soaking the fabric of his pullover by the shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings:
Graphic Descriptions of Violence including
Knives
Lighters
A cleaver
Torture (Silent torture such as threatening close people, Waterboarding, mentions of
possible abuse)

I don't know what to say
I hope… you liked the chapter…? I mean…

I'm not gonna lie: I didn't enjoy writing this too much at parts, and I promise fluff by the end of the week!

Thanks to Elfo for sticking with me!
Free for general awesomeness! And because I love you!
And Darcy because i just really really love you!
And my new favourite member of my whatsapp group Lena! I adopted you and will never let you go!
Thanks to Saya for reading this hellride! Multiple times! And for being there for me! I live for you! I love you!
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Recovering from Baltimore Games

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He looked into his uncle's eyes and knew he was safe.

The boy closed his eyes and wanted to be gone.

He wasn't lucky enough to finally faint as the adrenaline rush faded off and the pain slammed him down.

Someone loosened the cuffs, unchained him, and then he was being dragged up the stairs and out, totally lost within himself.

For a second, he thought there was an angel over him when he blinked against the faint hue of streetlights and saw the huge, blonde curls. He was dead, he knew it all along.

But she slapped his less injured cheek a few times, probably trying to be careful as she whispered "Stay with me, Abram, we're getting you to a hospital."

He pressed his eyes close and nodded.

"Neil," he whispered as they pushed him into the back of the car, head on his mother's lap as they arranged his legs carefully. Nathan hadn't touched his legs yet.

"What did you say?" Mary asked, and he hid his face in her shirt as tears burned in the wounds on his cheeks.

"My name is Neil."
They moved too quickly. Neil was going in and out of consciousness too quickly to have a talk, but he was glad they were here. His mother, his uncle and some of the Hatfords that had probably followed.

"Why don't we just put him on the plane already? We have doctors with us, it will save time," Mary said, making her brother sigh.

"He needs a hospital, Mary, he needs a whole bunch of experts," Stuart answered and Neil felt nausea from the movement and the content of her words washed over him when she shook her head.

"I want him on British ground as soon as possible," she argued, making him cough as he tried talking.

"I want to go back to Palmetto," he pressed out, voice hurting his sore throat.

His mother looked down at him with a frown before speaking. "You're not safe here, Abram, I'll make sure you're okay," she whispered, running a hand through his hair. It was almost enough to get him back to sleep, but Neil needed to stay awake through this. It was one of the few things that actually mattered.

"I want to see them," he said, unable to move much. Pain clouded every other sense he had and each and every single one of his muscle fibers was sore.

"They cannot protect you, Abram, we're taking you home and will make sure that you're okay," she mumbled, caressing his hair again. He wanted to fall asleep so badly, but couldn't. He really, really couldn't!

He pushed her hand away carefully, trying not to harm his arm too much. He still felt wounds ripping open again, but couldn't keep her hand in his hair. It was too distracting.

"I will jump out of this car if you don't bring me home," he said, trying not to make his voice sound too moved. It hurt so much...
"Abram, have you seen -"

"My name is Neil Josten and I want to go home," he repeated, hearing Stuart chuckle in the front seat.

"I told you it was not going to be as easy," he said, making Mary sigh frustratingly.

"Okay, Neil, why don't we talk about this once you're stable and safe on British ground? It'll be okay once you have a clear mind, don't worry," she said, trying to get him to calm down by brushing through his hair again.

Neil felt sick and shook his head. He couldn't quite get a proper grip on the situation, but it stressed him out so much. Everything hurt and he just wanted it to end.

"I need to see them, Mum, please let me see them," he almost begged. He felt the British accent on his lips, knew that it meant the world to her, knew that he was manipulating her, but he was fighting to stay conscious and she made him so afraid.

"Oh, Abram," she mumbled, running her fingers through his hair again softly, sighing. "They might not want to see you like this," she said, but moved. She pulled he phone out, and somehow that was enough for him to let whatever was pulling him down take him. She said something about where she'd take him, and that someone could come and visit him, and then Neil was gone.

It was still cold, still painful, still uncomfortable, but he felt alright. He was safer than before.

•

Neil felt waves of nausea wash over him again and again, felt like he was drowning in them. Sometimes, he started shivering uncontrollably, his full body shaking like it knew he was dying.

Riko was everywhere. His father was dead, Neil remembered his open skull, remembered the pieces of bone and brain tissue, blood, remembered the weight of his father's corpse. But Riko's smile wouldn't leave him, wouldn't let him feel too safe. He was still out there, and Neil wouldn't be safe. Not without them by his side, not without him by his side.
Whenever he got too close to the surface, the pain made him dive back in. He wasn't sure if he even wanted to get back up.

But the further down he dove, the crueler Riko became, the worse the memories turned. Memories of a time when Neil hadn't even been ten, when Riko had been much taller and much stronger, when he'd had no one to rely on.

Still, after a while, the pain dulled, became less hurtful and more neutral.

Neil remembered the first time Kevin had promised him he'd make Court. He remembered the first night Jean and him had slept in the same room, remembered the scared boy with the same doomed fate as the rest of the team?, remembered how he'd crawled into Jean's bed and had talked to him. He hadn't been good at English and Neil hadn't been good at French, but they had worked it out.

Jean had told him about his little sister that was safe because he had been sold, talked about demons in his head and how he felt worthless. Neil had answered, and they told each other stories. Mothers that abandoned them, fathers that didn't care enough, fathers that didn't want them alive, family that was far away, family that didn't exist.

Neil felt uncomfortable, but started feeling less pain. He could come closer to the surface without feeling like he might crumble beneath the hurt.

It was painful of course, but it wasn't unbearable when he decided to make the final pull. When he finally ripped through the surface and took the first breath of real air again.

•

Neil blinked, eyes hurting when he saw the bright, white ceiling of the room. He could feel nothing but numbness, which meant that he was drugged to the brim with painkillers. Thank Goodness.

He looked to one side, seeing a window and the sky. The sun was setting or rising, he wasn't sure, but the light was too bright. He turned to the other side.

His uncle Stuart sat in the chair, dozing off with his phone on his lap, constantly buzzing. He
frowned at it, for some reason bothered by the sound.

"Can you turn that off?" he asked, making his uncle jerk awake, brushing through his hair while looking at Neil.

"How are you feeling, Neil?" he asked, smiling tiredly as he turned off the phone. Neil tried getting a grip on the situation, but wasn't sure what was happening.

"I feel pretty high," he mumbled, unsure what to do. Was there anything to be done?

"Do you need anything? Mary is currently discussing something with some doctors, but you've been cared for, so don't worry. Water?" His uncle checked Neil's temperature with his hand before helping him sit up a little straighter. Neil looked down at his arms, saw them wrapped from his thumbs to his elbows, and felt a little sick. He felt his face and pressed his lips together. More bandages.

"What happened?" he asked lowly, unsure what exactly the question was. He just needed answers.

"Mary shot Nathan. The others got away, but two of our men got hands on Riko. They're waiting for Tetsuji or someone else to come pick him up. This is against our deal with Ichirou," Stuart explained, helping him to a glass of water. He took a sip and felt sick, pushing it back with shaking hands. Stretching out his arm was almost too much.

"Where are we?" he asked then, remembering distantly what Mary had said. British ground.

"Pretty much halfway between Palmetto and Baltimore," he explained, making Neil sigh in relief. He was home.

"There is a bunch of people waiting for you outside, by the way. They almost chained one of them to the man that's with them because he tried breaking into this room," Stuart added, making Neil tense.

"They're here? Let them in!" he demanded, but Stuart hesitated.

"Neil, you don't look especially presentable, maybe you want to wait for a day or two, get some sleep -" he tried, but Neil shook his head. He felt dizzy and nauseous right away again, but this was
important.

"I need to see them! You don't understand, Stuart, please," he said, and to his surprise, the man got up.

"If it gets too stressful, I want you to throw them out. I'll be in front of the door the whole time," he said, leaving the room. There were exactly three seconds of silence. Then chaos went loose.

Matt got in first, directly followed by Nicky and Dan. Allison and Seth were by their side, while Kevin stayed behind a bit, arms crossed in a way that looked as if he was hugging himself. Aaron stood by Nicky's side, and Wymack, Renee and Andrew got in last. Andrew didn't meet his eyes, staring out of the window as his hands were balled to fists in his pockets.

"Well, shit," was the first thing anyone said. It was Seth, looking paler than usual, and Neil pressed his lips together. Maybe he shouldn't have let them in. Maybe he looked too close to a corpse to meet anyone.

"You look terrible," Allison said, and Neil didn't like how she looked. As if she hadn't slept in a few days. She didn't even have the simplest shade of make up on. This must have gotten to her.

"What happened to you?" Dan asked, and Neil looked at Andrew, who finally looked back. He didn't know what to say.

"This isn't the place for these kinds of conversations," Wymack argued, and Neil nodded a little.

"How are you? When can we take you home?" Matt asked, and Neil almost smiled.

"I'm -"

"I swear to God I'll slap you if you say 'fine'," Seth said, and Neil let out a breath that could have been laugh and sigh alike.

"I think I'll live. I haven't talked to a doctor yet," he explained, voice still scratchy. He'd spent three days screaming, after all.
"We can stay here for another day before I need to drive us all back," Wymack announced, and Neil nodded. He hoped he could go home with them. He wasn't sure if Mary would ever let him go.

"I can't believe you survived the Butcher," Kevin said after a few moments, making Neil play with the hem of his blanket. It had been more than a close call. He'd been dead.

"Look at him, I wouldn't call that 'alive','" Andrew mumbled, making Neil sigh. He wanted to talk to him.

"We're right outside the door if you want to talk to anyone. Just yell for us and we'll be here, but I think we should leave you alone for now," Wymack said, and Neil wanted to argue. He couldn't. He felt sick and dizzy and needed to talk to Andrew. He'd just call them back in as soon as they were done.

Matt looked at him for a long moment before ruffling Neil's hair as gently as he could. And then they were gone.

Andrew stayed in the corner of the room for exactly one second after the door had closed, then he was in Stuart's place right next to Neil's bed, looking at him almost angrily. Neil pressed his lips together.

"I'm sorry," he started, but Andrew shook his head.

"No excuses, idiot, tell me what happened," he said, making Neil press his lips together. Andrew looked as if he hadn't slept in a month.

"I went to get the cigarettes, but Lola and two of my father's men were there and got me. I think they'd have waited for my morning run if I hadn't shown up in the middle of the night," he mumbled, looking out of the window so he wouldn't have to look at Andrew.

"We drove to Baltimore and Lola messed up my arms. They cuffed and chained me when we got there, and then my father came. Riko was there, too," he added, pressing his lips together before his voice could betray him. He was too close to breaking all over again.
"What happened to your face?" Andrew asked, making Neil sigh while shaking his head.

"Lola burnt the part where Riko cut off the number. Nathan-" Neil took a deep breath against the trembling in his voice. "He cut me every time I said my name wasn't Nathaniel. I'd rather not see what he did."

"You're too proud while facing death, it's going to kill you one day," Andrew said, almost making Neil smile.

"Did you just make a joke? Think of what that's gonna do to your reputation," he mumbled, turning to face him again. "But it won't kill me, you'll be there, right?"

Andrew was the one to look away this time. He seemed tired, exhausted, drained.

“Mary said she'd take you home with her. The deal is still on,” Andrew argued, making Neil take a closer look at him. Andrew was never sorry for anything, but right now he seemed almost close to regretting something.

"That sounds like one more reason to stay," he said, making Andrew look back at him.

"You're still high on painkillers. We'll see how you think about this once the pain sets in and we get a look at what's left of that face of yours. Who broke your nose?"

Neil closed his eyes against the memory of himself trying to escape, of being shot down, of Lola kicking his face.

"Lola," he answered, even though it didn't begin to cover everything the question made him want to say. "Thanks for being here, Andrew, I appreciate it a lot," he added, because he needed him to know.

"There was no other choice but to show up," Andrew answered, making Neil press his lips together.

"Can you take me home with you? Andrew, I don't want to go with her," he said, only barely keeping himself from saying 'please'. He'd used the word so frequently over the past few days, but it
hadn't lost the negative connotation. Not when he was with Andrew.

Andrew looked at him for a long moment before nodding with a grim expression. Neil had never been this relieved.

"What's happening out there?" he asked, making Andrew look at the door as if someone was coming in.

"There are many doctors. They wanted to minimize the scarring," he explained, then he looked almost amused. "They keep giving information about your condition to Abby instead of Mary, it was almost funny. And you finally have a bullet wound to add to your collection."

Neil remembered.

"Andrew? Can you stay here until they let me go?" he asked slowly. Yes, he trusted his uncle. But he wouldn't lose this. The Foxes, his family. Not after he’s just gotten them back.

"You think I'd let you stay here and kill yourself again?"

Mary yelled at Andrew to leave. It was what woke him up again. Somehow, sleep came more peacefully with Andrew on the chair next to him.

His ears rang with his mother's loud voice and Neil pressed his eyes together against the brightness.

"Mum, stop," he said lowly, but she shook her head, coming closer to look at him.

"The doctors will come to check on you in a few minutes, we're leaving after that," she announced. He winced at that.

"I told you I'm not going with you," he said, making her sigh and cross her arms behind her back, shoulders straight.
"You're not a legal adult, Abram, you're coming home with me. You're not safe with these people."

Neil would have smiled if his face hadn't been a huge meat salad.

"I don't think the law is on your side concerning this. I could tell them things about you, Mary, I don't want to, but I could. And anyway, Nathan is dead. You shot him. What should you still protect me from? The deal with the Moriyamas is still relevant, they won't do this again."

Mary looked at Andrew for a second before turning back to Neil.

"I'll talk to Ichirou about this. But there could be a war between us over this, Abram, the only reasonable reaction would be doing the same things to Riko," she said, making him shake his head.

"Nobody cares about Riko. Let us play against him, it'll be worse than torture to lose against us," he said, making her arch an eyebrow.

"How can you think about college sport when you look like this? How can hockey be any of your concern?" she asked, making him press his lips together.

"Exy," Andrew corrected, making her frown.

"What?" she asked, and Andrew shook his head.

"He plays Exy. If you'd listened to him for more than two minutes in a row, you'd know that. And his name is Neil," he said, making her scoff.

"None of this is relevant, Abram, we're leaving in an hour latest!"

Neil balled his hands into fists and turned away.

"I think you should leave now," Andrew said, making her shake her head. Neil closed his eyes, not
wanting to talk to her anymore.

Andrew asked her one more time before he stood up. It was enough to get her to leave.

An hour of silence and dozing off and whispering words of gratitude to Andrew went by, before the door opened again. Neil opened his eyes and saw Wymack, Abby, Stuart and three strangers in white coats enter the room.

"Mister Josten, you're awake," the woman said, smiling warmly. "That's a first success."

Abby stood by his side, smiling as she took in his appearance with a frown. She brushed the hair from his face to get a better look at it and seemed satisfied.

"Sorry I couldn't be there earlier, I talked to the doctors outside," she whispered, before the woman started talking again.

She explained everything from what they had used to clean the wounds to what he'd have to do at home.

"We gave all instructions to Miss Winfield, so don't worry, you won't have to do this on your own. We also talked to your mother about how you should still want to contact the authorities about this," she added, eyes flickering to Stuart, who looked at Neil with nothing but worry. Neil knew it was about his condition, not about potential issues with the police. He was glad his uncle and not his mother was here. He was even happier about Abby and Wymack.

"It's alright, everything is settled," he said, making the doctor nod. "When can I leave?"

She checked her notes and shook her head a little.

"We have to make some checks. You're stable and look alright, but I wouldn't want to make promises I can't keep. We'll see."

And they did. They tested reflexes and a bunch of other stuff Neil couldn't even begin to name. It was draining. But a while later, they left.
Abby let out a long sigh, looking at him and pressing her lips together. "Neil, you're a strong kid. You really are," she said, fingers brushing over his hand. "I'm sorry that we're only here to put the pieces back together, I'd love to be able to prevent all of you from breaking, but... I'm glad you're here. Don't worry, we won't let you go," she added, and Neil couldn't look at her. This woman was better than anyone else he'd ever met. She actually cared about them, all of them. She was like Wymack without the hard shell, alcohol and sarcasm.

"Thank you," he whispered back, making her smile.

She and Wymack left the room, leaving him with Andrew and Stuart.

"We are going to leave soon, but you can always call if something is up," he promised, and against all odds, it really meant something to Neil.

"I appreciate it," he said, making his uncle smile.

"I know, and Mary knows it, too. She's a proud woman, you know? She cares about you a lot. She'd come here for you all over again," he said, but Neil only shrugged. He didn't want to think about her.

"I'm not sure if we'll have a chance to say goodbye properly, Neil, but don't you ever doubt that we'll always have your back!" he promised, and this time, Neil smiled.

"Okay," he said, and that was the only goodbye he got before they left.

Neil didn't mind too much.

•

The day was nothing but Foxes and doctors. All of them crowded the room again and the doctors seemed more than a little annoyed.

Still, by six pm, Neil was allowed to go. Abby had talked to specialists and every doctor and nurse
for hours before they allowed it, but eventually, Neil was allowed to go.

He got up and his legs were way too wobbly as he tried walking, but Kevin and Seth were directly by his side. He didn't dare to hold on to anyone, unsure how deep the wounds were and how easily they'd rip open, but he felt secure when they left the hospital as a team.

He couldn't help smiling when he saw the huge orange bus on the parking lot.

"I couldn't exactly tell them why I needed to pull nine students and a nurse from school for a few days," Wymack explained as they got on the bus. "I told the headmaster it was a team building trip because we're close to the quarter final."

Neil's eyes went to Abby right away, but she only raised an eyebrow and shook her head. "Four weeks of no contact sport only because of the nose. You've been shot, Neil, you-"

"Nothing is broken except for the nose!" he argued, making Allison laugh out.

"We'll see how quickly it heals, okay?" Abby asked, making him sigh. They settled down close to the front, for once not splitting into two groups. Wymack started the engine and Neil sat on a bench next to Andrew. He took a deep breath and started talking. Told them of the little boy that had been sold. The boy that had grown up and ran away, causing a damage that weighed a few million dollars. The boy that had ruined his father.

Told them about a father seeking revenge, of a neglected kid that wanted payback for everything Neil had done and said, told them everything from lighters to cleavers, from water to guns, and when he was done, they looked at him differently. Kevin sat on the bench behind him, and he patted Neil's shoulder softly. None of them seemed sure what to do, and Wymack ignored the speed limit as if it wasn't even there, turning his rage directly into speed, just the way Andrew did.

Abby hadn't looked at him a single time as he talked, while the others didn't take their eyes off him.

"At least he's dead now," Matt mumbled, while Renee said "At least you're safe now."

They drove back and Neil swallowed more painkillers than was probably healthy on an empty stomach, but he wanted to live through this without them seeing how much he was suffering. He wasn't sure if he was ready to feel it himself.
The sun was down by the time Wymack dropped them off and Neil woke up with a sigh, blinking confusedly. When had he fallen asleep?

When he realized that his head was on Andrew's shoulder, he sat up straight. "I'm sorry," he whispered as the Foxes started walking out of the bus.

"Shut up," Andrew answered, making him blink confusedly. He wasn't feeling well.

They got in slowly and Neil was sure the elevator worked. Wymack and Abby left them with instructions and promised to be there first thing in the morning. Neil just wanted to go to sleep.

"Okay, does anyone else have an inflatable mattress?" he heard Matt ask, and blinked confusedly as he entered their room. They had already started pushing the sofa, armchairs and table to the side, and Seth and Allison started carrying mattresses from the bedroom to the living room.

"Let's just all take our mattresses here, it'll work out," Nicky said, and him, Kevin and Aaron left as Dan and Renee got blankets and pillows.

A few minutes later, there were a bunch of provisory beds on the floor, and they started getting settled. Andrew moved for Neil to follow him, and they went to the bedroom. He wore sweatpants and a hoodie they had brought him to the hospital, but Andrew seemed to know he was uncomfortable.

It was everything but romantic when Andrew helped him out of the clothes and into shorts and a t-shirt, but he was thankful he didn't have to do it on his own. He'd die if he had to move too much.

"It hurts," he said, not sure why he did it.

Andrew nodded and sighed.

"You'll fuck up your organs for good if you take any more painkillers on an empty stomach," he said, making Neil shake his head.

"I know, I'll eat tomorrow, I promise, but I've never felt this sick," he complained, making Andrew
sigh. He still gave Neil a pill and the bottle of water that stood next to the bed.

"That is probably due to the painkillers, idiot," Andrew mumbled, and Neil was glad to swallow the pill. He'd be able to sleep, at least.

When they got back to the living room, all of them were on mattresses already, wrapped in blankets and facing the TV that played "The Lion King".

There were two mattresses left between Aaron and Matt, so Neil and Andrew took them.

Neil was asleep before Mufasa died, and glad when sleep pulled him in. He woke up about a thousand times that night, but then he stretched out his arms. Less than half an hour later, Andrew's hand was on his. He needed something to hold on to so he'd stay sane. He'd lose himself otherwise.

The Foxes took the next day off school, just because it was Friday and they'd missed the rest of the week anyways. Neil got up and felt dizzy, then he ran to the bathroom, almost collapsing in front of the toilet as he gagged and threw up the tiny bit of acid that was in his stomach. Nathan hadn't let him eat and he hadn't brought anything down yesterday.

Still, the pain and all the pills together with lack of nutrition made him weak and he breathed heavily as he flushed the toilet. Everything hurt.

There was a soft knock on the door before Allison came in, locking the door behind her.

"Hey, need some help?" she asked, helping him stand up. She closed the toilet lid and pushed him down.

"I know that some meds need you to take them on an empty stomach, but most painkillers require food. They mess up your stomach, Neil?" she mumbled, handing him his toothbrush after putting toothpaste onto it. She brushed his hair as he cleaned his teeth, unsure what to answer to that.

"I know the past days have been hell, but don't mess it up. You can't replace them as easily as you
can force down a piece of bread."

Neil nodded and she put down the comb. He didn't understand why she did this, but being cared for felt good. Maybe he'd need their help for a bit.

When he'd cleaned his mouth, Allison hugged him carefully, and Neil closed his eyes. He was glad to have them.

"I worried about you so much, Neil, I'm glad you're back," she whispered, and they left the bathroom.

Kevin, Matt, Seth, Renee and Nicky were still asleep, so they joined Dan and the twins in the kitchen. It was the most uncomfortable morning ever, but Neil liked something about it.

He even had breakfast, eating some bread and having a mug of tea with it while the others slowly got up.

Abby showed up an hour later, taking care of the burns and cuts by putting the salve on them that had been given to her by the doctors. She shook her head when she saw his face, leaving the bandage on his nose but taking off the ones on his cheeks.

"Let's just hope that this doesn't scar too much. They put a lot of effort into it," she mumbled, going on with the bullet wounds and his arms. She kept shaking her head, mumbling words Neil didn't even try to understand.

"Okay, Andrew has the pills you need to take, it says on the boxes whether to take them once, twice or three times a day, please take that seriously, okay?" she asked, making him nod. He didn't need an addiction on top of his miserable condition.

"Sure," he answered, not knowing if he should thank her again. He decided against it. She knew that he appreciated everything she did for him. She knew he trusted her more than he'd ever trust his mother.

The Foxes spent the main part of the day together, ordering food together, watching movies together. In the late afternoon, Andrew provided Neil with another dose of painkillers, frowning at him.
"Nicky asked if we should go to Columbia so you'd have time to cool off," he said, making Neil frown.

"I don't think Abby would allow that," he mumbled, making Andrew shrug.

"I didn't plan on telling her," he explained, making Neil sigh. "She also said you should let the wounds air a little, but I doubt you'd be comfortable with doing this here," he added, and he pressed his lips together. Maybe he was right. He wouldn't want the Upperclassmen to see him without the white patches. He'd actually appreciate it if nobody saw him like that.

"Maybe," he answered, making Andrew nod.

"We're leaving at seven latest," he announced, leaving Neil in the kitchen as he went off, probably to tell Nicky, Kevin and Aaron where they were spending the weekend.

The hours went by and Matt asked a thousand times if Neil really wanted to leave, but Neil didn't want them to see him like this. And anyway, he liked Columbia, he liked the house he had a key to, liked the room he shared with Andrew.

Neil felt good when he was sitting on the passenger seat, and liked looking out the window as Andrew flew over the highway. He closed his eyes and let himself arrive back home. Not Baltimore, not some hospital, and especially not England. He was home as long as he was with these people.

He had honestly not expected Aaron to come, but they arrived and Aaron looked at Neil for quite a long moment. They usually avoided each other at all costs.

Nicky and Andrew went to the kitchen to prepare some food while Aaron indicated for Neil to follow him up the stairs. Kevin was busy taking stuff from the car, so Neil couldn't expect him to follow. For some reason, he felt a little uneasy.

However, he still climbed the stairs after Aaron, following the boy upstairs while feeling slightly uneasy. It wouldn't be bad, Neil knew that. He'd survived Nathan and his men, he'd survive Aaron.

In the end, he and Aaron were in his room, and Aaron closed the door behind him.
"Okay, Neil, let's get this straight," Aaron started, and Neil knew he was fucked.

"Let's get what straight?" he asked, making Aaron roll his eyes.

"I want you to stop that thing you have going on with my brother," Aaron said demandingly, making Neil swallow against a weird taste in his mouth. Of all things Aaron could want to talk to him about, he hadn't expected this.

"What? Why would I... Aaron, what are you talking about?" he asked, making Aaron roll his eyes again.

"You didn't see him when you were gone, but you made him feel bad, Neil, very bad. I don't want this to repeat itself," Aaron said, making Neil frown.

"I didn't mean to inconvenience anyone by getting kidnapped," he said, almost laughing at the level of stupidity. Did Aaron actually blame this on Neil?

"Neil, I want you to listen closely. Neither of us knows what exactly made Andrew the way he is, but he's messed up, and I won't let you take advantage of that. He's my brother, and if you want to go around and hurt people, go ahead, but pick someone else. You're not nearly good enough for him."

Neil stared at Aaron, unsure how to react.

"Aaron, I wouldn't ever push him, I wouldn't-"

"It doesn't matter what you do, Neil, he'll burn down the world for you anyways, just because he thinks you deserve it. He'll go down in flames, and it'll be your fault!"

Neil held his head, sighing softly while attempting to massage his temple. This was messed up on too many levels.

"I don't - Aaron, what am I supposed to say? We don't have anything going on, we're just... I don't even know. Andrew knows it's nothing," he said, breathing against the
headache. He felt dizzy and nauseous. He should take his next dose of pills soon, anyways.

"Just that he doesn't mean anything to you doesn't mean you can play with him. End this as soon as possible, or I will make you," Aaron threatened, making Neil take a step back. This stressed him too much. He didn't want to deal with it. He wanted Aaron to leave him alone.

"I didn't say that," he argued, but couldn't tell the whole truth. Of course this meant something to Neil. It meant a lot to him. Andrew didn't want it to carry any meaning, but he wouldn't tell Aaron about that. Neil was pathetic enough as it was.

"I don't care about what you say or not, I just don't want this to stay a thing for any longer," Aaron said, making Neil shake his head.

"I want to leave," he said, feeling something washing around his heart like cold water. He moved towards the door, but Aaron stretched out his arm, looking more than a little displeased with Neil's attitude.

"I don't care. Tell me yes before you leave. I don't want any more evenings spent on the roof or-"

"Aaron, are you insane?" Neil asked, shaking his head. "Who do you think you are? I know you care about your brother, but you're taking it too far. What exactly is your problem? Because I'm sure we can work it out," Neil said, trying to breathe evenly. Something in him felt uncomfortable with the way Aaron held the door close. He wanted to leave.

"My problem is that you're exploiting him on too many levels for him to understand," Aaron said, blocking the door with his whole body now. Neil's heart picked up the pace.

"Let me out of here, Aaron, I'm serious," he demanded, making Aaron scoff.

"What if I don't? Just say you'll leave him alone, and-"

Neil boxed him into the face with his fist, and regretted it instantly. His hands were fine, but his arms hadn't gotten away all too well, and the jolt almost made him crumble.
Aaron almost laughed as he opened the door and left Neil alone.

Neil needed a few minutes to calm down, breathing against the pain. Then he walked down the stairs slowly. Maybe it was good that Andrew had his pills, because right now, Neil wanted to take all of them.

Nicky and Andrew were still cooking something that looked like omelets when Neil entered the kitchen, making his stomach growl.

"Andrew, where are the painkillers?" Neil asked, making both of them frown at him.

"We have some in the cupboard under-" Nicky started, but Andrew shushed him.

"No. You're taking too many," he said, and Neil let out a frustrated sigh.

"Andrew-"

"After dinner, I'm not discussing this," he said, making him press his teeth together. His arm was burning.

Neil turned around and left them. He sat down next to Kevin on the sofa and wasn't sure what to do. For a moment, he wished Matt was there to just hug him and make him ignore the pain.

"Jean keeps texting me about you, Neil, I think you should talk to him soon," Kevin explained, making Neil nod. He wanted to; he just couldn't seem to find a good moment.

"If everything goes well, we'll play against him in the semifinal," Kevin said with a smile. Neil would love playing on the same court as Jean again. He missed him.

Aaron joined them after a while, ignoring Neil as he talked to Kevin about anything and everything. Neil didn't feel all too comfortable anymore.

A while later, Nicky started carrying in plates of food and distributed glasses that probably contained
alcohol for everyone but Neil. Mixing meds and vodka would probably not be too helpful.

They ate in silence while Kevin turned on an Exy match. Other teams still had death matches, not everyone had qualified already, and they watched the Trojans ruining the Jackals, which was hilarious considering how by halftime, more than fifteen players of one team had red cards and not a single one of the others.

"Jean lost his fight," Kevin mumbled, but Neil shook his head. He'd adapted.

They sat through the game, the press conference and the analysis of the game before Nicky sighed loudly.

"Can we watch something else? Why is this important?" he asked, making Kevin roll his eyes.

"They won, that means if we win the quarter final and if they win the quarter final, we'll be up against the Trojans in the semifinal, which will not be funny for a single one of us," he said, making Nicky shake his head.

"There are worse things than not getting the title," he mumbled, starting to put the dishes away after the hours they'd spent here.

"Neil," Andrew said after a while, and he was glad to be able to walk up the stairs with him. Painkillers!

Andrew gave him the medication he was supposed to take every evening before taking him to the bathroom with him.

"You should take a shower," he said, already pulling out plastic bags from underneath the sink, but Neil only took a step back. Yes. He should.

"I'll shower in the morning, or... some other time," Neil mumbled, making Andrew raise an eyebrow.

"What's wrong?" he asked demandingly, but Neil only shook his head. "I'm taking a turn."
He pressed his teeth together. "I don't... I don't know, Andrew, but... Riko put a cloth on my face and let water run over it until I was sure I was dying, and... I really just don't want to shower," Neil explained. Maybe he'd just use the bathtub instead. Anything to not have water running over his head.

"You forgot to mention that he waterboarded you?" Andrew asked, his tone could cut steel while putting the plastic bags away again. "I'll remove the bandages on your cheeks," he simply said, making Neil nod a little. He didn't want to know why Andrew knew how to take care of these wounds.

It hurt a little when he peeled off the bandages, and Neil bit his lips together through the pain when he cleaned the wounds and put fresh salve onto them.

"I can't believe you held on to Neil Josten for this long," he mumbled, and Neil pressed his lips together.

"I can't believe I let go this easily," he answered, making Andrew shake his head.

"I'll still clean you a little before you start smelling like a corpse," he said then, putting a washcloth in the sink and letting it soak in warm water.

Neil remained still when Andrew helped him out of his shirt, not daring to look around. He didn't want to face a mirror just yet. He became even stiller as Andrew grabbed the washcloth and started cleaning his upper arms and torso with it. He didn't know what to do and was glad that Andrew wasn't being careful but rough. I wouldn't have made it through this otherwise. Andrew started by using water and shower gel, then took another washcloth to wash it all off, and Neil did feel better afterwards.

"Thank you," he said, but Andrew didn't react as he put the towels and cloths into his clothes basket. Then he helped Neil into a fresh tank top, which added to his comfort. He almost appreciated this. Being cared for.

"We should wash your hair," he said instead, making Neil eye the shower suspiciously. He didn't trust himself enough not to panic.

"Tomorrow?" he asked, and Andrew just left the room, though Neil knew he wasn't satisfied with this. He didn't like Neil avoiding every possible trigger, but Neil couldn't help it. Not after a few
days.

"So... what's the plan for the night?" Neil asked, sitting down on the bed while Andrew took the armchair.

"The plan is that you tell me what your problem with Aaron is," Andrew said, making him look out of the window. Was he so obvious in everything he did or was Andrew this good at reading him?

"He doesn't like me. It's not a big deal," he brushed it off, watching the leaves of the tree outside instead of looking at Andrew.

"It's a big deal to you, so tell me," he demanded. Neil tried crossing his arms before he realized he couldn't do that without pain, so he let it be.

"He talked to me about us. He doesn't approve, but it's no real issue," Neil explained, knowing he made Andrew angry. He didn't want to go into detail, for some reason. He just wanted this conversation to be over.

He looked up when he heard Andrew getting up.

"Where are you going?" Neil asked, but Andrew was out of the door in seconds and Neil got up, following him down.

"Deciding to have a say in my life behind my back?"

What had Neil started?

"What's your problem?" the other twin asked, arms crossed defensively over his chest. Nicky was on an armchair, headphones in, probably talking to Erik, but he pulled one of the earphones out as his cousins started arguing.

"Imagine me going after your precious Vixen, how would you like that?" Andrew asked, and Kevin looked as if he'd rather not be sitting next to Aaron right then.
"Don't you dare." Aaron's voice had gotten low and he seemed ready to get up, ready to try turning this verbal fight into a physical one.

"This is a warning, Aaron. The only one you'll get," Andrew said, ready to turn back around. But Aaron wasn't done.

"Why? You never called her by her name, Andrew, she's only 'the Vixen' to you. I care about her, and I don't want you to use that against me all the time," he demanded, sounding too serious about it. Andrew froze, turning back around slowly.

"Look who's talking. What have you been doing since he even got here?" Andrew asked, and Neil frowned. This couldn't… was Andrew talking about him?

"You said that this was nothing, Andrew, and he said it. This is not even close to what Katelyn and I have. We know it's important," Aaron repeated and Neil wished he'd just stop. He was provoking Andrew too much.

"Okay, Aaron, listen really closely. We said the deal was still on with one exception each. If you have a problem with whomever I want to choose as my exception, the deal is off. Don't talk to me again, change rooms, go driving in someone else's car, I don't mind. Consider yourself warned."

And like that, he walked back up the stairs, the remaining four boys looked at each other, unsure what to say. Then Neil realized they were staring at his face.

He'd been in the doorway for the entire argument, more on the outside than in the room, but he'd come in now, and his cuts and burns were on display before he'd even seen them himself.

"Neil," Kevin started, but stopped. All of them knew he wasn't the major issue right now.

"You just had to tell him right away, didn't you, Neil? Don't come between us like this again," Aaron demanded, and Neil shook his head.

"Why would I? You're doing a good job at that yourself, you don't need me for that," he said before turning around and leaving them in the living room.
He knocked on Andrew's door softly, and took the annoyed groan as a sign to come in. "Hey," he mumbled, staying in this half of the room so he wouldn't invade Andrew's privacy.

"Don't think this changes anything. It's still nothing," Andrew said, crossing his arms. Neil wasn't sure if this was the time to address it, but he didn't know when else to do so.

"Lola threatened she'd take you as well, and it was the worst thing she could have said. I think it means something," he said, careful not to overstep the lines they'd drawn.

"That's not my problem."

"Aaron said you were worried when I didn't show back up," Neil tried again, taking a few steps into Andrew's direction. There were still few feet between them, but Neil could make out the different shades of black on Andrew's clothing. Close enough to reach out, if he wanted to.

"Aaron should shut up if he doesn't want to have his tongue for breakfast," Andrew muttered, but both of them knew it was an empty threat. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Neil smiled at that. It wasn't 'not answering anymore' or 'leaving the room', this was a mature reaction to his feelings. Neil was glad.

"What do you want to talk about instead?"

"Nothing," Andrew answered, and for once in his life, Neil didn't say something stupid just because the opportunity was there.

"Wanna go back and join the others?" he asked, but Andrew didn't, so they just stood by the window in silence, looking over the street and the other houses until Andrew opened the window and lit two cigarettes.

It ended how it always ended; Neil on his back, Andrew on top of him, sharing whispers and kisses as if their lives depended on it. But Andrew's hands avoided the bandages carefully and it didn't feel as urgent as it usually did. Neil's nose hurt with every brush of Andrew's, but he ignored it. This didn't feel as helpless and frantic as it usually did. It was more careful, softer and warmer. Maybe it was just the fact that they weren't on the roof but on a bed, but maybe it was something entirely different.
Neil slept alright. He still jerked awake every once in a while, but even that eased when Andrew placed his hand in the middle of Neil's chest. It felt almost as if Andrew was actively controlling Neil's emotions, sometimes.

When he opened his eyes, Andrew was already awake, eyes on Neil's face, looking as if he was searching for something. "Morning," Neil mumbled, but closed his eyes again. His head hurt, as if his brain had gotten too big and was pressing against his skull. Every cut and burn itched and he felt uncomfortable all over.

"What's wrong?" Andrew asked, making Neil shake his head. It was a bad idea. He felt nausea wash over him and heard ringing.

"I feel sick," he mumbled, making Andrew nod.

"You're a wreck," he answered, climbing out of bed and handing a glass of water along with two small pills to Neil. "You don't drink enough. And these are the only ones I will give you before breakfast."

Neil took the pills and a few more sips of water than were strictly necessary. He was annoyed when his condition didn't improve right away, but knew it was childish. But he was in pain.

Andrew vanished in the bathroom, leaving Neil to himself for a while. He heard the rushing of the shower, telling himself it was only that. No Riko, no cuffs. Neil took a deep breath and got up, standing in front of Andrew's bookshelf and looking at the titles to distract himself from the sound of water running, running, running.

He relaxed a lot when the sound stopped and was able to breathe again, finally. He'd almost choked multiple times, holding his breath in. He didn't want to get any in his lungs, his... he was unreasonable.

A few minutes later, Andrew opened the door. "Come here," he said, and Neil followed him on wobbly legs. The air was hot and humid, window far open so the steam could get out. The mirror was still fogged, but Neil saw enough of himself to freeze. It got less and less foggy, and Neil looked at his massacre of a face.
His nose still had a bandage on it, hiding the break, but his cheeks were free. He could make out the cuts clearly, the long lines across his cheek. The burn on the other one. The doctors had probably done a good job at this, but Neil felt sick just looking at himself.

Andrew made a disapproving sound as he pushed Neil to the toilet lid. "Abby said they’d heal better if we let them air," he explained, slowly starting to unwrap the bandages all along Neil's arms. Neil tried to concentrate on Andrew, on the hands, the wrists and underarms hidden by the long bands, the strip of his arm that was visible before the shirt hid the rest of him.

But it didn't work. He looked at the deep wounds, the burns, the places his cuffs had dug into his wrists.

Andrew's hands were careful and steady when he did the same thing Abby had done yesterday, cleaning and putting salve on and rewrapping the arms. Neil felt bad.

"What's your problem?" Andrew asked, making Neil press his lips together.

"Nothing. Thank you," he mumbled. Andrew made a dismissive gesture, putting some salve onto his face as well before washing his hands and putting the tubes back.

"In two years, you'll have nothing but tiny, pale lines on your cheek. Nobody will even question it, they took good care of it," he said, but Neil looked away. Two years? That was longer than he even expected to live, if he was honest. What mattered was that he’d be reminded of his father each and every day. Everyone around him would immediately know how messed up he was.

"Let's get some breakfast," Andrew said, leaving Neil in the bathroom. He swallowed, shaking his head. He'd seen their looks last night. He didn't need that again.

"I'd rather stay here," he said, making Andrew stop a step away from the door.

"Neil, you're coming down there and having breakfast with us. I don't want to repeat the time after the Nest, I don't want to force you to eat," he said, and it made him feel sick and angry on so many levels, for some reason.
"I didn't stop eating then and I don't have a problem with that now," he argued, wanting to cross his arms to not feel so useless. "You don't know how this feels, Andrew, with your untouchable attitude, but some of us can't go around doing what we want," Neil went on, shaking his head. Andrew had long since forgotten what vulnerability felt like! "Can you imagine what Riko did when you did as much as cough in his presence? I don't want people to see me like this, because all it would take for someone to make me fall is poke at my face."

His breath went heavy and he felt sick. Andrew didn't know what fear felt like, what being weak felt like, he was just absolutely untouchable, always far above anyone else.

"Scars and cuts don't make you weak, Neil, and not a single person in this house is of another opinion," Andrew answered, and Neil wanted to smash something. He felt too much, emotions boiling over already, and he was projecting it all on Andrew. He knew it wasn't fair, but he didn't have any capacity left.

"What do you know about any of this, Andrew? Have you even seen me? My body is nothing but breaks and cuts and burns."

Aaron could use this against him, everyone could. If Riko laid hands on him again, Neil would end it as soon as he got any opportunity to. He couldn't live like this.

Andrew looked at him for a very long moment, breath going quick in a contrast to his steady stance. Then he raised his arms and took off the bands, rolling them up and pushing them in his pocket.

Andrew had seen Neil's scars and Neil had asked for something in return, that one time at the hospital. Andrew had given him his armbands, and Neil hadn't understood. Andrew's arms had been hidden under the long sleeves of his hoody. He understood now, when he looked at the pale lines all the way up and down his lower arms, some thicker, some barely visible, some vertical, others horizontal. Neil stared at the cuts that had healed so perfectly, and shook his head. He knew what attempted suicide looked like, knew what cuts looked like, and shook his head.

"Andrew-"

"Are you done?" he asked, leaving the bedroom and Neil behind. Neil almost ran after him.

"I'm sorry," he said, but Andrew didn't react as he went into the kitchen.
Nicky and Aaron were there, drinking coffee and barely looking up as they entered the room. Andrew took a mug from the cupboard next to Nicky and probably wanted to make hot chocolate or something, when Nicky realized what was going on.

"Andrew? What... Andrew?" he asked, and Neil hated the broken sound in his voice. He knew how Nicky felt. Exactly as crappy as felt.

Aaron just stared at his twin for long moments, then he shook his head and left the room.

Andrew ignored his cousin, warming up milk in the microwave and waiting.

"Andrew? What happened?" Nicky asked again, making the boy shrug apathetically.

"Nothing. I'm making a point," he said, and Neil let out a shuddered breath. He hadn't meant for this to happen.

When Andrew was satisfied with the temperature of his drink, he went to the living room, leaving Neil with Nicky.

"What happened?" Nicky asked, arms around himself, hugging his chest tightly as his lip shuddered.

"I didn't- I said I didn't want to come down with my face looking like this, and he just... we had some sort of an argument," Neil mumbled, unsure how much to share and what to keep to himself.

"Did you know about this?" he asked, and Neil shook his head. He felt terrible. Nicky hugged him softly, making Neil smile a little, unsure what to do. He wasn't sure how he deserved this.

"He's opening up because of you, you know that?" Nicky asked, and Neil felt a little uncomfortable, relieved as Nicky let him go.

"I don't think so," he muttered, making Nicky sigh.

"Neil, it's true. And don't worry about your face, you're still absolutely on the list of people I'd cheat
on Erik with. Right beneath Kevin, but it's tight," he added with a laugh, and it made Neil smile for some idiotic reason.

They went to the living room, where Andrew and Aaron sat on the sofa, ignoring each other. But they sat on the same sofa and Neil saw how Aaron looked from his book to Andrew all the time.

"If this is still a topic, I'm leaving," Andrew said, making Nicky nod a little.

When Kevin woke up, he was too hung over to care about anything and when he did realize, Aaron told him to fuck off before he even opened his mouth.

Neil let Andrew wash his hair, that night. It was in the sink and he stopped it about ten times to calm down, but twenty minutes later, Neil felt better.

Andrew only got his armbands back on the next day, before they drove back home. Nobody said anything and Neil didn't doubt that this was a secret all of them would take to the grave.

When Allison laid eyes on him, she dropped the mug she was holding in order to come over and hug him tightly. Matt looked heartbroken and Dan seemed absolutely tired. Renee seemed less surprised, but shook her head. During that day of first seeing his scars, all of them promised they'd be there for him if he needed anything. Renee patted his shoulder softly, assuring him she'd always have his back and would listen to anything he wanted to share. He didn't deserve this team.

Days went by in seconds while nights dragged on for months. His pain was more present at night, his mind kept wandering. It exhausted him and the people around him more than anyone would ever admit.

Matt stayed up with him again, arm around Neil's shoulders as the boy had troubles falling asleep. They watched Disney movies together and Neil fell asleep on the sofa, glad to be close to someone.

Kevin made all of them crazy as soon as they knew they'd play against the Bearcats next. Neil wasn't allowed to train yet, considering his freshly broken nose, so he spent all his free time watching videos
and analyzing the team’s style. He liked being able to work for his team, even when the thought of not playing in the quarter final made him feel worse than anything else would have. This was the most important game, they needed to win, and his team was a player short. But Neil decided not to pity himself for once but help them prepare as well as he could.

They ended up not going anywhere for spring break, maybe because Kevin wouldn't let anyone leave and partly because the Foxes were making genuine plans for summer vacation and none of them had a problem with staying at uni for the few weeks.

Matt went to visit his mother for a weekend and Renee stayed at her mother’s house for a couple of days, but all over, the Foxes spent the holidays at the Tower. Neil was glad that all of them finally got a chance to relax after the stressful weeks filled with nothing but finals.

But the two weeks went by and not much changed. Neil didn't have to wear the bandages anymore and he didn't take many pills, at this point. Maybe something against the pain, nothing else.

He could also go running again, which was great for him. However, he was almost glad that he wasn't training with the team. Showering was more of a challenge than he liked to admit.

The day of the game was the first Friday after the holidays, and Neil watched them practice harder and harder. They were absolutely amazing. Neil had never seen anyone put that much work into practice.

The orange bus was already parked outside the Tower when Neil got out of class, and he hurried up. All of the others had their gear and racquets in there already, but Neil wouldn't play. He hadn't even practiced with the team for a single time since coming back from Baltimore. Abby would have let him this week, but he didn't want to interrupt their preparations for the game, so he kept on analyzing statistics and evaluating styles. If he couldn't play a game, at least he'd do his best to support them.

Away games had become something different during his year here. In the beginning, they had always been split in two, now Kevin wouldn't allow for that to happen. He discussed every possible line up and for once, everyone listened.

At least save for Andrew and Neil, who occupied the last two benches they could without leaving a gap between them and the team. Andrew had heard it all before and Neil had gathered the information.
An hour into the ride, Wymack announced the first break, and Neil remained seated as the bus started emptying. He had something to talk through with Andrew in private. Neil smiled when he saw the look on Andrew's face, knowing he wanted to ask why they were not getting out but that he wouldn't initiate a conversation when he didn't know where it went.

The sun shone through the window and Neil smiled at Andrew for a moment. He didn't know what it was, but it wasn't like in the movies or books. Andrew's hair didn't light up golden or white in the sun, his eyes didn't show constellations he'd never seen. Andrew didn't even smile.

It was just this. Just them sitting on the bus on the way to a game, and Neil could look into Andrew's overexposed face and he knew if he asked, he wouldn't receive a no as an answer. That was enough.

"So, I've been thinking," Neil eventually started, and he heard the mock when Andrew mumbled 'Oh no'. "You said you'd think of a prize for closing the goal, remember? You said it would be different every game."

Andrew looked at him for a long moment and Neil was about to ask what he was seeing when Andrew looked away.

"You're buying the cigarettes until the Trojans game," he said, after a few moments. It made Neil laugh.

"That was the prize for the last game," he argued, making Andrew arch an eyebrow.

"You got kidnapped on your way to get them. Then you didn't leave the house for anywhere but classes for another week. It's my prize, if you're not willing to-"

Neil wanted to kiss him, he was so happy. Instead, he shook his head. "I'm doing it, promise! But you said 'until the Trojans game'. You say it as if it was sure we'd make it, tonight."

Andrew shook his head a little, turning away again. Neil knew he exhausted him, but he'd never been quite this happy.

"If they are even half as stubborn as you are, there's no way we're losing," Andrew replied. "Have you even seen the Bearcats perform this year? Kevin would have kicked half the Kader off the team if they were Foxes," he added.
Neil smiled even more at that, making Andrew roll his eyes. He cared. He'd listened.

"Stop that," Andrew demanded, and Neil smiled even more.

"Yes or no?" he asked, making Andrew look outside. No Fox to be seen, yet.

"Neil-

"Yes or no?" Neil repeated, and Andrew pulled him in for a short kiss.

This was Neil's favorite kind of nothing.

They arrived at the stadium a few hours later and the bus grew silent. They were as excited as determined, and Neil could almost smell the flicker of hope in the air.

They went to the locker rooms while Neil stayed with Wymack and Abby.

"You know what to say when they start talking about your face," Wymack started, and Neil nodded.

"Why don't you trust me when it comes to the press? I've given interviews all my life," Neil argued, and Abby actually laughed at that.

"Neil, we know who you are as a person, don't even try. I don't want to hear suggestive remarks about the Ravens tonight. We've been through this," Wymack repeated, and Neil crossed his arms. He could finally do that without feeling too uncomfortable. The wounds had healed well, but he still walked around with long sleeves most of the time. Not everyone needed to see.

"They'd deserve it," Neil argued, and Wymack let out a sigh.

"We're not saying they don't, Neil, we're just worried about you," Abby answered, and Neil refused to answer to that. He didn't like this attitude.
The Foxes came back wearing gear, and Neil smiled when he saw their faces. He was so proud of them.

"Don't look like you're going to cry, idiot," Seth mumbled next to him, patting his shoulder. "You'll be out there with us next time."

Neil couldn't help smiling. He knew they'd perform better without him than with him, tonight. He wasn't in the condition for full body checks or an hour of running. He also knew that they'd perform better if he was with them in a better condition, but he couldn't change anything about it.

Wymack told them that he believed in them, that he knew they'd give everything they had. He said he was proud, no matter the outcome. He also talked about pride, about honor, and about the fight in all of them.

Neil had never seen Seth smile so honestly. He was almost done with uni. Almost done with college Exy, this was his final countdown, and he was determined. He'd been on the original lineup when the Exy team at Palmetto was founded, and Seth was ready to take the cup home.

The announcer called out the lineup after warm ups, and the team went on the court. Neil almost fainted when he saw the bleachers. This stadium sat ninety thousand people, twenty five thousand more than the Foxhole Court, but at least twenty thousand people wore bright orange. A whole block was occupied by the Foxes' fans, and Neil was in awe. He couldn't believe that so many of them had followed. There were big orange spots all over the bleachers, and Neil shook his head. They'd never seen that many opponent fans at their own stadium.

The game started with Dan, Aaron, Renee and Neil outside, watching as they started, and Neil couldn't stop yelling in support when Seth scored only four minutes into the game. Neil didn't doubt that they'd win.

"Neil Josten," a reporter called, catching him off guard. He looked directly into a camera and almost forgot putting on the press smile Tesuji had forced into him with more that his cane.

"Hello," Neil said, smiling brightly. This could be fun.

"As you're not wearing your uniform, I take it you're not playing tonight?" the man asked, and Neil forced himself not to look at the camera as if he was on "The Office". He almost pointed at his face,
but he let that be as well.

"That’s true. Unfortunately I’m not in the condition to play yet," he answered, and the reporter seemed relieved that Neil offered the next question so easily. These people hated needing to ask detailed questions.

"Now that you say it, you do look quite- I’m cutting that, wait," he said, rephrasing the question. "That’s horrible! Why can’t you support your team tonight? Does it happen to have anything to do with your new appearance?"

Wow.

Neil didn’t stop smiling. "I am supporting them, I just can't play tonight. It's kind of a funny story, I was attacked by a bird." He couldn't wait for Wymack's reaction.

The look on the reporter's face was priceless. "Okay, you got me. No, seriously, it's-"

Neil stopped talking when the sound of a goal blared through the stadium. His eyes were on Andrew, who had his arms crossed and looked bored. Then he looked at the other goal and saw Kevin in a hug with Matt before they went on playing. How...? Neil couldn't help smiling.

"You were saying?"

Neil suppressed a sigh and turned back to the reporter. "Yes, it's a long story and I don't really want to go into detail. It was a get together with my father I'd rather not repeat, and he's behind bars already. But don't think this will affect my performance on court."

The man gave him a look that made Neil smile. How could people be shocked at such a harmless version of the truth?

Wymack had told him to say this instead of admitting that his father was dead. It meant that his identity was safe and no one would question it. It also meant that a few years down the road, he'd have to pretend that his father died so that no weird TV show would try initiating a get together, but he didn't worry about that just yet.
"So you're saying there'll be another game for the Foxes? You think you'll make it to the semifinal?" he asked, and Neil knew this wasn't a question he was supposed to answer. They were still playing and this would be turned against him if the answer wouldn't fit the outcome.

"I'm confident that each and every single one of these players is in the best condition they ever had. They're fighting and they deserve it. I don't think anyone can take that from us, no matter the outcome, but I also don't really doubt that we have every opportunity to win this," he answered, and saw the smile reporters always wore whenever they got what they wanted.

"The Trojans are playing against the Jackals next weekend and they seem to be the audience's favorite team, so far. How do you feel at the prospect of playing with your former teammate Jean Moreau?" the man asked, and Neil really wanted to watch the game. Still, the mention of Jean's name made something in him ache. They hadn't made up yet. He hadn't had a chance to talk to him yet.

"I honestly can't think of something better than playing on the same court with Kevin and Jean again. It's been a year and we haven't seen each other in ages. I think it'll be amazing," he said, and his smile was honest, this time. He loved the plain thought of it.

"You also said you looked forward to playing against the Ravens again. If everything works out for the Foxes, you'd play against them in the final. How does that make you feel? You'd face Riko again," he reminded him, probably assuming to get an even more emotional reaction from Neil.

He turned to face the court again. He wouldn't speak of that kid on TV.

"I'm trying to watch my team compete," Neil said, ending the interview. He could imagine the look on the man's face, and that was satisfying enough.

By half time, the Foxes had a four point gap. Andrew had let four goals in, while Kevin and Seth had scored that many, each.

Some games ended with fewer goals, and Neil knew that all of them were absolutely exhausted, but he was incredibly proud. Everyone knew they wouldn't be able to keep a gap this high in the second half, facing an entirely new lineup of players that were determined to destroy them, but that wasn't important. They were ready to fight because for once in their lives, the Foxes had something to lose.

The second half started and the crowd was ecstatic. Andrew and Renee had a short conversation
about strategic matters and she decided she'd rather play as a backliner than a goalkeeper, thinking she'd be able to support her team better like this.

She was an amazing backliner. Neil couldn't believe how she slammed into strikers twice her weight as if they were nothing but feathers in the wind.

Abby had work to do every time a player was changed, taking care of bleeding noses and a split lip. Seth and Kevin didn't get into fights for once in their lives, took hits and checks without fighting back, knowing they could be pulled from the game, disqualifying the entire team. They didn't have a sub, even though Matt could technically play for one of them. They'd lose the very second one of the strikers was pulled from the game.

Seth had a black eye and Kevin had been checked so many times, both of them were absolute physical wrecks by the time the Foxes won.

10-9 wasn't as good as the first half had promised, but when the buzzer announced the end of the game, the crowd went wild. The Bearcats had slowly started catching up, but they never managed to and the score wasn't even or in their favor for a second in the game.

Dan grabbed Neil by the hand and all of the players that weren't on court participated in the team-hug. They'd managed! They would keep fighting, keep winning, and they'd bring home the cup.

The drive home was pure ecstasy, loud music, singing along to songs Neil had never heard before. He thanked Andrew about a thousand times on the journey and when Wymack stopped the bus to get gas halfway through the way, Neil bought three packs of cigarettes just because he could. Andrew rolled his eyes when Neil dropped them on his lap.

Matt was allowed to choose the music and it seemed to be nothing but 80s rock - not that anyone minded. It was almost three am by the time the bus pulled into the parking lot by the Fox Tower, but none of them were close to tired. Except for Abby and Wymack, maybe.

They got off the bus and Neil heard a yell. He took a step back quickly, but realized he wasn't being attacked a second later.

Katelyn was in Aaron's arms and she went on and on. "It was so amazing, Aaron, I almost died watching the game, seriously, did you see what you were doing?" Neil kept on walking, but this was probably the shortest sentence she said that night. How could people be so overly happy all the time?
Andrew and him went to the roof for no more than half an hour, and Neil smiled when he opened the door to his room a while later and saw all of the Foxes there, drinks in their hands and loud music blaring. Andrew followed him and ignored Katelyn's presence in the room, but he had a cup in his hand after a few minutes, and all of them were undeniably, absolutely happy.

They would make it. They had to.

Neil participated in practice again, and was glad about it. The first week, they didn't know for sure who they'd play against, so it wasn't tough practice. They worked on some drills, precision, team building, and had a whole lot of fun.

But when they found out that they would actually play against the Trojans next, it became serious. Seriously evaluating players, seriously trying to figure out drills and moves, trying to get a glimpse behind the style of one of the Big Three.

"We're doomed," Kevin said when they analyzed the game against the Jackals together.

"Don't say that, we can do it," Allison argued, but Kevin shook his head.

"They won 13-6 against the Jackals," he said, but she shook her head.

"They're just a team, Kevin, we're great. We can," she tried again, making Kevin run through his hair stressfully.

"We can't even figure out half the moves they know by heart, their style is flawless, and they won't be provoked easily. Their condition is better than ours and their Kader has close to three times as many people as ours, Allison. How aren't we doomed?"

Neil's heart sunk at that, knowing that a part of this was true.
"Kevin? Shut up," Dan said, making him arch an eyebrow. "These are my players you're talking to, and I want you to know that. Just that you adore the Trojans beyond reason doesn't mean you can talk about us this way. You don't have to believe in us, but don't you dare take this feeling from anyone else. The rest of us thinks we have a shot at the title, so do me a favor and keep this to yourself."

She hadn't gotten up, hadn't raised her voice or talked in a bratty manner. She was just a captain fighting for her team.

They went on analyzing the game. Kevin didn't say anything for the rest of practice. He disliked not being where he wanted to be in this hierarchy, but this was Dan's team. She was right about that and he knew it.

They went on working hard towards the game, and Neil was gladly taken away by the rush of events.

Wymack almost killed him when he saw Neil's remark about a bird attack on TV, but it was too late to change anything about it now, anyways.

Neil played with the thought of calling Jean a lot during the three weeks between the Bearcats and the Trojans game, but couldn't quite make himself. They'd see each other soon enough. Or maybe he should? He wasn't sure.

"Jean called earlier today, he says hi," Kevin told him one day, when they sat on the bean bag chairs in the Monsters' room. He spoke French, so he didn't want the others to listen, apparently. It wasn't hard to miss names, though, so he wondered where this was going.

"He didn't," Neil answered. Jean wouldn't say hi to him over Kevin.

"He did say he was worried. Maybe he didn't say hi, but I really think you should talk to him," Kevin admitted. If he gave in so easily, why did he bother lying in the first place?

"We'll see each other in less than a week," Neil answered, making Kevin sigh.

"Why don't you just talk to him?" he asked, and Neil looked away. The cousins pretended not to care or were actually too caught up in their video game to try to listen, so Neil figured, why not?
They couldn't speak French anyways.

"Why don't you tell Coach he's your father?" Neil asked back, making Kevin look away.

"That's none of your business and definitely not your decision to make," he answered, and Neil nodded at that.

"Exactly."

They didn't talk about it anymore, and Neil was thankful. He didn't want to be pushed into this.

Wymack pushed them harder than ever, but Neil could tell that he wouldn't ever be mad, no matter what they did. He still threatened them with extra laps, but Neil saw the proud smile on his face. He'd never brought a team this far.

The Foxes perfected moves and drills they wouldn't have dreamed of, half a year ago. Multi-player-strategies were a part of the way they played now, and they finally relied on each other. Kevin, Dan and Seth high fived each other one practice, smiles bright on their faces. Neil could rely on Allison and Aaron, and when the week was done, each player trusted everyone else on this court. There was no lineup a single one of them was uncomfortable with and they knew this was something not a single other team could claim.

Neil thought of the mess of a team they'd been when he'd first gotten here, of Andrew who wouldn't work with anyone, the Upperclassmen that were divided into the antisocial Seth, Dan who worked way too hard, Allison who wouldn't even try supporting the strikers if she saw any chance to shoot a goal herself. He thought of Kevin, too mad at the team to play properly, of Aaron and Nicky who didn't dare to.

And he thought of this family they were now, unable to stop smiling. They'd grown together in the most twisted and painful way ever, through drugs and relapses and more than one time of being close to death. And they'd made it work.

When they got on the bus on the day of the game, Wymack and Abby had placed snacks of pretzels, chocolate and fruit on each seat, making Matt laugh as he entered the bus.

"It was Abby's idea," Wymack said before anyone had even asked, which resulted in more laughter.
and an exchange of money between Dan and Kevin. She'd bet that Wymack would do something nice to them, Kevin said that Wymack knew better than anyone else that they had nothing to celebrate yet.

They sat the way they had before but more tightly together. There were at least two of them on every bench, safe for Andrew, who preferred the last bench he could get without leaving a gap. He sat behind Nicky and Neil, reading a book while the others went through some facts about the Trojans.

They didn't think they would win. They simply knew they could.

On the cigarette break, Neil and Andrew went outside as well, smoking together and cooling off. The bus was a stressful place, most of the time.

"What's your prize today?" Neil asked after a while, when his cigarette had almost burnt down to the filter. Andrew looked at him for a moment, not reacting in any way before he answered.

"Score more goals than I let in," Andrew said, making Neil laugh out while shaking his head.

"Are you serious? I can't promise that if you don't close the goal, and-"

"I'm only playing one half, you're in for two thirds. Try," he said, making Neil smile quite brightly.

"Thank you," he said, making Andrew shake his head.

"They'll have Laila Dermott in for most of the time, Neil, don't overestimate yourself," he said, and Neil shrugged a little. He knew everything there was to know about every single one of the Trojans' goalkeepers. He also knew everything about the backliners, though he'd focused on Jean. His style had changed since they'd played next to one another as backliners. It had made him unreasonably proud.

Arriving in front of the red stadium filled the bus with excitement and maybe a little fear, but it wasn't bad. It was the best feeling in the world. Neil felt alive.

They were led into the stadium and security men showed their locker rooms to them. Neil almost
froze when he saw the shower. The Trojans had single stalls, just like them, but Neil still felt uneasy when showering. He panicked as soon as something got into on? his face, which made washing his hair a long, uncomfortable process.

But that wasn't a problem yet.

They changed into gear and Wymack joined them in the room together with the girls, handing out the lineup.

"I just got the lineup, and we've pretty much been right about our predictions. The plan is still to put as much pressure on them as we can in the first half, but I don't want any stunts. This is still the semifinal, and we can be proud we made it this far. There aren't many people who think that we can win against a Big Three team, but I want everyone in this room to prove them wrong. We've been preparing for this moment and I don't doubt that every single Fox has it in them to be Champion. I want you to go out there and fight, because if there's any team that deserves to make the Ravens suffer next month, it's us."

The Ravens had played 15-10 against the Lions last week, and in exactly three weeks, the final game would take place. They were close, so close to the top, and Neil prayed they wouldn't fall.

Cameras were ready as they got on the court. The stadium was filled, and Neil was sure that at least a third of the audience consisted of people dressed in orange. It made him incredibly proud.

That was, until the Trojans joined them in running laps. Neil almost stumbled over his feet when he saw Jean set his foot onto the field, head held high. He wore red and gold with pride.

"Please just go there, Neil," Matt said, and Neil did.

He ran across the court because Jean was there and he was there and there was nothing stopping him. Yes, they had argued. No, they hadn't made up.

That didn't stop him from yelling "Jean!" across court before flinging himself at the boy he hadn't seen since the winter banquet.

Maybe it was stupid, considering their argument, but Jean hugged him anyway and Neil dropped his racquet and Jean actually lifted Neil off the ground for a few seconds.
"Hey," Neil whispered, making Jean laugh as he set him down. Neil beamed up at him, and Jean shook his head, looking absolutely not mad.

"You idiot," Jean answered, and Neil couldn't stop smiling. "Kevin told me about your dad. I'm sorry."

Neil shook his head, not wanting this to be a topic. "Forget it. One more reason to kick Riko's ass next month," he said, and Jean shook his head, nudging Neil's shoulder in a brotherly gesture.

"Should you win, of course. But otherwise, I'll do that for you," he answered, making Neil laugh.

"Come on, Jean, who are we kidding, Kevin and I, side by side? You have no chance," he joked, and Jean ruffled his hair. Neil wanted to cry from happiness.

"I'm proud of you, Neil," he said, and Neil nodded a little.

"I'm proud of you, too. And I'm sorry about what I said," he added, but Jean brushed it off.

"It's over now, okay? Don't worry about it. You should rather worry about how you're getting past the best backliner Class I Exy ever saw," Jean said, and Neil couldn't believe they'd come this far.

"That's only because I transferred positions, but okay," he mumbled, and Jean nudged him again.

"No arguments on my court," Captain Jeremy Knox joked with a bright smile as he walked past them. "And you should use warm up time for warm ups. At least pretend to run a little," he added, beaming up at Jean. They exchanged looks for a moment and Neil wasn't sure if he imagined it, but Jean seemed even happier. Then they ran.

It was more of a race than warm ups, and got even better when Kevin joined them. Neil smiled so brightly that his cheeks almost hurt.

When they went off court around fifteen minutes before the start of the game, Neil felt amazing.
"Don't forget that you're playing against him," Wymack said to them, making Neil smile even more.

"Don't worry, I will," Neil promised. At the Nest, Kevin, Jean and himself had always played best when they were in opposing teams. Tesuji had known how to use siblings and their need to compete in his favor.

Neil and Seth called to court first, followed by Dan, Nicky, Matt and Andrew.

He started smiling even more brightly when he saw Jean on the opposite side, the backliner assigned to him. This would be fun.

The game started and the teams needed some time to adjust to one another. The Foxes usually played dirty, on the sluggish line between red and yellow cards, but if the opponent didn't give them any opportunity? It was weird.

This didn’t go for Neil and Jean, of course. It was the most frustrating game ever, with Jean constantly blocking shots and checking Neil only enough to get the ball from him.

It went the other way around as well, of course, with Neil predicting almost every move. It was fun, but Neil shot at the goal six times in the first thirty minutes. He scored only twice. When Jean blocked the next shot as well, Neil wanted to leave.

Kevin came to court for the last ten minutes of the first half, and managed to score twice in that time. It made Neil furious.

But something about this gave him strength. Something about having every person he ever cared about on the same court, something about the loving teases.

When he got the ball the next time, Jean was in his way, obviously, so he passed down the court to Allison, trying to run himself free of the huge shadow. He managed to outrun him for a few seconds, and when he got the ball, he scored past Laila Dermott before she had time to move.

"Jean!" Kevin yelled, throwing his hands up. "How didn't you see that coming?"
Neil started laughing when Allison screamed "Wrong team, Kevin, wrong brother," at him, and Jean patted Neil's shoulder.

"You're better than I thought," he mumbled, but Neil shook his head.

"I hate you."

It made him laugh, and they finished the half time 7-7. Much worse than they had wanted.

They met in the locker rooms, and Neil downed an entire bottle of water before he could begin to catch his breath. His legs were sore already.

"Did you even try scoring?" Andrew asked him mockingly, and Neil rolled his eyes with a smile.

"Did you try closing the goal? Because I never saw you being worse," Neil mumbled, and Andrew rolled his eyes. He was sweaty, hair and shirt clinging to him tightly, making Neil want to kiss him even more.

Wymack looked over his players and Neil knew he was trying not to let him be himself and scream at them.

"Positive feedback, anyone?" he asked, and Kevin shrugged.

"Their best goalkeeper played an entire half, so we'll score more easily," he suggested, and Neil nodded. He prayed for Laila to not play the second half.

"But I bet Alvarez will play, and she's a dealer legend. I'm serious, if she's on there, we won't be able to track the ball," Allison chimed in, and Neil sighed.

"We'll see what they end up doing. Kevin, Seth, you're going out first, Dan, we need you to stay in a central position. Matt, Aaron, if you don't keep the balls away from Renee, you're walking home," Wymach said, and Neil wanted to argue. He didn't want to sit around.

Then again, he'd just played an entire half. Maybe he should take a little longer than the half time to
cool off.

"Can you put me back on there as soon as possible?" Neil asked as the second half started, making Wymack sigh.

"If you sit down and have some more water, maybe," he answered, not looking at Neil but the court.

Neil did. He sat down, drinking some water, and looking at the field. He wished he was religious just so he could pray to someone they'd win.

"I can't believe we have a shot at this," Nicky said next to him, making him smile brightly.

"We can't lose this, Nicky, we really can't," he mumbled, making the older boy nod.

Allison sat next to Andrew and tapped her legs with her fingers rapidly.

The crowd roared when the Trojans scored, when the Foxes evened the score, and when Kevin scored his first goal with Jean as his backliner.

"Josten," Wymack said, right after that goal. "You and Seth are switching, get out of there."

Neil was on his feet right away, and on court before Seth even realized he was being swapped. He'd played for the majority of the first half, so he was thankful to get a break.

"Thank God," he mumbled as he walked past Neil, and he was happy when he saw Kevin and Jean racing against each other.

The backliner he played against now was a boy called Maximilian de Una, who was probably the only backliner in Neil's size. It was his first year and he seemed absolutely determined to block every attempt of Neil to score.

What the Trojan didn't know was that Neil didn't play alone. He didn't dare to pass to Kevin, most of the time, but he and Dan and later Allison played together and could make it through pretty much
every constellation of players. In a matter of fifteen minutes, the score went from 9-8 to 12-10 in the Foxes' favor. With five minutes left on the clock, it was 12-12 again.

Neil thought he'd die.

His lung was burning and his head hurt, his legs were sore beyond anything his words could begin to explain.

If they went into overtime, they'd be doomed. Allison screamed something at Kevin and Nicky before she started running, and Neil ran himself free just in case she needed someone if this didn't work. Jean and Kevin were constantly yelling at each other, but she could rely on him and Nicky fully.

Allison was reckless when she checked players on her way, passing backward and forward, performing one of the moves Wymack had made them learn. It looked amazing, but even better was the view of a red goal. The 13-12 with two minutes left on the clock.

Neil realized that there were only two players on their side of the court, and saw that girl Alvarez passing to a striker too close to the goal and unprotected.

He ran.

A second before the sticker could score, Neil checked him heavily, regaining possession of the ball for the Foxes. All they needed to do was not lose it.

Neil passed as far away from Renee and their goal as he could, towards Allison, who knew what he meant to do. She decided against passing to Kevin, knowing Jean was too dangerous in that particular situation. She was clearly enjoying herself, passing to Nicky and running past Alvarez with a bright smile.

When the buzzer blared, Matt had Neil off his feet in seconds. They hugged, laughed, yelled, and it was wonderful.

Seth kissed Allison, Dan had tears in her eyes, and the twins let them be forced into the team hug. The Trojans stayed to shake their hands, and Neil hugged Jean tightly.
"You were absolutely amazing," he said, laughing when he saw Kevin's look. Jean had made them both suffer beyond reason, and Neil wouldn't have had it any other way.

Jeremy shook Kevin's hand quickly, smiling and seeming extremely proud of his team.

Neil looked around and saw nothing but smiles, saw two girls kissing, and saw Allison interrupting them in order to start talking to Alvarez. That's when Neil realized the other one was the goalkeeper that had made his life absolute hell.

"You're such an incredible dealer, seriously, I never saw anyone-Neil!" she called, and he frowned, walking over. "Aren't they absolutely amazing?"

He started laughing, unsure what to say about that. "I mean, you made the first half absolute hell for all of us," he told Laila, making her laugh.

"I did my best, but I'm not gonna lie, I spent the halftime on the floor in the locker room trying not to die," she answered, and Allison laughed.

"I was a backliner when I was in high school, but changed to dealer when I saw you perform," Allison told Alvarez, and this was about how the rest of the time went by. Teams complimenting each other and smiling and not at all being mad about the loss.

Kevin and Dan had press duty together with Jeremy and Jean, and the interview was the most hilarious thing Neil had ever seen. The boys shoved at each other, interrupted one another and made jokes about the other one's performance while Jeremy and Dan tried giving serious answers. Dan lost it when they brought Neil into the argument, and the reporters went home without a single straight answer.

The adrenaline rush was enough to get him through a shower, and when they went to the bus, Neil's smile was brighter than every star combined.

"I'm proud of you," Wymack told them for the hundredth time that night, and all of them believed it.

The journey home was filled with songs, games, laughter and loving insults for the first two hours
before some of them started falling asleep.

"Thank you, Drew," Neil mumbled again and again while falling asleep, and Andrew rolled his eyes.

"Shut up, Neil," he answered, but Neil couldn't.

He dreamt of a burning castle, of dead ravens, and of the sweet taste of revenge.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MY BEAUTIFUL SON!
Raven to Fox is exactly one (1) year old today!
Thanks to everyone who's been with me for the past year and thanks to all of you who joined in later!

Special thanks to Saya because she didn't only stick with me and my kid, she adopted it and cares about him!

I can't believe I've been doing this for a year... also can't believe it'll be over so soon!!!

Another huge thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! I love seeing new users and People I thought had already left!
He was happy.

It was a weird thought for a person like Neil Josten to have, but he really was. He had no issues with a single teammate, he was back on court and stronger than ever, and he was determined. He was ready.

The Foxes weren't that optimistic. Their practice was split into actually performing and analysing the Raven's drills.

"It's as if they turned into an entirely different team since I left," Kevin muttered, but Neil shook his head.

"The Rookies are simply extremely strong. Many of them came to Evermore around Easter already and spent every second they weren't at school with us. They're good," he explained.

Tesuji had planned to substitute for Jean and Kevin by recruiting only the most promising players, and he'd even considered the ones that didn't look picture perfect. The Ravens this season were ruthless, a bunch of kids that weren't broken yet. Some of them had kept their old style while others played exactly the way Kevin and Neil had during their time at the Ravens.

They were pretty perfect.

Wymack stopped the game at least every twenty seconds, making them point out flaws in their technique while also noting down moves they recognised.

"They play Exy like chess, it's unbelievable," Dan mumbled after a while. "The backliners can't even get to Riko because there's always at least one other player assigned to checking everyone who gets in his way."

Neil and Kevin frowned at each other. That wasn't true, was it?

Then he thought of practice, of the games they had played. This wasn't a conscious decision anyone had made, it was just the way they always played. Riko was the best striker, it came natural that you'd want to keep him free. Neil couldn't count the many occasions he'd broken toes while trying to keep him clear.

"What is the consequence for us?" Wymack asked, looking at all of them.

"We need a strong defense in order to have a chance against them. We also need to try and not lose any striking power," Matt said, and Wyamck nodded.
"I want the dealers to play rather defensive in the game whenever Riko is on court. That means that Allison will be playing while Riko is on court and that Dan will play during the two middle quarters," he explained, and they nodded. They could do that.

"And as soon as he's off court, I want you to score as if your life depends on it, because - let's be honest about this - it does. I don't want any complaining in practice for the next few weeks, I want all of you to give everything," he added, and Neil doubted anyone would question this. They knew how close to the top they were. They knew how far they could fall.

"Alright, I want to try something new later, so be on time," Wymack said before they all went. They still had class, after all. Their final exams were right around the corner, but they were all caught up in training. They'd manage somehow.

Neil didn't listen too much. He was fluent in Spanish and could use most of Matt's old papers to hand in. He also skimmed the SparkNotes for most of the books he was supposed to read for English class. He did pretty good in his classes.

Math, of course, was none of an issue. Neil found it almost enjoyable to sit in that class, considering how much sense it made. It was the one subject he actually put effort into.

It wasn't that he didn't like languages, he just knew that he was good at them. He didn't see a point in doing much of the homework if he was good in class and had practice to attend. And maybe that wasn't a problem, considering that it was only his Freshman year anyways.

Still, practice was the best part of the day. When they went to the stadium and he set a first step onto the court, Neil smiled right away. He couldn't wait.

"I had a talk with Kevin about this, and we think it'd be good to learn one or two new countermoves against Raven drills. They're not complicated but require a lot of running and quick thinking," Wymack announced, dividing them into two teams that played against each other. He explained what he wanted to see, the drills they'd learned half a year ago and the response he wanted to see now. It sounded like fun, especially considering that Neil knew all strategies from the backliner perspective already.

An hour later, he wanted to die.

"Neil, what on earth are you doing?" Kevin yelled, and he groaned.

"We're constantly running over each other's feet," Dan complained, and Kevin shook his head.

"It's not that hard, just follow the instructions," Kevin argued.

Half an hour later, he and Seth were fighting and Matt and Aaron had to be put on different teams because they almost killed each other.

Neil's head hurt, and he was frustrated. He'd been doing this since he was eight years old, but this was a new perspective, and he kept mixing up what he'd been doing for eleven years and what he was supposed to be doing.

"Can't I just be a backliner again?" he asked, annoyed with himself for not being able to get his thoughts straight.

"Neil, get your head in the game!" Kevin yelled across court, making every single player burst into laughter for some reason. Neil frowned, looking around while Allison repeated "Get'cha head in the game," a thousand times.
When they realised that neither Neil nor Kevin had any clue as to what it was, Aaron hit Kevin's shoulder and shook his head. "Do you know any pop culture at all?" he asked while Matt announced a movie night.

Practice went on after that, but Neil didn't improve too much. Aaron struggled with it as well and Allison seemed annoyed by being on the same team as Kevin. It was bad.

"If we don't know how to react to their technique properly, we'll play as bad as last year," Kevin said, shaking his head. "Could everyone just put in a little more effort in order to not repeat the 13-9 catastrophe?"

Wymack watched them mostly, taking notes. Except for Kevin, nobody expected anyone to perform a new move perfectly on the first day.

After training, he asked if anyone had plans for the weekend. When they shook their heads, he announced training camp for that weekend.

"We need to get these into your heads as soon as possible, these countermoves are one thing we have that no other team has," he explained, and Neil knew he was right. He was glad. They needed this.

"Hey, Neil, do you have a second?" Abby asked just as he was about to join the others in the locker rooms. Neil raised his eyebrow and looked at her, walking down the corridor after her. She probably wanted to see his scars or foot again. She did that, from time to time.

"Yes?" he said, though it was more of a question.

"Alright, I don't want to make this awkward for you, but please consider it, okay?" she asked, and Neil wasn't sure what to answer. Was there anything to say? "I just want to propose it if you... Alright, so the summer holidays are ahead and I would understand it if you didn't want to stay in England. The dorms close over the break, and I want you to know that you can stay at my house if you have any issue at all with finding a place."

Neil looked up at her and wasn't sure what to respond. He hadn't even thought about that, yet. He opened his mouth but no words came out for a second.

"I... Abby, I don't know what to say," he said, swallowing against the lump in his throat. Why did this feel so weird?

"You don't have to say anything, Neil. I'm staying here over the summer and have quite a few empty bedrooms. Andrew, Aaron, Nicky and Kevin stayed with me for a little, usually, because Kevin doesn't want to be away from the stadium for two and a half months, so it'd get a little full, but we'd make it work, especially if you and Andrew stay in the same room, so don't worry, okay?" she asked, and Neil shook his head a little.

He just stood there and tried thinking of something to respond, but the only thing he brought out was "Thank you."

"Don't worry, Neil! Just tell me a few days ahead if you're coming so I can clean the room for you," she said, smiling warmly. "That's everything, now hurry, you don't want to keep the others waiting," she added, and Neil nodded, turning around and leaving.

He couldn't believe that she was serious, that she honestly offered this without any intention. But he pushed the thought away and showered quickly before running out, not wanting to keep the Monsters waiting for much longer. Nobody said anything about his absence.
None of them had lives anymore. Every free second was spent with preparations for their finals, even Andrew’s car had sheets of paper flying around it because of the learning they tried squeezing in. Neil’s room was nothing but a ton of job applications by Seth, who applied at every hotel and travel agency in a ninety mile radius. Neil couldn't imagine not living with him anymore, next year. Though he had the feeling that Seth would come to visit them quite often.

"You speak five languages?" Neil asked when he skimmed one of the stashes of paper laying around.

"It's not that hard, and I want to work in tourism. And Italian, Spanish and French are easy enough. Greek was a little tough but otherwise... I don't know," he answered, making Matt laugh.

Neil shook his head a little. He'd picked up a ton of languages because he was a lot better than Riko at learning them, and it gave him some sort of satisfaction. He still found it weird when others spoke that many languages fluently.

He was about to ask more, when his phone buzzed. Nicky had texted him. "Can you come outside?"

Neil frowned and got up. "Nicky texted," he explained, getting his shoes on and leaving the room. Nicky smiled brightly and started walking down the stairs already.

"C'mon, let's get some coffee," he said, and Neil frowned before following him.

"What's this about? Whenever Allison gets coffee with me she's mad at someone," he said warily, not sure what else to say.

"It's not like that, we just haven talked in a while," Nicky said, making Neil frown even more as they went outside. It was the start of April and the sun shone brightly. Neil figured it must be around 20 degree outside, and something about it felt good. He didn't like the buzzing of insects all around him, but the warmth relaxed him a little, for some reason.

"We talk every day, Nicky. I don't remember the last afternoon I didn't spend at your room," Neil argued, making the boy sigh.

"Can you stop this for a second, Neil?" he asked, shaking his head. "Why do you turn everything into a discussion?" Nicky smiled through this, but Neil could tell that there was something on his mind. They walked side by side in silence until Nicky pulled Neil into his favourite café and ordered iced caramel coffee for the both of them, not letting Neil get close enough to pay.

"Will you tell me what you want to talk about, now?" Neil asked, and Nicky sighed as they sat down in a booth.

"I want to go to Germany for a month or two during the holidays but I don't want Aaron or Andrew alone for too long. I thought perhaps all of you want to come along for a few weeks? Not two months, obviously, but maybe we can start the holidays together? Erik's flat only has two rooms but his parents are gone for a while and offered the house," Nicky explained, smiling insecurely at Neil, who wasn't sure how to react to that.

"Allison said she had some contacts and would try getting all of us into a holiday home close to the beach for a week or two, somehow not too far from here," he started, but Nicky interrupted him.

"After that! I wouldn't want to miss that, obviously. I think all of us need a team vacation after this year. After that! We have ten weeks of holidays, Neil, please think about it," Nicky said, and Neil wasn't sure what he expected him to answer.
"I didn't say no, Nicky, it's just - I don't know. You don't have to ask me, I wouldn't mind staying here. I mean, Abby already offered a bedroom if I didn't know where to stay over the summer, so it's really no-"

"You're kidding, right?" Nicky asked, voice too loud for Neil's liking.

"What?" he asked, sipping his coffee and smiling a little at the taste. It was nice.

"Neil, you're a part of the family. I'm asking you to come with us because I'd love to have you there. Because I'm visiting my boyfriend and would like to have my family with me. And you're definitely not staying at Abby's house. This is offensive on so many levels, really, Neil. You're staying in Columbia with us, obviously," Nicky said, sounding almost angry while managing to smile absolutely brightly at him.

Neil stared at him.

"I can't just-"

"Shut up, Neil, I don't want to hear any of that bullshit. You're one of us, okay? And until you earn your own money and have a job that pays well enough to afford a flat, you're living with us," he said, crossing his arms. "And I'll discuss it with you even then because staying with us is a great way to save money."

He turned away and shook his head a little. "Nicky, I don't know what to say," he answered, feeling even smaller than he was. "Thank you."

"So, are you coming to Germany with us?" he asked again, making Neil look back up at him. He couldn't believe it.


"You're such an idiot, I thought I'd have to beg you. Let's go back home," he said, ruffling Neil's hair with a smile. They walked back slowly, and Neil couldn't believe it. A family.

They went back home and Neil smiled brightly when he even thought of the conversation.

For the first time in his life, he had a plan.

But the moment went by and Neil tried putting some effort into classes before practice.

The next day started terrible, considering their morning-analysis. They watched the Raven-Fox game from November, and Neil had never felt worse about his performance. The others felt the same way, he guessed.

"I want you to ignore your own performance and look at them, okay? This is probably the most important game we'll watch," he said, turning the screen on and leaving them for a few minutes. Neil couldn't help staring at himself and the sloppy style. He hadn't been a very good striker for the first few months, he knew that, but this made him feel worse.

"Josten," Wymack called by half time, and Neil left the room to follow him, shrugging when the others shot him confused glances.

"Hello, sir," he tried, looking at his Coach and following him to the office.

"I need you here for a few minutes," Wymack answered, nodding towards the second chair while
sitting down on his desk.

"Shouldn't I be watching the game?" he asked, but Wymack shook his head.

"Do that as homework, alright? This is more important," he explained, handing a mountain of about twenty files to Neil.

He frowned at the stack, seeing "Marisol McCarthy" in bold letters on top. He flipped it open and saw the picture of a girl looking into the camera with her arms crossed, looking more than a little displeased with having her picture taken. There was biographical information, statistics, letters by teachers and a bunch of graphs Neil didn't bother to understand.

He spread the files before him on the table and looked at the names. Cady, Jack, Sebastian, Ellen, Conny, Ayden, Dmitri, Michail, Leigh and a bunch of other ones. Neil looked back up at Wymack.

"What is all this?" he asked, and Wymack smiled a little when he sat a gladd of water down in front of Neil.

"These are the twenty players Dan thinks are worth considering for the next season. I want you to choose at least one player for each position, and if more catch your eye, go ahead and put them on the stack as well. Don't choose more than six, though. I won't promise to sign all of them, but I'll give them the benifit of being the co-captain's favourite."

Neil sipped the glass of water and spilled when Wymack said this.

"Excuse me?" he asked, setting the glass down.

"The ERC said they wan't us to have at least fifteen players next season, which is still only half the amount of other teams, but they say we're too close to not being allowed to compete when Seth is gone," Wymack explained, while checking something on his computer.

"Okay... the other part?" Neil asked, making Wymack look up.

"Dan will only be there for another year and I want someone with experience for the following year. You're the best person for that, you get along with everyone and chose most of the rookies yourself. Will have chosen... whatever, you know what I mean. When she's gone, we'll need someone who can keep this team together and working," he explained, and Neil held his breath, shaking his head.

"I don't... why? I mean, why not Matt or Kevin or-"

"Neil, get it together. Kevin will always love Exy more than he loves the Foxes, and that's not bad, but it's not what I look for in a captain. And anyways, you'll stay here for longer than the rest of them, you're the best captain I could choose," he answered, and Neil had to look away.

"Thank you, Coach, I don't... thank you! I won't disappoint you," he promised, and Wymack raised an eyebrow at him.

"This is one of the first times you don't call me 'Sir', Neil. Don't ever go back, it makes me feel old. Now look through the players."

Neil smiled brightly. More brightly than he had in a long time.

He looked through the players and was astonished. He saw potential, and he saw people life had tried conquering. He saw fighters.
In the end, Neil had seven players on a separate stack.

"I'd like to actually see them perform before making the final decision," he said, making Wymack nod.

"Go ahead, you can have the files and DVDs until tomorrow. We should just make the decision quite soon," he said, and Neil smiled. He put them into his bag and held that to his chest like a treasure.

"Thank you, Coach," he repeated, making him roll his eyes.

"Go back to the others and see if you can take some notes on the Ravens. They should be halfway through the game against the Scorpions by now," Wymack explained, making Neil nod as he left the room, clinging to his backpack.

Dan smiled at him widely when he entered the media-room again, while the others were mainly unconcerned.

"Did you say yes?" she asked, and Neil figured she was the only one who knew, so far.

"Why would I have said no?" he asked back, sitting down between her and Kevin again.

"I'm looking forward to it," she said, making him smile widely as he took out his notebook.

"Me too."

Neil spent every free minute of that day watching the seven kids, and in the end, he did make the decision.

Leigh Magona was the backliner he picked, a girl that had been to juvenile three times in the past four years. She was tall and had perfect grades, but a reputation worse than most other Foxes and a police record going back to the age of eleven.

Jack Aderlee was a goalkeeper from a family with eight other children. He was known for streetfights and had more than one encounter with the police. When he was fourteen, he'd stolen his first car and crashed it into a tree. It was his stepfather's, and the boy had been admitted to the hospital with a concussion and broken ribs after his mother had found out. He wasn't fast, but he was a strategic player, constantly shouting at his teammates in order to improve their performance.

Dmitri Vashkov played the position of dealer as if his life depended on it. His record read like a really bad episode of an afternoon TV show. He'd prostituted himself in order to get money for drugs before he spent four months at a clinic to get off them. Half a year later, he was readmitted with the diagnosis of depression and anorexia, and he picked up Exy there. During his senior year at high school, Dmitri seemed to have found a cause, considering how he was in trouble with the police multiple times for burning down small shacks that had always turned out to be a meth labor or weed plantation afterwards.

Marisol McCarthy was a striker at the moment, but she had played every position during the past few years. She'd been kicked off teams for violent behavior and because she'd stolen. Her grades were bad. She'd repeated two years and was older than Neil. She had three younger siblings that all lived with her dad while she stayed with her mother. She played aggressively without ever getting a single red card.
He gave the files back to Wymack the next day, who nodded before telling him to go to training.

They practiced the moves for the entire week and tried perfecting them on the weekend. Kevin had forced five new drills into them as well, and Neil knew all of them were improving. He knew that he was improving, as well. But it didn't feel like it. He didn't feel ready.

It made him incredibly mad. He was able to show the backliners exactly what they were supposed to be doing while being unable to perform his own job. Neil felt useless.

"Hey, Neil, take it easy," Matt said, smiling at him widely when they had a short break. It didn't manage to encourage him whatsoever. "You're a great striker, don't let this put you down. Everyone struggles, you're allowed to take some time to learn new strategies."

Neil shook his head, looking at Kevin on court. The boy never had any problems with new techniques, he was a quick learner and always looking for the next hurdle to overcome.

He, on the other hand? He knew what he was supposed to be doing, but his feet dragged him elsewhere.

"I don't have to learn them, Matt, I was there when Tetsuji made them up. I know them inside out," he argued, but Matt shook his head.

"A different perspective changes everything. Give it time!"

Neil tried. He gave himself a week of running into the wrong direction before realising and turning around. A week of stumbling over his feet, a week of the team growing more and more frustrated with themselves.

"We should have started learning this earlier," Renee said, one afternoon, making Kevin throw his hands into the air.

"Oh really? It's not like I've been saying that for a year," he said, shaking his head. Neil felt sorry for Renee, but the girl didn't say anything.

"Hey, Kevin," Wymack called one time, after practice, making him and Neil stop while the others went to the locker rooms. Neil went on slowly, wanting to hear what they were talking about.

"You're going too hard on them. I know the game is stressing you out, but why don't you take it easy?" he started, and Neil heard Kevin sigh.

"All eyes are on us. This is important to me. To Neil. To the rest of us. We deserve to win, but we can't. Not like this," he explained, and Neil went to the locker rooms. Changed and showered and waited in the car with the others.

Neil stayed with the Monsters for the afternoon, sitting on the sofa with Nicky laying there, legs across Neil's lap. The twins shared the bean bags while Kevin sat in the armchair.

"You shouldn't have said that we could win after Christmas. We won't manage this," Kevin started in French, making Neil frown.

"We're so close now, why don't you believe in us? We have it in us, we're matching the Ravens' skills," Neil argued, using French as well.

"We're too passionate. The girls fight harder than anyone else for their stance, Matt wants this with an intensity, and it's Seth's last season. The cousins have something worth fighting for for once in
their lives. You're irrationally fierce and project all your anger into playing. We can't win against the Ravens. They're too analytical for us," Kevin mumbled, and Nicky turned the TV louder.

Neil shook his head, knowing that Kevin had it the wrong way around.

"They can't win against us because we don't have a style or strategy like them. We're a mix and we're not as static. We're more dynamic than they could ever be," Neil argued, and Kevin shook his head, looking away. Neil knew there was more to this. "What's your reason? Why do you want this so badly?"

Kevin took a deep breath and looked away.

"I have no clue. Closure? I want to show Riko that he didn't break me. That he didn't manage to take my fight away," Kevin explained, and Aaron frowned at them when he heard the name between all the French words. Names were always tricky.

"I want him to see me standing. That I have my life together. That I'm no longer his," he went on, and Neil nodded. He understood Kevin perfectly.

"You don't need the game for that, though. You could start differently," Neil tried, and Kevin shook his head.

"How?"

Neil played with his fingers a little while thinking of how to put it.

"Maybe if you didn't go as hard on us during training? Or you could talk to your father," he tried, not naming him so the others wouldn't recognise the name in the stream of French words.

"Forget it," Kevin said, shaking his head and crossing his arms. He looked away, but Neil could tell he was thinking.

"It'd be a way to be your own man, Kev. To be an adult. Responsible and independent," he tried again, but Kevin kicked against the sofa table.

"Shut up, Neil," he said in English, so he knew the conversation was over.

He didn't mind.

Neil went to his own room after a while but couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling and listened to Matt's breathing, Seth's snoring, while the bed creaked with every move.

He couldn't play the way he wanted to. He wasn't bad, he was just not assimilated to the position enough.

It was the way he'd felt pretty much a year ago, when he'd transferred from backliner to striker.

From a Raven to a Fox.

Neil remembered the frustration and he felt exactly the same way now. The only thing that had helped were late night practices with Kevin. Going over something as simple as how to hold the racquet a million times. Learning the easiest manoeuvres from the scratch.

He got out of bed and pulled a hoodie over his head. It was only eleven pm but they all had morning classes tomorrow, so everyone was asleep.
Neil took the key Andrew had given him and unlocked the door to the Monsters' room, went to the living room and stopped.

He couldn't just break into their room in the middle of the night, wake up Kevin and force him to come train with him.

Neil sighed and went to the hallway again, debating on what to do. Then he pulled out his phone.

"Hey Kev."

"You up?"

"Can we go to the stadium and train a little?"

"It's okay if you don't wanna."

"It's Neil in case you didn't safe the number."

"Josten."

"If you're asleep nevermind btw."

Maybe he only texted seven times in fifteen seconds so the buzz of his phone would wake Kevin up. Maybe he was exaggerating.


Kevin did show up a few minutes later, looking like death himself. Neil laughed when he saw him walking out of the building and entering the passenger seat.

"Shouldn't we walk? It's Andrew's—"

"You didn't wake me up in the middle of the night to run to the stadium. He gave you the key, you're free to drive it," Kevin explained, making Neil sigh a little. He hoped Andrew was okay with this.

They actually got to the stadium, Neil driving carefully as he tried not to harm the car in any way.

"Why are we doing this?" Kevin asked when Neil parked, and he looked out of the window for a second before bracing himself for the words he was about to say.

"I don't want to face Riko like this. He made sure everyone can see how weak I was, but I don't want to prove him right. I want them to see that there's a lot left of me and I don't think I can do that without winning the game," he explained, getting out of the car and walking towards the stadium.

"Neil, wait," Kevin said, but he didn't walk more slowly. Riko had broken him. He'd been dead long before his mother had arrived. Neil had given up and there was nothing that could bring back the part of him that Riko had taken.

Nothing except for making him pay. Riko might be king, but he had a new enemy in his kingdom. A boy that had enough anger in him to tear down castles.

"He'll pay for everything, Kevin. Everything he did to you and Jean. Everything he put me through. And I don't want him to lose, Kevin, I couldn't care less, but I want the rest of the world to see how he loses everything he ever was. He'll never be anything but a forgotten wonder child that missed its way into the real world," Neil said, and it made him even angrier to say the words out loud.
That psycho had made them suffer and it was time for payback.

"You should calm down a little, Neil. There's no point in starting the game like this, your emotions cloud your sense of reason," Kevin argued as they went to the locker rooms. They didn't change into gear, knowing they'd only play with each other without checks or fouls.

Neil still felt better in running shoes and with his racquet in his hands. He didn't respond, but he knew Kevin was wrong.

This was what differentiated him from the Ravens. Neil couldn't leave his feelings out, they were an inevitable part of his game. He couldn't analyse every event when he had a goal in mind. Kevin couldn't make him deny himself so obviously.

"If everything we ever do should be reasonable, then why didn't you talk to Wymack yet? What's the big reason behind that?" Neil asked, knowing it moved Kevin the way his words had affected him.

"Did you want us to practice or is the reason I'm up in the middle of the night that you have too much to say?" Kevin asked back, looking unimpressed.

Neil straightened his posture and looked into Kevin's eyes.

"He deserves to know," he said, not wanting to let this go. If he had a shot at someone like that for a father, Neil would take it. Maybe you needed torture and a burnt off face for the realisation, but maybe Kevin only needed someone to open his eyes.

"What do you know about any of this, Neil? Has it ever occurred to you that he might not want to know? You always hated Riko, but before you even got to the Nest, he was the only family I had. I grew up with him and even when I found out about Wymack, I stayed," Kevin said, and Neil felt uneasy all of a sudden.

Jean was afraid of Riko and Neil hated the Raven. Kevin, though? That was a complicated issue, somewhere between manipulation and love, spite and hate, family and enemies. Role model and negative example.

Neil remembered how Kevin had only started to realise that things were wrong when he'd arrived. When Riko did all these bad things to someone else and Kevin finally realised that this wasn't what it was supposed to be.

"He'd be proud of you if he knew about this, Kevin, I promise," Neil said, but Kevin shook his head, swallowing visibly.

"Let's just train," he argued, and Neil remained silent for now.

They practiced every move Neil struggled with, put effort into each detail and two and a half hours later, Neil felt more confident. Maybe he'd learn this. He really didn't have a choice.

"You need to work harder on this, you don't have a chance against the goalkeepers if you play the way you have been so far," Kevin said when they were back in the Maserati after a quick shower.

Neil ignored the underlying insult the way he ignored the pain in his legs and drove on.

"I'm not a bad striker," Neil argued instead, bringing them home slowly.

"You're not a good one, either. Everyone has been telling you about how much of a development you went through and how good you got, but this isn't the time for that. Nobody cares that you only
played this position for a year, you need to play like a pro if you want us to have any shot at the title," he explained matter of factly, making Neil take a deep breath.

"We have to win, Kev, you know that," he said, unable to look at Kevin. Neil knew that the time for excuses was over. He'd have to deliver.

They went home in silence and Neil stopped the car.

"This is going to kill me," Kevin mumbled when he opened the door of his room, but vanished before Neil could begin to answer something.

Neil went to bed quickly afterwards, but it was pointless. It wasn't as if he'd be able to sleep, anyways.

He thought of Kevin, of how he'd been a Raven since he was five, how Riko was the first kid Kevin had talked to after his mother's death. Of course he couldn't hate him the way Neil did.

Neil, who had a mother that probably loved him in her egocentric way. Neil, who'd been sold, who'd been property, who'd never been allowed to be anything but an Exy player.

He didn't sleep that night.

They went to the stadium the next morning, and Wymack had a new game for them to analyse. Neil stared at the screen and tried figuring out the goalkeepers' weaknesses.

Class was alright. He hadn't read any books for this semester yet and considering how it was almost over, he wouldn't bother to do that anymore. He was tired and didn't think that listening would do him any good.

Other students wished him luck for the game next week and Neil felt sick. Less than ten days and this would be over. He'd know if it was worth it or if Riko had been right all along.

That afternoon, practice went a lot better. Everyone put effort into it and even Neil managed the new drills now. They were good at performing moves and countermoves and Kevin smiled when it all seemed to work out.

Andrew didn't bother blocking anyone's shots when they played against each other in two teams though, making Kevin increasingly mad until he threw his racquet at the floor and yelled, but it was still a good game for the players that finally learned to rely on each other.

And Neil pushed harder than he had since the Trojans game, trying, really trying, to get past. The game became faster as they finally had the chance to really use their new skills, and Neil felt like more of a striker than ever.

There were small fights between them, as always, but Matt and Aaron were concentrating on the game again quickly and even Seth and Kevin didn't kill each other for once.

Kevin was louder and angrier than usually, but that was probably Neil's fault for keeping him up last night, but in the end they wore smiles on their faces.

They were far from perfect, but they managed the new drills and the thrill of pushing farther and farther made them all enthusiastic.

Trainings like this made them think that maybe, if everything went well —
Perhaps they could win.

Neil felt the flicker of hope in all of them, but he knew that something had shifted. They weren't only dreamers anymore. They had gotten past wishing and wanting. They had a shot at it now.

It had finally gotten through to every one of them that they could use the chance Wymack had offered when they thought the world had given up on them. They could be champions, show the world what not even they had dared to consider up to now.

Neil was still smiling when he realised that Kevin was slower than usually while packing away their stuff. When they went off the court, he didn't follow them to the lockers but went to Wymack first.

"Could you wait for a second? I have some things to talk about if you're not too busy," he said, and Neil saw the tense shoulders, saw the boy that looked so much alike Wymack. He held his breath and made a point of looking away, walking towards the locker rooms so that the others would follow.

Kevin came along but was unusually silent as they showered and got dressed.

"Don't wait for me," Kevin told Andrew, making Nicky frown.

"What do you need to discuss?" he asked, but Kevin shook his head and Neil couldn't believe Kevin would do this. He was glad, of course, but it was still more courage than Neil would have given him credit for.

"Nothing. Game stuff," Kevin said, leaving the room quickly as the others exchanged looks.

"He's getting weirder and weirder with time," Seth said after some time, leaving the room with Matt.

The Monsters left as well, and Neil crossed his fingers, hoping this would turn out okay. He knew Kevin needed it to.

They went home and Neil tried to get studying done, but he kept thinking about Kevin, hoping the conversation would be okay.

It took more than three hours for Kevin to get back, and Neil pressed his lips together when he saw the almost half empty bottle of vodka Kevin must have bought on the way.

"How did it go?" he asked in French, but Kevin shook his head.

"I don't want to talk to you," he muttered, and Neil raised an eyebrow at the mix of English and French Kevin used. He must have spent some time getting drunk if he was this gone.

"Kevin?" he asked, and Aaron frowned at them deeply.

"What happened?" he asked, and Kevin shrugged.

"I'm going to bed and if anyone wakes me before practice, it'll be the last thing you'll do," he said, vanishing in the bedroom. Neil heard the shower a few seconds later.

"What was that all about? What could Wymack have said?" he asked, and Aaron kept looking at the bedroom door as if he was waiting for an answer.

"Probably something about the game," Aaron said, but none of them believed it and it wasn't Neil's place to give up other people's secrets.
They remained there, studying on the sofa or the bean bags while the TV ran in the background, until Andrew got up. He didn't say anything but the way he looked at Neil was enough for him to close the book and follow him outside.

It was drizzling when they got to the roof, but it didn't bother either of them.

"Why did you push Kevin to admit this to Wymack?" Andrew asked before lighting two cigarettes, carefully shielding them from the water. Neil didn't look at him but at the university building, frowning to himself a little. He'd only found out about Kevin's relation to Wymack this winter.

"How did you know?" Neil asked back, but Andrew glared. Neil inhaled the cigarette smoke deeply and let out a sigh. Truth for a truth. "He needs to get this out and Wymack deserves to know," Neil answered before looking at Andrew expectantly.

"It was obvious that he was looking for a part of his family," Andrew answered, making Neil frown.

"How's that?" he asked, watching how Andrew took his time taking deep drags from the cigarette, blowing into Neil's face. It had long since stopped bothering him.

"It's not your turn," Andrew answered eventually, and Neil rolled his eyes. No matter what his reputation might say, sometimes Andrew was nothing but a drama queen.

"You can have two in return," Neil offered, and Andrew considered it for a moment.

"Nicky wouldn't have come back here if it hadn't been for Aaron and me. You wouldn't have come here without Kevin. I would have stayed at Cass's house if it weren't for Aaron. Family makes you have irrational decisions. Why else would he have chosen the Foxes? He could have made court even two years ago," Andrew explained, and Neil had to press his lips together so he wouldn't stare open mouthed.

Andrew didn't usually talk this much and something between the revelation and the analysis moved Neil.

The blond boy didn't look at Neil, though. His eyes were on the ground, looking down the tower as both their legs dangled from the edge.

He thought of how Andrew had explained this to him. Feeling something for once, just to remind yourself you could. But maybe this wasn't exactly the same action today. Maybe Andrew wanted to distract himself from something else.

But maybe he was just looking down the building and Neil interpreted too much into it. Maybe Andrew didn't care about his twin or cousin. About Neil or anything else.

"I couldn't believe when Wymack asked me to be co-captain," Neil said after some moments. He needed to fill the silence. "I mean, it'll only be my second year. Most of the rookies will probably be older than I am, I don't think I can do this," he added, and Andrew looked back up.

"Captain?" he asked, and Neil shrugged. He hadn't told anyone yet, only Dan knew, but he wanted to talk about it, somehow.

"I was surprised as well," he mumbled, looking away. He'd never had this much responsibility, and it was weird. Someone trusted him enough to be a constant in something as huge as this team.

"I'm not surprised," Andrew argued, and for some reason, Neil couldn't help smiling.
"Thanks," he said, letting his cigarette burn to the filter. Neil felt warm.

"That wasn't a compliment," Andrew said, but Neil knew that Andrew approved and that was enough.

"It kind of was," he argued, while Andrew threw the stub of the cigarette down the building.

"Just shut up already," Andrew demanded, sounding annoyed, which made Neil laugh.

"Why don't you make me?"

Andrew shoved against Neil, but he was still smiling. These were the moments he lived for.

But as always, they had to go inside at some point. When Neil laid down in his bed around two hours later, the boys were sleeping already. He could see Allison's hair sticking out from the blanket, making him feel a little bad. She was clinging to Seth tightly, and Neil knew she was afraid of the next year. He'd be on his own and far away, could probably be persuaded to do drugs or be with girls more easily than when he was here.

Still, Neil didn't think that would happen. He'd been clean for four months now, which appeared to be longer than since he joined the Foxes.

Neil climbed into bed and tried to close his eyes. He counted in every language he knew, but Matt's snoring made it impossible to stay awake. The rain had gotten stronger as well and Seth's heavy breathing did the rest. He counted Foxes, counted happy memories and counted days without Nathan Wesninski on this planet, but nothing helped.

He didn't sleep that night, either.

The next morning, the drive to the stadium was silent. Kevin looked dead on his feet and Neil wasn't sure what to expect of the day. He doubted this would be a pleasant morning.

The Upperclassmen were seated in the TV room already while Wymack was standing next to it. The Monsters and Neil took the remaining seats, waiting for Wymack's instructions for today's game.

"Okay guys, before we're starting with the analysis, I'd like to say something. I'd rather have you hear it from me than anyone else," he started, and Neil couldn't help but notice the deep circles under his eyes and the tired expression. He guessed the man had slept just as little as he had.

Dan frowned deeply, crossing her arms, and Neil realised that Wymack wasn't looking at Kevin.

"So, I don't think we should make this a big deal, but," their coach started, but shook his head. He seemed older and Neil pressed his lips together.

"A baby? How old is mini-you and why didn't you tell us earlier?" Allison asked, but she seemed delighted by this information. "A small Wymack, can you imagine?" she asked, making Nicky smile.

"He's… what, twenty?" he asked, looking at Kevin, who nodded with a pale face, not looking up.

"And you'd have known if this hadn't been something I was told about yesterday. As I said, I wanted
you to hear it from me. Now if nobody has anything to say, I'd like you to concentrate on the Ravens' technique in this game. Concentrate on the defense."

And like that, Wymack pressed play and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter that could have been posted earlier if I hadn’t had rookie training today *insert annoyed emoji* *insert half joked comment about how bad they were* *insert absolutely not joked comment about one of them tho*

Important Information: as you can see, I raised the chapter number from 45 to 46 because this chapter got way too long and I wasn’t comfortable with what it became because it was more rushing from one scene to another than actually writing, so… yeah. Not too important I guess but I wanted to let you know!

THANKS A LOT FOR ALL THE FEEDBACK ON THE LAST CHAPTER AND TUMBLR!! It made me feel so good and all of you know how much i appreciate it!

Special thanks to Saya because you!!! Slay!!!!!! And I am so happy you continue doing this with me! And thanks for calling me pumpkin and being you!

Also thanks to everyone who is okay with my constant rants about literally anything!
Kevin pressed his lips together and Dan looked ill.

"Don't you think this could have been worth mentioning?" she asked, voice a little shaky. Neil knew she loved Wymack a lot. He wasn't sure why, but he understood that this was hard on her.

"I didn't think it was relevant," Kevin answered, voice barely audible, and Andrew and Neil exchanged looks.

"It's just kind of unexpected," Nicky tried, but it didn't improve the mood.

"No, it changes everything! You lied to us, you pretended to come here because you wanted to help, because you saw something in us. Instead you just used us to get what you want like the rest of them," Dan argued, and Matt placed a hand on her back. She shook it off.

"That's not true," Kevin said, and Neil saw how Renee had a hand on Dan's shoulder. The air was charged and it would take mere seconds for a fight to break loose.

"You never cared about the Foxes, Kevin!" Dan said. Neil didn't understand why she was so emotional. Of course she had issues with this, it was a weird situation after all, but this?

"Dan, cut this," Seth said, and all eyes were on him. "Name a single one of us with a healthy father-child relationship, I'll wait," he went on, crossing his arms. "Of course Kevin never cared about the Foxes, all he ever cared about was his money and fame, but that's not the point of this. We're Foxes, Dan, nobody cares about us. Nobody except for three people at this campus! And maybe I'm only talking for myself here, but if my father was a guy like our coach, I'd try to get to know him as well."

Neil couldn't believe Seth was backing Kevin up. But his point was undeniable, and Neil nodded along.

"I'm just trying to say--" Dan said, but Neil decided to step up.

"We all like Wymack, Dan, a lot! What does this change? Why does it bother you? Maybe he has a son, we'll all survive," Neil tried, and she crossed her arms.

"Training is over. I won't stay in a room with you," she announced, turning off the TV and leaving. Matt was on her heels and Renee followed quickly as well.

Neil was glad. She needed people on her side, he didn't want her to be alone with this.
"This explains your obsession with Exy," Allison said after a few seconds, and then shrugged. "You'll have to invest into good hair products. He was grey by the end of his thirties," she went on, getting up and shaking her head.

"Not in the mood," Kevin said lowly, and Allison shrugged.

"Whatever, Kevin, nobody cares. I always found it sad that he didn't have a family," she said to herself leaving the room. Seth looked as if he wanted to say something, decided against it, and followed her.

"Kevin Wymack would have sounded weird anyways," Nicky tried, but Aaron smacked him.

"You never told us. Why?" he asked, and Kevin shook his head.

"Didn't want to make it a deal. I wanna get blackout-drunk now, will anyone skip class with me?" he asked, and Nicky shrugged as Aaron nodded. Neil decided against it.

They went home and Neil attended the Spanish test he hadn't studied for. He couldn't answer many questions, but it'd be okay. He'd pass.

Getting back, he found that Dan and Matt occupied the boys' room while Seth, Allison and Renee were in the girls'.

He couldn't believe that something this irrelevant would move anyone enough to argue.

Afternoon practice… well…

Neither Kevin nor Dan attended, Nicky was a little drunk and Wymack looked pale and not sure what to do when he saw his players on court like that. He didn't say anything, though, and Neil assumed that he'd grant this to them for once.

It was the most unproductive they'd been in weeks and Neil hated the mood all of them had. As if this changed anything.

"I want to see all of you on court tomorrow. We're really not in the position to have anyone ditch practice like that," Wymack said when they left, and Neil could hear the disappointment in his voice. He knew both Kevin and Dan would regret this, not because of the punishment but because this was nonnegotiable.

When Neil entered the locker room after he showered and got dressed, Matt and Seth looked angrier than he'd seen them in a long time.

"Is everything okay?" Neil asked, and Matt turned away, shoving clothes into his bag and putting it over his shoulder.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," he answered, shaking his head. "All of you think she's overreacting, but she put so much into this team."

"Nobody is denying that, Matt. But she pretends that Wymack is a new person now. He was never a saint, but having a son he didn't know about doesn't turn him into a bad person," Seth said, trying to keep his voice low. It didn't work.
"I want to go home now. So please, come on," Matt said, leaving the room. Neil found it remarkable that even with all the tension, they drove home together.

"I don't get it," Aaron said, shaking his head, while Nicky shrugged.

"Me neither. Wymack is the only one that has the right to react emotionally but it seems that only everyone else does," he mumbled, and Neil nodded. He thought perhaps Kevin had the right as well, considering how he was only starting to understand everything Riko had deprived him of.

They drove home in silence, and Neil was worried when they showed up to an empty room. Kevin was gone.

They'd practiced for two and a half hours, so Kevin could be just about anywhere in the state.

Neil took out his phone and texted him, since nobody else seemed bothered.

It took half an hour before he received an answer.

"Leave me alone, Nathaniel"

"I meant Neil"

"Sorry"

Neil wasn't even bothered by the name as much as by the fact that Kevin was drunk enough to use it.

He knew it came naturally to him and Jean sometimes, and that wasn't a problem. They'd grown up using that name and it wasn't used in a harmful way.

Neil remained in the Monters' room, not sure if he'd want to face the Upperclassmen right now. It was always weird when two of them had an argument, so Neil thought perhaps it'd be better to leave them alone.

He even took out a folder and took notes on a few books he needed to read for Spanish. Admittedly, he only took notes of the SparkNotes website, but it was better than nothing. Neil never understood why people needed to read entire books to get the gist.

It was around nine in the evening, when he heard a key in the lock. The four of them looked up as Kevin entered the room, and Neil frowned deeply.

"What happened to your face?" Aaron asked, and Kevin's hand came to his cheek before he flinched a little. He seemed drunk enough to pass out right then and there.

Kevin took something from his face that could have been a transparent band aid or something different, and stepped more into the room. Neil stared at the small symbol and pressed his lips together, unsure what he'd do if he'd open his mouth.

Where the number on his cheekbone had been, a new black tattoo covered his face. It was a crown, the royal lily on top of where the 'two' had been mere hours before.

"A crown?" Nicky asked, and Kevin pressed his eyes together for a second, holding on to the door
"The royal lily crown," Kevin corrected, and Neil remembered when Kevin had first heard of the style. He'd gone on and on about the meaning of the lily, the function of the crown throughout history, where the symbol came from and what it meant.

"Why would you...?" Aaron asked, and Kevin touched his cheek again and nodded.

"They call him the King of Castle Evermore. The Son of Exy. He's a manipulative child, thinking that being assigned a title makes him worthy of the job. We all play the little game Tesuji shoved us into, but I'm quitting. I'm not playing this anymore, I'll show them who deserves the crown, and when I'm done, the only lily he'll see is on the grave he buries his dreams in," Kevin said, voice deeper and slow. He was standing tall, talking as if he'd never been forced to stay silent. Fighting as if he'd never lost.

Neil couldn't believe that Kevin was stepping up for himself. That he'd done this.

He looked at the others, and had an eyebrow raised while Nicky looked with his eyes wide.

"Time to tear down the castle," Andrew said, and for once in his life he didn't look bored. Neil saw honest interest on his face, and if he wasn't mistaken, there was the hint of a smile. It was the most emotion Neil had ever seen on Andrew's face.

But Kevin was still as drunk as one could get before blacking out, and Neil helped him to bed shortly after that.

"I'm proud of you, you know? Wymack and the tattoo, that's— That's pretty amazing," Neil said when Kevin laid there, eyes already close.

"Can't just keep screwing everything up," Kevin mumbled, voice slurred and low in the room.

"You're not screwing anything up, Kevin. You're doing good," Neil assured, before leaving the room slowly and silently.

Andrew was on the roof when Neil came back into the living room, but he didn't mind. Everyone needed privacy sometimes.

He talked to Nicky about this for an hour or something, and couldn't believe it had happened. Kevin had done this...

Nicky explained how he'd met people that identified via their tattoos and how the meaning could be very important, but Neil didn't quite get it. The four on his cheek would be the only tattoo he'd ever have and that wasn't a bad thing. He never wanted to be marked again.

Neil went to his room shortly after that, and Seth and Matt weren't talking, apparently. He'd never been in his room without chatter and noise, and something about this bothered him.

He tried making conversation, but didn't receive much of an answer. Matt had never been this reserved.

"Guys? Is this something we have to be as invested in? I mean, why do we have to be like this with each other when it's not our problem?" Neil asked after a while, and Matt didn't look up from his
phone.

"You're picking sides, why can't I?"

Neil and Seth looked at each other and he pressed his lips together.

Matt went to bed first that night, and Seth came to sit by Neil's side as he turned on a movie.

"He'll calm down, don't worry, yeah? Matt and I are both a little too invested into our relationships sometimes, it'll work out in a few days," he assured, and Neil nodded. He didn't think that they could afford this, especially considering how the game was next week, but this was not his problem right then.

He went to bed an hour later, when the movie had ended, but he couldn't close his eyes for longer than a minute before the lids forced themselves open. Couldn't even count to ten until other thoughts came rushing in.

Neil didn't sleep that night.

Not the following, and not the one after.

The press loved Kevin's tattoo and had one news report on the former Perfect Court after the other. Neil was a wreck and avoided cameras like death itself.

The game was half a week away and Neil got better at practice, but he knew his grades dropped again. He couldn't think of anything but Exy, anything but winning just because he refused to lose.

But after five nights of less than two hours of sleep per night, Neil was a drained. He wanted to sleep, but thoughts kept him up.

It was Monday night, around midnight, when he started falling asleep on the roof next to Andrew.

"Just go to bed," Andrew said, and Neil groaned. His head felt as if it was filled with cotton and his eyes burned, but he knew that no matter what he did, he'd stay up all night.

"I can't sleep. As soon as I lay down I'm wide awake," Neil mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He was dead on his feet.

"You fall asleep constantly," Andrew remarked, making Neil look over the streetlights with a frustrated shrug.

"It's different," he said, unsure how to express this.

When he was in his room with Seth and Matt both asleep, thoughts came easier. He felt worse about the game, everything he considered was disastrous. He felt cold and hopeless and more like a Raven than in a long time.

The roof, however, made him feel better. No matter the weather, no matter what they were talking about, he was at ease. Neil was okay when he was here.

"You're an idiot," Andrew answered, and Neil nodded to himself. He felt like one, these days. He'd screw up the game if he didn't start sleeping normally again.
They stayed outside for no longer than half an hour after that, and Neil's eyes felt like fire. He needed to sleep, but his mind wouldn't let him.

He and Andrew went inside soon, and Neil was glad to be on the sofa. Kevin and Aaron were asleep already, but Nicky was still up. He seemed happy to see them and talked about how he'd just talked to Erik, who couldn't come see the game but was excited for the summer with all of them.

Neil had almost forgotten. He'd spend the summer in Germany with them. It was a nice reminder.

Nicky did most of the talking until around one am before he announced that he'd go to bed.

Neil rubbed his eyes again and tried not to feel too bad at the prospect of another sleepless night. He wouldn't be able to do this for too much longer, though.

"I should go, as well," he said, getting up from the sofa and running a hand through his hair. Maybe Seth was still up, they could watch a movie together or something.

"Go where?" Andrew asked, and Neil frowned.

"To bed. It's the middle of the night," Neil explained, unsure why Andrew asked. It wasn't as if this was an unusual time to go to bed, after all.

Andrew looked at him for a long moment. "You won't be sleeping," he stated, and Neil didn't know how to react. It wasn't a question and Neil didn't need to confirm it.

"I know, but I'll survive. I'm going to fall asleep, eventually," he tried, knowing Andrew wouldn't be satisfied.

But Andrew didn't say anything, so Neil turned around. Maybe laying down would help.

"Where are you going?" Andrew asked again, and Neil sighed. Why was he doing this?

"Andrew, I'm dead on my feet, I just want to lay down," he said, not sure why he had to explain himself. He just wanted to lay down.

"Sleep here. See if it works," Andrew said, and Neil frowned.

"I don't—why would that change anything?" he asked, shaking his head. He supposed his room was better than the sofa, considering how he never felt good without people around.

"It changed something on Christmas and when you came back from Baltimore," Andrew answered, and Neil was almost stupid enough to react to this. Andrew was talking about his bed?

"You don't have to do this," Neil said, knowing how little Andrew liked anyone in his bed, but the boy shook his head.

"I know that. Now shut up and go to bed," he said, and Neil looked at the door for another second. He shouldn't push Andrew, should leave, but he couldn't. If he got any sleep at all, this would have been worth it.

"Thank you," he mumbled, but Andrew rolled his eyes and went to the bedroom, Neil on his heels.
"I said 'shut up'," Andrew whispered, and moved for Neil to lay down while he went to the bathroom.

So Neil did. The room was silent, all of them asleep, and he was okay with listening to their breaths for now.

Andrew came back in more comfortable clothes and went to bed, laying down with his back against the wall. Neil couldn't help looking at him in the dark, and something about it calmed down his heartbeat.

"Thanks," he whispered, but Andrew didn't answer. Neil had no problem with that, he was used to Andrew by now.

Andrew closed his eyes at some point, and Neil tried to sleep. He closed his eyes and really didn't want to get lost in the spiraling thoughts, but he couldn't ignore them.

The game would go very wrong. Neil couldn't perform the drills one hundred percent yet, and the game was only a few days away. They were split in the middle and he was caught in between, they'd never—

Andrew's hand was on his chest and pressed lightly, and Neil opened his eyes.

"You're breathing too fast. Calm down," Andrew whispered, and something about the hand on his chest made him feel better.

He knew Andrew hated loud breaths, especially at night, so he closed his eyes and told himself to calm down.

Neil brought his hand up and placed it on Andrew's, and something about it made him feel good. More at ease.

"Thank you," he whispered again, and Andrew didn't react. Neil still found it easier not to slip away like this.

It wasn't the perfect night. He had troubles falling asleep and woke up often, but it was more than he'd gotten in a week.

Waking up and seeing the profile of someone Neil felt home with made falling back asleep easier.

Too many things happened at the same time.

There was banging on the door, Nicky yelped, Andrew jerked awake, and Aaron spit threats at whoever bothered them at this ungodly hour.

Kevin was the only one able to sleep through the banging.

Nicky was the one to get up and get the door while Aaron laid back down.

Andrew frowned at the door while Neil laid next to him, looking at the lines the pillow had drawn
into Andrew's cheeks. It was a nice sight and almost enough to calm down Neil's heartbeat that was racing from the way he woke up.

"Did you see Neil?"

Matt.

Neil could practically see Nicky's confused expression as he said "It's eight in the morning, guys, no I haven't. Not since last night." He sounded tired and Neil rubbed his eyes.

"Could you ask the psycho? Neil left his phone in our room and we're worried," Seth chimed in, and Neil shook his head. He hated how they talked about Andrew.

"He's my cousin, Seth, seriously," Nicky said, and Neil heard a loud sigh and steps as the man walked through the living room. "Andrew, have you… okay… w…"

Nicky looked more than confused to see Neil laying in Andrew's bed, and his reaction was enough to get Aaron to sit back up and look at the bunk properly. He rolled his eyes and let out a sigh, getting up and out of bed.

"It's too early for this," he muttered, shoving past Nicky. The next thing Neil heard was the coffee maker.

"I should go," Neil mumbled, climbing out of bed. He was wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, so it wasn't too much of a problem. He knew better than to thank Andrew for the full night of sleep he got for once, knowing this was something he'd only say in private.

"You okay?" Nicky asked, but Neil just nodded and Andrew got out of bed to join Aaron in the kitchen while Nicky laid back down.

"I'm good, thanks," he said quickly, before walking to Seth and Matt, who stood in the doorframe with their arms crossed and an eyebrow raised.

They looked expectantly for exactly three seconds before Matt started laughing and ruffled Neil's hair.

"I was worried!" he complained, closing the door behind him as the three of them walked back to their room together.

"Why were you there? Why didn't you take your phone?" Seth asked, and Neil realized how Matt sat in the middle of them as they settled on the sofa, arms around both of his roommates.

Maybe a night of sleep had helped him sort out the issue, and maybe worrying about Neil was good on their relationship, as weird as that might sound.

"I couldn't sleep, I— sorry," Neil mumbled, and Matt and Seth exchanged looks, making him turn away. They were such... such brothers, sometimes.

"Whatever, Neil. Just tell us where you are, okay? Nobody cares if you sleep in his bed or if he stays the night here, you know that from Dan and Al," Seth said, making him shake his head.

"Guys, c'mon," he complained. He'd just woken up and would really like to get some more sleep,
though he doubted that that would work.

Dan and Kevin both attended afternoon practice on Monday, even though Dan still barely talked to Kevin or their Coach. The game would take place in four days and Neil—Neil wasn't hopeless.

They played against each other in two teams, and for some reason Dan and Kevin had been put into the same team. It was the first time the team opposing Kevin won by means that weren't cheating.

"Guys, the game is this week! We cannot afford this kind of behavior," Wymack said after training. Dan seemed to be enraged even further.

"I agree, Coach. We can't go on pretending we haven't been used for this. He lied to us and if I'm still captain next year, he won't be a part of my team," Dan answered as they went off court, and all of them froze.

Kevin had been looking dead for the past days, but this was a new low even for him.

"You can't do that," Neil said, needing to speak up. "You're mad at him and Wymack and that's none of my concern. But this? You're two players short without us. Good luck explaining that."

Everyone looked uncomfortable, but Neil was sick of this. He couldn't have them rip each other's heads off just because of weird ideas they had.

"You're picking sides?" Dan asked, crossing her arms offendedly. "And what is it with these former Ravens that makes them think they're irreplaceable?"

"Dan," Matt mumbled, but Neil stared at her, unsure how to react to this.

He was sick of people forcing him to pick a side. Raven or Fox. Monster or Upperclassman. He was done choosing to ignore facets of himself just because others didn't understand that he was both.

"Have fun replacing Kevin and me. Seth will be gone as well, and we'll see how well the team will do with three or four rookie strikers. Do you know what you're doing? You're putting your personal issues over the team, which is exactly what you allege Kevin of," Neil said, trying to ignore the pull in his chest. He knew that he was on thin ice and that Dan had the power to throw him off the team. He wasn't co-captain yet, none of the others except for Andrew knew he was supposed to become one.

"We're a team, so let's behave like one," he added, swallowing against the lump in his throat. The game was this week, they couldn't afford this.

"I can't believe this," Dan said, storming off. Out of the stadium. Neil stared past her, really unsure where she was going. She couldn't do this, right?

"This is why you're co-captain in two months, Josten," Wymack said, but Neil shook his head. He didn't feel too good right then.

"I don't think—"

"Co-captain?" Nicky and Matt asked at the same time, and Kevin smiled at him.

Neil looked down and shrugged. What if they thought he didn't deserve it?
"Congrats!" Renee said, while Seth shook his head.

"You'll have to take it easy with the press now. What a pity that I won't be seeing that," he said, and Allison patted Neil’s back.

Aaron seemed indifferent and checked his phone, but Andrew looked almost interested in the situation. Neil probably imagined that.

Matt was worried about Dan of course, but when they changed and as Neil received many hugs and congratulations for his new position, the Foxes calmed down.

When they drove home, Nicky wouldn't shut up about Neil being captain. He talked about how they would get away with everything and about relaxing practices, making Neil laugh.

He hadn't thought about this yet, though. He'd lead some practices, probably. He'd be in charge, have to punish people somehow from time to time. He hoped he wouldn't be too much of a Moriyama with the team.

Neil thought of the Foxes in two years. Dan, Allison and Renee would be gone, he'd be facing a court with half the original line up gone. Kevin and Matt would leave the year after that. The cousins the following. He'd be captain of a team he'd have to get to know.

"Neil?"

He looked up from where he was staring out of the window, totally lost in the thought.

"I just never thought that this would be possible," he explained, voice almost scratchy as he smiled.

He had a family and something to look forward to.

When Neil had first arrived here, he'd been lost. He'd clung to the one thing of his past that wasn't destructive or negative. He'd been looking for something to look forward to, something to hold on to.

He'd arrived and didn't even realize that until now. Neil had a course and liked where the way led, where it was taking him. And he didn't doubt that these people would stick with him even if he was still at college while they were living their lives.

They arrived at Fox Tower and Kevin climbed the stairs by his side. "Thanks for stepping up. I wouldn't have found the words," Kevin said, making Neil smile.

"No problem, Kev," he answered. "Thanks for allowing me to stay here," he added. Maybe because he hadn’t thanked Kevin yet, but maybe just because he needed to hear something like this right now.

“That really went without saying, Neil. You’re my brother,” Kevin answered, and when Neil looked at the crown on Kevin’s cheekbone he felt like perhaps both of them truly understood what that meant for the first time.

Neil spent the afternoon with Renee, Seth and Allison, helping Seth with job applications and going through websites and newspapers while looking for flats somewhere close by.
“I can’t believe you’re leaving,” Allison mumbled for the thousandth time that afternoon, and Seth barely looked up from his laptop. They’d been through this.

“I can’t believe all of you will be gone next year,” Neil added, and it made Allison laugh.

“You’ll still have the Monsters. I don’t want you too far away,” she mumbled towards Seth again, who looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll live close by. And it’s not like you’ll stay here once you graduate, so don’t make this too big of a deal,” he said, shaking his head.

Allison frowned at him, shaking her head.

“Why would you say that?” she asked, seeming unhappy with the implications.

“It’s— Allison, come on, we all know that you’ll travel all around the globe with your job,” Seth answered. It was true, and all of them really knew that. “I think it’s weird that you ask me to stay close by when you’ll be gone in only a little over a year.”

Neil looked at Renee, who frowned from Seth to Allison and back. This was weird. Neil didn’t want them to argue, but he was kind of on Seth’s side.

“That doesn’t mean that— I just assumed we’d live together after I graduate, no matter where I work,” Allison said, seeming indifferent to the assumption that this was not the way it would be. Neil never understood how she could shut off emotionally so quickly. She did that from time to time, and it was always about Seth. Neil didn’t understand why she pretended that this didn’t matter to her, when they depended on each other so obviously.

“You’d move in with me?” he asked, and Allison frowned at him.

“Seth, what— of course. But it’s fine if you want the flat to yourself, I get it,” she said, voice still too flat.

“I didn’t think you would consider it, Al. But sure, honestly, I’d like to share the flat with you when you’re done with school.”

Allison looked at Seth for another moment before looking back at the paper in front of her. She seemed happier, but Neil could tell that she was suppressing a smile.

“Good that we settled this,” she muttered, and Seth rolled his eyes. These two would kill each other, one day.

They went on working on the texts a little before Neil decided he needed to catch up on learning as well. He excused himself and went to their room, almost stopping when he saw Dan and Matt on the sofa, reading and taking notes.

He opened his mouth but wasn’t sure what to say. Neil didn’t like that this conflict was so present suddenly.

“I just wanted to get some stuff,” he muttered, walking across the room and getting two books before turning to leave.
“It’s your room, you don’t have to explain yourself,” Dan said, and Neil frowned at her. He wasn’t sure how to react.

“Yeah, sorry, I didn’t… I don’t know,” he said, not even sure what he wanted to say.

“Neil? Can we talk for a second?” she asked, and Matt seemed surprised to hear that. Neil looked from her to the door and back before shrugging. Why not?

“Sure,” he said, and Matt stood up, leaving the room to them. Neil wondered what kind of conversation this would turn into as he sat down by her side.

“Okay, I’d like to start with something. When Wymack told me he wanted me to have a co-captain for the last year so we’d have someone for the following one, I thought he meant Kevin. He was the obvious choice, had experience, and he’d chosen us over the Ravens. I thought the fact that he came here was proof that he believed in us. But when he said he was thinking of asking you, it made a lot more sense, and I don’t want us to have an argument as a start of this new partnership,” she started, and Neil frowned a little. He wasn’t entirely sure what to make of this.

“And I’m glad he asked me. What does this have to do with anything, though?” he asked, watching her expression shift a little.

“Nothing, I guess. I just wanted to apologize for the way I behaved. You’re important for the team. But the other thing… I’m not sure how to react, and I know it’s wrong to let it out on all of you. But I really don’t know how to behave.”

Neil looked at Dan for a long moment and couldn’t believe it. Dan was one of the strongest women he knew. The fact that she was this worried and… open? It was weird for him. But then he thought perhaps admitting a mistake and asking for help showed more strength than pretending it didn’t happen.

“I don’t get why this is an issue to you. I mean, I get the whole part about Kevin’s reason to stay here, but isn’t all of this essentially none of our business?” Neil asked, and she let out a breath.

“I liked pretending that we were important enough for Kevin to consider. For you to come here. You’re— Neil, the Perfect Court was a dream every little league player wanted to come true, and that you came here and believed in the Foxes? That was a great deal for me. I know it’s absolutely idiotic, but this team is the best thing that ever even happened to me and I want to make it big. I don’t like that we’re means to an end for him.”

Neil stared at her for a very long moment before shaking his head. He understood the words but hated the meaning. He knew that Tetsuji’s marketing of the kids he’d bought had been good, but he never considered that anyone would see them as special just because of that. But with this in the back of his mind, he felt like he understood her a little better.

“Dan? I really don’t know what to say right now. I love the Foxes, yeah? I love this team and Palmetto and everything this comes with. But I think you should talk to Kevin about this,” he said, and she nodded, looking away from him with a sigh and crossing her arms.

“I guess I should,” she answered eventually, and Neil felt uncomfortable.

“I think this argument should end as soon as possible, Dan. The finale is on Friday,” he responded, needing to remind her of this. They couldn’t go on like this.
“I know. I'll take care of it,” she said, making it sound like a promise. Neil was glad they’d talked this through.

They went over to the girls’ room after that, and Matt looked a lot more relaxed when he saw Neil and Dan together. He knew the tension was tough on the entire team.

The Upperclassmen were pretty chatty, all of a sudden, and Neil had troubles making out words on the page he was trying to read. He decided to go to the Monsters’ room, around half an hour later, unable to ignore the ringing in his ears.

Nicky and Aaron were in the bean bag chairs while Kevin sat on the armchair and Andrew occupied the sofa. All of them had books or stashes of paper on their laps, and Neil was glad to finally be able to hear his thoughts again.

He sat down next to Andrew and the five of them spent the afternoon pretty much in silence. Neil didn’t really know why, but the tension in his shoulders had been less prominent since the conversation with Dan.

The day went by, Aaron went out with his girlfriend for a few hours, Nicky turned the TV on after a while, and at some point they sat their books down and started talking.

When Andrew and Neil sat on the roof by the end of the day, Kevin and Nicky had gone to bed already. Aaron was still out with Katelyn when they’d left, and Neil looked over their campus, smiling with the burning smell of cigarette smoke in his nose.

The area was unusually silent, and Neil knew that it had something to do with finals. Nobody was partying this week, even though nothing could stop them, usually.

But somehow, he felt the electricity in the air as if it was only seconds until lightning would strike across the sky. He could almost hear the distant rumble of thunder, even though the sky was clear and the stars shone brightly.

This felt like the silence before a storm, and Neil knew that Friday was the only chance to see who’d make it out alive and who’d get lost in the floods.

“I can practically hear your overdramatic thoughts,” Andrew remarked after a few minutes of silence, and Neil couldn’t help laughing.

Maybe he was being overdramatic, but maybe this was exactly the right amount of drama. The game would decide a lot for him, but at the end of the day? He’d survive even if they didn’t win.

That didn’t mean he wouldn’t do everything to make sure Riko would drown in the waves.

“What does it cost me to get you to close the goal this time?” Neil asked, and Andrew massaged the bridge of his nose, when he’d finished the cigarette.

“Just don’t be an idiot for a week,” Andrew said, and Neil rolled his eyes, looking over the university again.

“I don’t think that’ll work,” he said, and Andrew let out an annoyed breath while mumbling ‘idiot’. Neil laughed at that.
“Andrew?” he asked again, needing to know the cost. He couldn’t have him taking this game as a joke.

“Nothing, Neil, I’ll just do it,” Andrew said, and his voice was almost a little low.

“Did you just say you want nothing? Because in that case—“

“I swear, Neil, if you don’t shut up right now, I’ll let Riko score every five minutes,” Andrew interrupted him, and Neil couldn’t help smiling.

He was almost sorry for the hard time he gave Andrew. Almost.

But none of this mattered ten minutes later, when the summer breeze turned into warm breaths and when his focus shifted from the smell of cigarettes to the taste of them against his lips, even when he hadn’t smoked them.

Neil felt present in the moment, felt home here when Andrew and he held on to each other. When the sound of shuttered breaths and the feeling of the pulse became the only sensations Neil even recognized anymore, when hands on his torso didn’t make him panic, when Andrew let his guard down. Exactly then, Neil was alive.

Neil was glad when around half an hour later, Andrew asked him to stay in their room. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep elsewhere anyways, but the trust was still new and Neil was only getting used to shared beds. That had usually been reserved for the darkest of nights at the nest, when neither he nor Jean could bear the thought of a night alone.

And falling asleep with his eyes mapping out Andrew’s features turned the nights from dark shadows and brutal memories to golden dreams and bright wishes that could come true within the next week.

The next day’s practice was led by Wymack as Kevin and Dan were somewhere on their own, having a conversation in private. Neil was glad they were working it out.

The moves and counters worked and their strategy was set. The press usually only started to bother them on Gameday, but now they started on Tuesday and bombarded them with questions on the way to and from class.

The Foxes started going to class in groups of at least three people in order not to be crowded by photographers alone and Allison and Nicky took it upon them to not let anyone leave without looking at them first, making sure they looked presentable at all times.

Neil felt alive again.

He slept through the nights in Andrew’s bed and even if nightmares woke him up in the middle of the night, he could fall back asleep easily.

On Thursday after practice, Wymack told them that their classes would be cancelled for the next day and asked how many people they’d invited for the game as they only had ten seats reserved.

The mood dropped at that, and Nicky was the one to talk.
“Erik said he couldn’t come as he’s working. I asked him to stay the week, it’s a tragedy, “he said, crossing his arms. Neil felt almost sorry, but he knew they’d see each other in a month or two.

Then he thought of not seeing Andrew for two months and felt weird. Maybe this was a big deal, after all.

“Stephanie can’t come, either. Nobody could watch the kids,” Renee said, but shrugged. Neil knew she saw her regularly, so this was none of a deal.

“My mom can’t make it either,” Matt said, and he did seem disappointed. Neil bit his lip as Dan kissed his cheek, and he looked around the room.

“Can anyone make it?” Wymack asked with a frown, and Dan shrugged.

“I invited two of my friends, they said they’d come,” she said, and Neil felt sorry for his team. He knew all of them had weird and messed up family relations, but he also knew that these things still meant a lot to most of them.

“Hey, at least Kevin’s dad will be there,” Seth remarked, and Nicky started laughing when Allison smacked him.

“You guys are unbelievable. See you tomorrow,” Wymack said, and Kevin looked uncomfortable as they left the room.

“Guys, before you storm off, there are a few Vixens and Basketball guys in our room with pizza and fries, so if you wanna come along, we could have a nice evening before tomorrow,” Allison said into the general direction of the Monsters, and Nicky seemed excited while Aaron and Andrew rolled eyes at the same time, which made Neil smile.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Nicky said, looking at his cousins. Neil knew the main reason Aaron was annoyed was because he never liked having his brother and Katelyn in the same room, but they’d deal with this.

Andrew shrugged in response and so it was settled.

The Foxes went to shower and change before driving back.

Kevin was obviously not pleased by this and wouldn’t shut up about it.

“All I’m saying is that I think it’s disadvantageous to not get a full night worth of sleep before a game,” he said in response to Nicky trying to make this event sound better.

“Yeah, but we don’t have class tomorrow,” Nicky argued, obviously happy to have this party today.

“This’ll drag all of our performances down! Alcohol before games is the worst thing for your concentration,” he complained, making Aaron chuckle next to him.

“Look who’s talking,” the twin mumbled, and Kevin elbowed him.

“I wouldn’t drink before a game. Not one as important, at least,” he said, and nobody argued.

They got home quickly as Andrew ignored the speed limit the way he always did and Neil smiled
when he saw the Fox Tower.

He felt a little weird as they went into their own rooms first, changing into more regular clothing. Seth and Matt arrived a few minutes later and Neil was glad all the Foxes would be over.

He didn’t like spending time with the other teams, didn’t like pretending to try to make friends or attempting to talk to these people. He liked the group of friends he had just fine and was really not in the mood, especially considering how these people were always a lot.

But when they went over and he saw Aaron and Katelyn close to each other and all the others mixed and happy with bright smiles on their faces, he couldn’t be too stressed.

Especially when he leaned against the wall next to Andrew, who handed him a red cup wordlessly.

The table with food was right next to him and Neil didn’t mind watching the others be happy from a little off. This was where he felt more comfortable. Not in the center of attention but next to Andrew instead, watching the surroundings with a thoughtful expression.

“I can’t believe the final is tomorrow,” Neil said after a while, and Andrew ate a piece of pizza before answering.

“It’s just a game,” he said, and Neil shook his head. He knew that when it came down to it, the importance didn’t matter. Whether this was a regular game, a death match or the final, their performance would probably be the same.

But it was the final. He felt his heart beating at the plain thought of it.

“I always knew I’d play in the final, you know? I just never thought it wouldn’t be a game played in black,” he explained, glad that everyone else was having a nice time and leaving them to themselves. He needed conversations with Andrew to get him through some days.

“Don’t get sentimental now, it’s not like you left us any chance but to get this far,” Andrew answered, and took the cup Neil had barely taken a few sips of, emptying it before refilling it with a mix of vodka and energy drinks Neil found worrying.

“I challenged Riko, it’s not like I could force any of us to perform like this. I’m glad it happened, though. I’m happy to be here,” he explained, looking over the room. Even Kevin was drinking, despite his earlier complaints, which honestly didn’t come as a surprise.

“You’re not drinking if this is the outcome,” Andrew muttered into the cup, making Neil sigh. He didn’t understand this.

“You know that this doesn’t have anything to do with the alcohol, Andrew. I just… I’m so thankful you let me stay, last year. I’m glad you helped piecing me back together, I’m happy that I can call these people my friends,” he explained, but the words didn’t begin to cover his words in any way. There were so many things left unsaid, and Neil wasn’t sure he’d ever have the time to let all of them out.

“You’re delusional,” Andrew said, voice sounding almost angry, and Neil knew he should better stop talking.

Neil remained by Andrew’s side for the rest of the evening, and was glad what the Basketball team
started leaving them quite early.

Nicky came over to talk, so did Kevin and Matt from time to time, but they remained by themselves mostly, talking silently and sharing the cup until Neil felt warm and his lips felt numb and his tongue was heavy.

He remembered how he’d gotten drunk at the Nest once, how he and Riko had a huge argument. He remembered waking up and not being able to recall the things he’d said or what he’d done wrong, but he knew it had been terrible. Kevin had given him painkillers but both he and Jean hadn’t talked to him a lot for a week and Riko had made his life a living hell.

But now? He knew he was safe and home.

Of course the fact that this wasn’t the first time he had a drink and that it wasn’t unreasonably much probably contributed in one way or another.

But as the evening went on, Andrew and he went to the sofa Renee sat on, and the room began clearing. They had almost no food left, but Neil had a plate of fries on his lap while Andrew had found toffees somewhere. The Vixens started leaving as well and the room grew more silent as the conversations became more personal, and in the end, the Foxes were alone with Katelyn, who sat on the floor with Aaron and Allison on her other side.

Matt was asleep one the other sofa and Seth had his head on his shoulder, dozing off as well.

“You okay?” Neil asked Andrew for the fifth time that evening, getting nothing but an annoyed sigh for an answer. He didn’t mind.

“I can’t believe tomorrow is the day,” Nicky said, shaking his head. The Foxes were all sleepy, and Dan sat next to Nicky with a proud smile on her face.

“I can’t wait to show all of them that we have it in us,” she answered, and they nodded in unison. Neil couldn’t wait!

“You’re all underestimating them,” Kevin argued again, but Nicky elbowed him.

“You’re underestimating us, Kevin. Come on, positive vibes only today,” he tried, but Kevin shook his head.

“That’s her job,” Kevin argued, pointing at Katelyn with his empty cup, and Aaron pulled her even closer with the arm he had around her back without saying anything. Neil thought it was interesting how Andrew was quite obviously ignoring them.

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“I was thinking—” Allison said, changing the topic as subtly as a bulldozer, “considering how we planned the Fox vacation for Spring break before Neil decided to almost die, we could do it for a few weeks now? I know we talked about it but we didn’t have a set plan yet, did we?”

Nicky’s smile grew even wider at that, and he nodded.

“My flight leaves in the second week of vacation, but I’d definitely be here before that,” he announced, and Aaron tilted his head.

“Second week? I thought we were leaving on the fourth?” he asked, and Nicky shrugged.
“I mean, we haven’t booked anything yet, I only thought you’d not wanna spend the whole two months in Germany,” he explained, and Andrew and Aaron exchanged a look Neil didn’t know how to interpret. It was always hard to analyze their interactions, considering how rarely they happened.

“If you wanna come, I obviously wouldn’t mind,” Nicky added, and Aaron shrugged.

“I mean, it’s not like we have other plans or anything,” Kevin said, and Neil wanted to punch him. This was definitely not their choice.

Though he still couldn’t quite believe that he’d go with them, no matter the choice they’d make.

“I’ll just book the house for two weeks. If you wanna leave early then that’s fine,” Allison announced, and Nicky looked at his cousins with his eyes shining quite brightly. Neil knew he hoped they’d come along but also that he wouldn’t push them to do this.

“If you want to,” Aaron said, directing it at his twin, ignoring Allison the way he always did.

“You can decide for yourself,” Andrew answered, and Neil almost wanted to nudge him. He didn’t want them to argue over this and Andrew’s remarks would likely trigger a confrontation.

“It’s not as if we ever went alone. If you’re going early, I’m coming,” Aaron said, and Neil and Renee exchanged looks. They acted like… brothers, almost.

“I don’t care. I won’t be the one making this decision,” Andrew said, and Neil could tell that he was tensing next to him. This was too telling in front of that many people, and Andrew was starting to get more and more uncomfortable.

“Come on, you’re the older one, just say what we’re doing,” Aaron said, and Neil raised his eyebrows.

“What?”

Andrew frowned. Frowned. It was more of a reaction than Neil usually got and he was almost stupid enough to touch his shoulder or do something else to get him to realize that he was showing this to everyone.

“You’re… I was joking, Andrew. The older twin. It’s not important,” Aaron answered, and Nicky had a hand over his mouth with a huge grin.

“That makes so much sense! You’re the picture-perfect big brother! Well… a very dark picture, with some kind of grey theme and some cracks in the color, but—”

“I’ll stab you if you’re not shutting up right now,” Andrew said, voice dead serious, and Neil had to suppress a smile.

He could see the bigger brother in Andrew. He liked his life too much to say that, but he thought perhaps Andrew knew that himself without others spelling it out.

“I mean, you don’t have to decide today anyways,” Allison chimed in, emptying her cup and shaking her head at the taste. “And anyways, I think we should make the Fox vacation an annual event. Now that we all grew together, this is set.”
“How exactly did we grow together?” Kevin asked, obviously too tired to have a conversation. “Just getting drunk before an important game—“

“We know that you’re in a bad mood, Kevin, but remember that this is our alcohol you’re drinking,” Dan answered, and Nicky let out a laugh.

The conversation was less deep from then on, and soon, Aaron and Katelyn went away, and he came back without her. Matt and Seth went to their room and they helped cleaning the living room a little before calling it a day.

The Monsters left the room and Neil was debating which room to sleep in when he saw Andrew walking past the door to his room and opening the one to the roof instead. They exchanged one look, and Neil was behind him, climbing up the stairs and sitting down by the edge of the roof.

The sky was still dark, but the clouds shone purple already, making Neil smile. It was provably four or five in the morning, but there was no class tomorrow so Neil didn’t see a point in going to bed just yet if he could spend a few more minutes here.

Andrew handed him a cigarette and Neil inhaled deeply, closing his eyes at the burn and familiar smell almost clogging his airways.

“I can’t believe that it’ll all be over in like half a day,” he said, and Andrew blew smoke into his face as a response.

“No Exy talk right now,” he said, making Neil sigh. It was all that was on his mind.

“Okay. I’m looking forward to the summer. I haven’t been pretty much anywhere but Edgar Allan or Baltimore. At least if you don’t consider the times Tetsuji brought us along to some conferences and locked us in hotel rooms. I can’t wait to see the coast and Germany,” he mumbled. Away games with the Foxes had been showing him more of the world than he’d been allowed to witness in the past nineteen years of his life.

“Shut up, Neil,” Andrew answered, and Neil sighed. He had known that Andrew wasn’t in the mood for conversations. The fact that he was allowed to be here meant a lot to him, but he didn’t like the silence.

“Can’t we talk about anything? Like… I think you’re a good big brother. It makes a lot of sense,” he mumbled, and Andrew’s hand gripped the edge of the roof tightly, knuckles white and arm almost trembling with tension. Maybe Neil should shut up.

“I’ve had enough foster brothers to know that I don’t need to be anybody’s older sibling. Shut up, Neil, or you’re not playing tonight,” Andrew pressed out, and Neil barely kept his mouth from falling open.

Andrew was right, of course. He didn’t like the connotation of “brother” and had absolutely every right for that.

“I’m sorry,” Neil said, meaning it one hundred percent. Andrew tsk-ed, making him sigh.

When Andrew had finished another cigarette halfway before flinging it off the building, the boy got up and Neil followed him inside.
“Goodnight,” Neil said, and Andrew let out an annoyed sound again.

“I’m the one Kevin will bother if you’re not getting enough sleep so just do both of us a favor,” Andrew said, entering his room and leaving the door open for Neil to follow him.

Somehow, Neil couldn’t argue, thinking of how well he’d slept the past nights.

And when he was in the dark room next to Andrew only a minute later, looking at the boy staring up at the bunk above them, Neil smiled.

“Thanks, Drew,” he mumbled sleepily. Neil was almost sure he’d able to sleep in his own bed, but when Andrew’s hand found his, the way they always connected in the past nights, Neil knew he wouldn’t sleep as soundly.

He knew for a fact that he didn’t deserve this, but he wasn’t letting it go. Andrew’s breath became increasingly even and slow and his face was so soft. Neil never slept as well as when this was the last picture he saw.

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The day started with silent breakfast while Kevin constantly checked every social media account he had for updates on the Ravens.

“I mean, we could just pay someone to push Riko off the stairs and the game would be ours,” Aaron proposed, but Kevin wasn’t in the mood for jokes. Neil considered doing that himself, though.

He’d checked his phone twice that day and for some reason he managed to be disappointed that neither his mother nor Jean had texted him.

Then again, they had better things to do than bother with this banality. This was only a game after all.

Not for him, but for most other people.

“Neil?”

The day had started late for them and breakfast had been later than brunch for other people, but now, by around three in the afternoon, they were all on edge.

“What?” he asked, looking up at Kevin. They were both nervous wrecks at this point, and Neil was really not sure how to behave.

“You’re walking around the room constantly, it’s making everything worse,” Kevin said, grabbing him by the shoulder and pushing him onto the sofa.

“I keep mixing up two of the new goalkeepers, Kevin, what if I play right into their hands?” Neil asked, and in another situation this total desperation might have been comical. But right now, he was serious.

“You are NCAAs second ranked Striker for a reason, okay? You’re over Riko, and while I really didn’t understand that when it happened, it’s true now. You’re good, yeah? So stop doubting
yourself. There’ll be more than one shot at the goal and you’ll score, that’s out of question,” he said, and Neil tried breathing. Kevin might be right.

“Thanks, Kev,” he muttered. Maybe. Maybe he was right. But right now it didn’t feel like that all too much.

Neil was still glad that Kevin was there for him. These conversations were important to him and he needed this side of Kevin right now. He needed a brother.

He checked his phone again because he was an idiot. Still no good luck message by anyone.

Why was he so stupid about this? It’s not as if any of them had ever really cared about him before.

Though Jean kind of had.

Neil let out a sigh and turned off his phone. He was going insane thinking about whether or not Jean considered him family or not.

“Neil.”

He looked up at Andrew standing in the doorframe. He hadn’t even seen him getting up.

“What?” he asked back dumbly, but the eyeroll as Andrew left the room made him realize that he was supposed to follow.

Unsurprisingly, they ended up by the roof’s edge, and Neil took shaking breaths. The sun was burning down on them more intensely than it should, considering how it was only the start of May. Neil could almost smell the heat in the air.

“Stop,” Andrew said, making Neil frown. He wasn’t even ‘staring’ right now.

“What?”

“Freaking out. Today’s not the day for that,” Andrew answered, and Neil crossed his arms over the damp shirt. He was sweating already and wanted to be back inside, to air conditioning.

“I’m not freaking out,” he argued even though he knew Andrew was right.

“You look closer to running than when you first got here; you’re freaking out,” Andrew said, voice low and almost monotonous.

Neil pressed his lips together and looked away. Of course he was. He was seeing Riko again and everything depended on the outcome of this game. There was no deal or contract yet, but he knew there would be. He knew Ichirou would watch his investments perform and that today was vital to his future.

He just wished Jean was there to calm him down, the way he always had during the past eight years.

“Neil,” Andrew said again, and he let out a sigh. He hadn’t even realized he was slipping again.

“I’m worried,” he confessed. “Maybe I’m freaking out a little. This is a lot.”
“Yeah, no shit,” Andrew answered, and Neil fiddled with the hem of his shirt.

“Sorry,” Neil mumbled, and wasn’t entirely sure what to do with himself. He was so worried, it almost hurt physically. He felt the cold in his heart when he thought about the game, felt as if it was ice pumping through his veins whenever he considered losing tonight.

“Say no if you need to,” Andrew said suddenly, and Neil just looked at him for the few seconds before he moved in.

The sun was burning and Andrew’s eyes seemed a little brighter in the reflection, pupils tiny against the intense light. His hair seemed lighter as well, but the look of it all made Neil feel grounded. Anchored.

Lips slightly parted, sweat on his forehead and above his upper lip, expression almost blank safe for… something. Neil couldn’t put his finger on it, on the slight frown and corners if his mouth, on this something, because Andrew closed the distance and this ‘something’ wasn’t as important as their ‘nothing’ right now.

Neil had his eyes closed and felt the ice melting. He felt it cracking beneath the sudden heat.

Andrew was warm on more levels than Neil could begin to understand at this point, but he managed to make Neil feel put together, as if he was a puzzle and Andrew was the only one who knew where the pieces belonged.

His heart beat faster than it had since the night he’d left the Nest, outrunning every possible negative emotion, until there was nothing but Andrew.

Until there was nothing.

When Andrew’s phone buzzed in his pocket against Neil’s thigh, he was breathing heavily and managed to smile at the low curse Andrew let out when he saw the number on the display.

“What’s your problem, Boyd?”

Neil looked up at Andrew and wondered how they’d ended up on the ground, with the blond boy on top of him and breaths heavy. Wondered how on earth things always happened more quickly, as if they were each other’s slow motion for seconds but had been living in fast forward in retrospect.

There was silence for a few moments before Andrew shook his head and got up after ending the call.

“We’re supposed to go to the stadium early. Why is your phone always turned off?”

Neil followed him quickly and decided just not to answer. Both of them knew what this was about.

Andrew went down the stairs first and Neil wanted to stay in the moment for a little longer. In the warmth and in the look in Andrew’s eyes. Wanted to keep the soft feeling of hair between his fingers and the weight of Andrew’s hands all over him.

The Upperclassmen had apparently left already and the Monsters were already in the hallway when they came down.

“What’s going on?” Neil asked, quite confused with the sudden stress they seemed to be in.
“Wymack called Dan and apparently, he made everything sound urgent,” Nicky explained as they went to the parking lot.

“I checked every news channel and twitter account, if it’s about the Ravens, nobody has made it public yet,” Kevin added as they were inside the car, and Andrew started driving.

“Which might be the reason for Wymack stressing us out so much,” Nicky chimed in, but Aaron just shook his head.

“Can’t we just wait ten minutes instead of speculating?” he asked sounding annoyed, and Neil looked out of a window. This was stressing him out.

They arrived at the orange stadium, and Neil felt some of the tension just falling off his shoulders.

This was home.

Going inside, they met the others in Wymack’s office, where they were sitting in a circle. Neil chose to sit down between Kevin and Matt for today, and the others sat down as well.

“Any clue what’s going on?” Neil asked Matt lowly, but the other boy just shrugged.

“Alright guys, I ordered you in a little earlier than usually because there are a few things we need to discuss. Kevin and Seth are on press duty, but if all of you want to go out after the win, nobody minds. Strategies and line ups are clear, I suppose?” he asked, looking into the round.

Of course they were. The dealers knew what they were supposed to be doing, Renee would only be in the goal if Andrew got hurt but would support the defense otherwise. Neil knew the goalkeepers inside out.

They were ready.

“Okay, now I want you guys to listen closely, because I’m not gonna repeat myself,” he continued, and Neil looked up at the man he’d flinched away from so often and saw nothing that connected him to his father anymore. No one to ever be afraid of again.

“You know I’m not one for talking, but I want you to think back to your thoughts in the beginning of the season. Barely meeting the amount of players to start the season, barely good enough to remain in the first league. And now look at us.

Each and every one of you is here because you chose to make use of the chance I gave you, and I’m proud of this team. You’re more than they could ever realize and if I’m honest, you’re more than I saw in you at first.

You guys are fighters and everyone who thinks otherwise deserves to be proved wrong,” Wymack started, and Neil couldn’t believe that this usually so reserved man said these words.

“And this is the exact point. Half the people watching only turn on the TV tonight because they want to see us lose. Most of them don’t believe in us. Eighty seven percent said they thought the Ravens are going to win.

But you know as well as I do that the other thirteen percent are more than believed in us before, and
that neither of the opinions matter. You’re not playing to make a point or win a bet, you’re playing because you deserve to win.

Play as if you have nothing to lose. Fight because giving up isn’t an option. Win because you know you can.

I believe in you and I know that the Ravens have more money and players than we do. But they haven’t tasted the bitterness of a loss nearly often enough and I want all of you to teach them how losing against the Foxes feels.”

Silence.

They stared at their coach and Neil didn’t have any words.

He believed in them.

“Thanks, Coach. For everything,” Seth started, smile curved on his face, eyes determined. This would be his last game. Seth had everything to prove.

Dan wiped a hand across her eyes and Nicky rubbed his arms against the goosebumps.

Neil felt the fire in his chest burning more intensely and right now, he knew there was nothing to worry about.

“And no matter the outcome, I’m proud of you,” Wymack added, and Neil swallowed against the lump in his throat.

This was everything he could have wished for in a team.

“Before this starts getting sentimental, though, I want you to remember what you’re fighting for,” he added, and Neil frowned.

That was when Abby opened the door and Nicky shrieked as if he saw a corpse.

It wasn’t a corpse. It was Erik Klose.

Followed by a bunch of girls Neil didn’t know, two adult women, Thea Muldany, Bee and eventually Stuart Hatford before the last two people, Jean and Jeremy, entered the room.

Neil’s brain stopped processing information for a moment.

He ran and almost threw them both over as Neil hugged Jean first, hiding his face in the taller boy’s neck, clinging to him. He hadn’t forgotten!

“I thought you didn’t care,” Neil mumbled, and Jean laughed.

“Wouldn’t miss your big game. It’s a pity I’m not playing beside you,” Jean answered, and Neil let him go slowly, greeting Jeremy quickly before going over.

“I didn’t expect you here,” he told his uncle, and the greeting was a little awkward with Neil stretching out his hand while his Uncle went to embrace him.
“Your coach called a month ago and said he wanted family members of you along and since there’s probably going to be a conversation with Ichiro soon, I thought one of us should be there,” Stuart explained, and Neil nodded. He was relieved to see him.

“You look a lot better since when I last saw you,” he remarked, and Neil almost laughed.

“Yeah, not having your face sliced open open works wonders,” he answered, but couldn’t help smiling.

He looked around the room quickly and couldn’t help smiling. Everyone was talking and seemed happy, except for Nicky, who was still beyond talking as he clung to his boyfriend.

In the next thirty minutes, everyone introduced the people to each other. Neil met Dan’s former stage sisters and Matt’s mother, who seemed to be pretty close to Aaron, for some reason. He talked to Thea for a while and met Renee’s step mother.

Seth’s brothers had apparently not considered coming or maybe Wymack hadn’t called them, and Allison’s family was missing as well, but neither of them seemed to mind.

Only a few minutes into the meeting, they were one big group of Foxes and Family, talking and smiling and complimenting each other. Neil never left Jean’s side and was so happy to have him around.

His family was there, after all.

But they couldn’t do this for longer than an hour before the Ravens arrived and they needed to get ready. Still, nobody seemed bothered as this wasn’t really a goodbye. They would all watch the game, they would all be staying afterwards.

“I’m glad you came,” Neil told Stuart, who ruffled his hair and laughed a little.

“You’re my nephew, Neil. I’m glad it’s a game and not Nathan or Lola,” he said before shaking his head. “Keep your head up high, you’re a Hatford. You have the winning genes.”

And like that, he left. Neil hugged Jean for the tenth time that day, not wanting to let go.

“I wish you were there with us,” Neil whispered, and Jean shook his head.

“Someone has to make sure nobody cheers on the Ravens. And someone has to keep Jeremy from buying all of the Fox merch you’re selling,” he added, making Jeremy laugh.

“I only bought a shirt so we wouldn’t be mistaken for Ravens’ fans!” he argued, but Jean shook his head, smiling at Jeremy before ruffling Neil’s hair one last time.

“Good luck! Not that you’ll need it,” Jean said, leaving the room by Jeremy’s side. Neil didn’t quite know what they did or had, but as long and Jean was happy, he didn’t care.

“So, guys, I want you to calm down before the game and think of all these people in the audience. They’re part of the thirteen percent that believe in us. They’re the only ones I want you to think about tonight,” Wymack said, and Neil felt good.

His chest was tight and he was afraid, but something about this was good anyways. It was as if stress became a positive emotional all of a sudden.
They went to the locker rooms shortly after that and putting on his orange uniform, Neil felt alive.

The weight of the gear, his racquet in his hands, and the helmet on his head, all of this contributed to his wellbeing.

His feet tingled when they went to the court for warm ups, running laps and stretching on their court while Neil avoided the other half like acid. He’d seen Riko but refused to think about that. Didn’t want to think about their strategy that included playing for the entire first half and last quarter. He’d be playing with Riko for the entire time the other one would be on court, no need to engage with him before the game.

He hadn’t seen him since Baltimore, since Riko had taught him what ‘torture’ meant, but Neil did what he was best at. He swallowed down every emotion he might ever develop and went on with his life.

The stadium was breathtaking. It was filled to the brim and more than half of it was orange.

Still, probably a third of the bleachers were pitch black today. The Raven’s had brought many fans and Neil had never seen the stadium in less orange.

However, he knew that the game was being broadcasted on campus and live television. He knew the entire school watched them.

When they had warmed up, they went back off the court and drank something as the announcer yelled through the speakers, starting to talk about the importance of the game. There was a show by the Vixens, which usually didn’t happen but apparently today was special for them too.

And then their names were announced.

Riko was the first one to go on court, followed by Ravens that were mainly freshmen. As expected, Tetsuji had chosen the players Neil and Kevin could predict the least.

But when Neil, Seth, Allison, Nicky, Matt and Andrew went to their positions, and Neil didn’t feel intimidated.

Riko played on Seth’s side, mostly, so they would probably not run into each other too much at first.

At least Neil thought so when the buzzer sounded and the game started.

Adrenaline pumped through his veins and he ran, interrupting one of the starting moves of the Ravens that had the first serve, and the roaring in his ears was almost louder than the screaming crowd.

Neil pushed with everything he had. He slammed against his backliner more than he meant to, checking each other with enough force to send Neil falling every other time it happened. Sometimes he hated his size.

But Andrew deflected the first shots at the goal and Neil almost laughed at the way he threw them back against Neil’s backliner shins.

Neil couldn’t believe it.
Couldn’t believe how well the counter moves worked, couldn’t believe that the first time the buzzer blared, it was Seth who scored and not Riko.

The sound was almost deafening.

Knowing that their strategy worked was incredible, even when Neil was caught in the middle of fights and checked multiple times, but their defense held and even when Riko got close, at least two people were there and protected the goal before Andrew even had to move.

It was faster than an Exy game had any right to be. Faster than lacrosse, even, when Neil ran up and down the court.

Still, after ten minutes, Riko broke through their backliners for the first time and scored before Andrew fully saw him approaching.

He didn’t know what exactly it was, but Andrew’s face showed some emotion and perhaps it was frustration. Whatever it was, it sure was enough to make Neil fight even harder.

Neil slammed against many people and was checked four times during that single move he and Allison performed, but a minute later, the score was 2-1 in Foxes’ favor.

The game went on and soon, Riko was switched with another player, leaving the game after scoring another time.

Neil almost cursed because he went. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to check Riko yet!

Sweat was running down his temples and he was exhausted already, even when they weren’t even half an hour into the most important game of his life yet.

Allison and Dan swapped, Renee and Aaron came in and Kevin changed with Seth after the first quarter, meaning that everyone but Neil and Andrew was on court for the first time during that game.

Neil wasn’t much of a help offence-wise considering how out of breath he was, but he helped Kevin and Dan as well as he could and did his best to irritate or enrage the opposing strikers.

It was almost fun to check them, until they ran over his feet a few times too many and he almost yelled in pain.

He hoped nothing was sprained or broken as he got back up from the floor, taking the hand Aaron offered, and played on. Biting through the pain gave him new strength, and he fought harder, actually scoring pretty soon after that, even though his muscles hurt and he felt too hot.

Neil yelled in frustration as the Ravens managed evening out the score and even more when they managed to get a ball past Andrew another tome.

They went into half time with a score of 5-6 and Neil thought he was dying. He barely managed it into their conference room before collapsing against the wall and drowning a bottle of water in one go.

His foot was pulsing way too hotly and he didn’t dare to take off the show in fear of Abby seeing that something was wrong.
“We’ve had worse games, this isn’t the end guys! I don’t want to see long faces, I want you to use these fifteen minutes to breathe and go back out there fighting even harder than you did! In an hour we’ll know if the past year was worth it,” Wymack said, but Neil could only try catching his breath, head in his neck and eyes closed as he tried calming down.

He’d been on court with Riko and scored just as often as he had. Neil could do this.

The Foxes could do this.

“You’re doing amazing,” he muttered towards Andrew as they walked back, ten minutes later. He saw how drained the boy was and felt sorry. Neil would get another ten or twenty minutes of rest before he’d go back there, Andrew, though? He’d try playing for the entire game.

“Better than you are. Two goals in one half time? That’s a new low for you,” Andrew said, but Neil saw the expression in his eyes and couldn’t help smiling. What an idiot.

The Foxes went to court while Neil, Dan, Matt and Nicky remained by the sideline, outside the field.

The announcer counted down from five and seconds later, the game started.

Neil stared at his teammates playing and yelled loudly, unable to hold back. This was worse than every Thriller Matt had showed him during the past months.

Andrew deflected shots so easily, at least it seemed that way, and Neil shook his head. This was incredible!

And he was almost worried when he saw him gesturing and could almost hear the yelling, but somehow the backliners seemed more determined. It seemed almost as if Andrew told them which drill or move to use.

Neil couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe the 8-7 by fifteen minutes into the second half.

Yes, the Foxes were still behind and yeah, he felt his foot pulsing and hurting, maybe swelling, but nothing mattered when his coach swapped him with Seth.

He fought harder than he ever knew he could, using rebounds and pass-play and tricks so dirty they almost reeked of mud.

Dan was always right by his side, the closest she could be while staying clean, and Neil was glad he could rely on her to have his back.

Fifteen minutes left on the clock and it was 9-7 against the Foxes.

Ten and Riko came back.

Nine and Andrew blocked a shot so hard it sent Neil’s backliner stumbling back as it hit his shins.

Eight and Neil ran so much in order to stay free, checking a few Ravens so harshly the referees shot dark looks at him, but he scored.

Kevin patted his back but Neil was close to throwing up from exhaustion.
Riko played on his side and while he was silent, he pushed against Neil at every shot he had.

Seven minutes on the clock and Neil decided to screw his position, running after Riko and checking him hard as he tried aiming at the goal. Andrew deflected the shot easily and yelled nothing but “Run” and Neil knew he meant him.

Neil did. He ran as fast as he could, slamming against another player at full speed and probably earning himself a yellow card. But as he was barely on the 25 yard line of the Ravens, he caught the high ball Andrew had aimed at him.

He saw Kevin right beside him and together, they outplayed the defense, getting to the goal in no time at all.

Six minutes left and Kevin scored.

Six minutes left and he was checked from behind so heavily he fell.

His head hit the ground hard and the dealer earned a red card, considering how it had been well over three seconds since the last ball contact.

Five minutes left on the huge, red, digital clock and Seth and Neil were on court together again. Neil had a few broken toes in the best scenario and a sprained ankle in the worst, but as the score was 9-9, none of this mattered.

They needed to win.

The Foxes needed to win.

There was no other choice, even when Neil thought his lung was trying to cough itself out. Even when everything hurt and sweat burned in his eyes and Riko’s disgusting smile shone through the helmet whenever he turned.

Neil had to win.

Chapter End Notes

Okay Yall have to comment today because it’s my birthday in four and a half hours

And my best friend forgot

So you better make me feel good about something before I start crying

Okay now seriously:
This chapter and the last chapter should have been one. The last one was more plot-centered while this one centers around characters. I hope you like it. Whatcha thinking?

Aaand thank you’s:
To everyone reading this.
To everyone commenting.
To all of you who yell at me on Tumblr.

To the people starting to read this monster now, even when its almost over. I appreciate that a lot!

To Lena because your letters are life

And to Saya
Who edits this even when life and uni and everything is stressful. Who made a PLAYLIST just because of the birthday of this fic
Who makes me smile and calls me Drama Queen when Neil almost. Died.
Hahahaha

I love you

Also: I’m seriously in a bad mood so please I’m begging you. Please comment something nice
Neil remembered the exact moment he’d decided to run.

When Riko had told him to take care of the broken pieces that were left of the boy that might have been Kevin Day once.

Kevin, who was far from broken, banging against the plexiglass wall along with the rest of his teammates, screaming for the six Foxes on court to push harder.

Kevin, who’d refused to be broken.

Neil hadn’t run, obviously. Not yet. Jean had been there, after all.

And when Renee had come to take him, it was too late.

Riko had made that month the worst of his life and looking at his angry, sweaty face now, Neil’s heart raced.

This was payback.

Neil had come here as yet another piece of collateral damage, but he’d pieced himself back together. He’d let these people piece him back together, and standing here with them? He felt more like Neil Josten than he ever had.

The crowd screamed louder and louder as Riko broke through their defense and Neil’s only thought was how this wasn’t allowed to happen.

It didn’t. Andrew was there to make sure Riko didn’t score. Not this time.

And by some sort of miracle, Neil was clear, and Andrew passed him the ball.

Neil ran, passed, collided with the rookie backliner assigned to him, and thought of how this could have been him. He was supposed to be the best backliner on the Ravens.

He was glad that hadn’t happened, glad that he was standing here in orange. Instead of him, the Ravens had recruited this kid that looked as if he was a little too young for college, Nico Melucci, and managed to break him, apparently. Neil saw nothing but determination in his eyes, and he felt almost sorry. Still, he was a Fox now, and nothing could have prevented that.

But somehow, running along a court surrounded by black jerseys felt…

Home.
It was weird, now that he knew what that word actually meant, but it was true nevertheless.

Neil had come to hate the Raven side of him, but running and pushing harder, checking and being checked? He felt like he was okay with this. Past and present colliding with force, not making him flinch away anymore.

Seth and Neil ran faster than they ever had, and were side by side most of the time. Allison did her best to strengthen the defense, all of them being more of a union than ever before.

Maybe it was gonna be okay.

He passed the ball to Seth, outran his backliner, tried to be within Seth’s reach while staying clear.

Maybe this was where it was supposed to end; seeing Riko and being reminded of the brutality during his years at the Nest. Of the torture at both Riko’s and his father’s hands, of his foot that had been broken. Of Kevin’s hand, of Jean’s… well, there were a few parts of Jean Riko hadn’t broken.

But Kevin was here. Here in orange, here by Neil’s side, here at the Foxhole Court. And so was Jean, happier than he’d been in years as he was watching his brothers on court.

Two and a half minutes left on the clock when one of the two people decking Riko broke away and slammed against Neil so hard he fell.

The adrenaline rush wasn’t as strong after hours of excitement before the game and the past ninety minutes. The air was pushed from his lungs and he tried to ignore the pain that made his thoughts slow down.

But now wasn’t the time for this. None of this mattered with the even score. They were so close but could lose it way too quickly. Neil knew they wouldn’t survive the overtime.

So he kept going. A minute. They had a minute.

The rookie backliner that had checked Neil, Nico Melucci, was by Riko’s side again, backing him up along with the dealer, the three of them passing the ball at a dizzying speed.

They wouldn’t be able to prevent the goal if these people got any closer.

But half the team was on the Foxes’ side of the court.

Allison and Neil ran towards the army of Ravens at the same time, but he shook his head when they locked eyes.

“Let me! Run,” he told her, hoping nobody else listened or cared. Allison collided with the other striker and almost raised the referees’ attention for the unjustified check, but nobody seemed to consider this important as Neil ran, abandoning his position and slamming into Riko frontally.

Riko still shot. Shot at the goal, shot past Nicky and Aaron, shot…

Right into Andrew’s racquet.

Well, that was an exaggeration. Andrew moved, obviously, but not very far. Neil had thrown Riko off balance, resulting in this fast but badly aimed shot.

Neil looked at Andrew, breathing relievedly and Andrew?

Andrew smiled. It wasn’t a smile as much as it was a deadly grin, but it was there.
One pass to Aaron. One to Nicky. Then Neil was in possession of the ball, and he ran as if— no—and he ran ‘because’ his life depended on it.

Andrew yelled something at Aaron and suddenly, Neil had someone by his side to pass to. It was insignificant, it’s didn’t matter, it was a given — but it was also incredibly important to him.

Mere seconds left. And still only half the Ravens on their home court.

Neil passed to Allison.

Twenty seconds left.

Allison, Seth and Neil performed a Raven move, managing to outplay the remaining backliner.

Riko screamed before the ball even left Seth’s racquet.

Not even five seconds left, and the score was 10-9.

The crowd went wild.

Allison yelled, Seth’s smile was that of a hero on a history-book-cover, the Raven’s goalie slammed his racquet into the wall behind him.

Foxes ran onto the court and Neil was swept off his feet by Nicky.

His heart pumped pure adrenaline, Neil was high, everything was cotton candy. This was everything and everyone he had ever wanted to be.

Matt and Seth were hugging and he was pretty sure Seth had tears in his eyes.

Riko stood in the middle of the court, mouth slightly open as he stared at the scoreboard.

If he’d a single calorie left to burn, Neil would have smiled.

Right now, his body was more focused on keeping his heart beating, though.

The Ravens looked miserable. The goalkeeper sat against the wall with his hands in his hair, head between his knees. Nico Melucci had taken his helmet off, staring at the 00:00 left on the clock with tears streaming down his grim face. Another rookie, the dealer with JACKSON printed across his jersey, came by and hugged him, and suddenly Nico was sobbing.

Neil didn’t allow himself to care. Not about the crying kid. Not about the Ravens laying around with their feet in the air, held by medics. Not about the shattered dreams and not about the discouraged players that were not even bothering to congratulate the Foxes as they left.

But while the doors opened, the Vixens stormed in. The Foxes were a bundle of positive energy, Aaron wrapped his arms around that Cheerleader of his, Andrew was here with them, the girls were hugging.

Kevin smiled. Stood proudly and happily, while the rest of them were close to death.

Sweat ran down all of their faces and Neil actually smiled when he saw Dan and Kevin hugging, when he saw Renee nudging Andrew, when…

When he saw the look of utter disbelief on Riko’s face.
Neil looked around the court, only few Ravens still present. One of them was Nico, the backliner that took Neil’s place. But he refused to think about that right now. He wasn’t allowed to care.

“Feels familiar to lose against the second and fourth member of the Perfect Court, doesn’t it?” Neil asked, and Riko finally turned his face away from the score board.

“Leave this court right now,” Riko bit at him and they walked towards each other almost challengingly. Neil smirked.

“I believe it isn’t yours, Riko. This is the Foxhole Court, and nobody wants you here. You ruled long enough, have fun rebuilding the castle we just singlehandedly teared down,” Neil said, and Riko was on him in a matter of seconds.

Maybe he should have braced himself for the impact of the fall, but even if he had, Neil’s legs were too sore to carry him anymore.

So when Riko slammed into him and a fist collided with his face, Neil merely spit into his face and fought against the body on his.

Another fist collided with his jaw and he tried getting his hands free. His ears were ringing and his brain felt numb, he was strangely disconnected from the entire situation.

Then Riko screamed.

Not a choked scream, not a desperate one, not an angry scream.

A scream filled with fear and pain and failure.

A scream because Andrew slammed his racquet into Riko’s side hard enough for the momentum to knock the Raven off Neil.

He needed a moment to breathe before he could collect his thoughts. He turned his face and saw Riko curled into a ball while Andrew kicked him one, twice, three times more before turning away expressionlessly. Some of the stadium staff came running towards them, and all the stress fell from Neil’s shoulders as the Ravens’ captain held his ribs with tears running down his cheeks.

“Your nose is bleeding,” Andrew remarked, and Neil couldn’t help smiling when he saw drops of sweat chasing each other down Andrew’s temple and cheek.

He stretched out a hand, knowing Andrew might just turn away and leave.

But the boy pulled him up and Neil got to his feet.

“And you just dethroned the king, I think,” Neil answered, making Andrew look at him expectantly.

“You were absolutely amazing tonight,” Neil added, and Andrew rolled his eyes. Something about it made Neil smile even wider.

“If nine goals are amazing you should really raise your standards,” he muttered, and they went back to the rest of the Foxes, celebrating the win for a few seconds before everyone saw the blood on his face.

“Guys, I’m okay!” he argued, but Matt almost carried him out. Wymack patted both Kevin’s and Dan’s shoulder when they left the court and Neil couldn’t help thinking of how odd but strangely fitting the gesture was.
“Can’t you wipe your face on your jersey like everyone else?” Seth asked, making Neil laugh as he sat down. As if he’d ruin his Fox jersey.

Abby was by his side instantly, looking amused and worried at the same time.

“I won’t get too much blood on this thing, do you have any clue how bad that washes out?” Neil asked back, making Seth laugh.

Staff came and congratulated them, people were carefree and happy, everyone patted everyone’s shoulder and Seth and Wymack hugged. It had taken both of them five years to win the championship together, and in his last year, they finally managed.

“Nothing’s broken,” Abby said after a short moment, shaking her head. “You don’t deserve half the luck you have, Neil, you’re so willingly hurting yourself,” she added, laughing warmly. It made Neil feel good.

Abby cleaned the blood off his face with a warm cloth and when he looked up again, a camera team was filming them. So Wymack had let the press in, for once. Neil couldn’t blame him.

Dan was giving interviews, constantly being interrupted by teammates, and Abby paused, looking at the scene with sparkling eyes.

“I’m so proud of you guys,” she mumbled, probably not even directed at Neil, so he just decided he wouldn’t answer.

When she was done, Neil joined the others, laughing with them and talking about how absolutely amazing they were. Aaron contributed to the interview and Andrew was within the shot of the camera, so he participated in a way. Neil was proud.

He was even prouder when he saw Jean and Jeremy coming towards them in their Fox merchandise, absolutely ignoring the cameras when they went in for hugs. Naturally, reporters asked them questions as well, and Neil couldn’t have been happier than he was when Jean said he was proud of his family. They’d come so far!

The crowd was still going crazy on the stands while Wymack did his best to get the interviewers away from his Foxes an hour later, and the grin on Neil’s face would never fade away again.

“Okay, get showered. There might be something taking place at the Fox Tower,” he told them, and Allison’s eyes widened.

“You planned a party for us?” she asked in disbelief, and he shook his head, unable to hide a small smile.

“I didn’t say that,” he argued, and Renee laughed at Allison’s dramatic sigh.

They were on their way to the locker rooms when Neil felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking around and seeing Stuart’s stern expression made some of the bright fire in him die down.

“As much as I’d like you to just celebrate this, I need you to hurry. There’s a conversation that should have taken place weeks ago,” his uncle said, and Neil only nodded quickly before going inside.

“What’s wrong?” Matt asked, and Neil shrugged, not wanting to kill the mood. He’d talk to Ichirou right now?
“Apparently I have some issues to deal with. I’ll be right behind you, you won’t even realize I’m gone,” he promised, wanting to get into the shower quickly to be back with his uncle as soon as possible.

“Want us to wait up and drive home with you?” Matt offered, and Neil shrugged. Before he could decline, though, Andrew answered.

“You could also just take Kevin, Nicky and Aaron with you,” he said, and Matt looked from Andrew to Neil and back, smiling brightly and ruffling Neil’s sweaty hair.

“Okay,” he said, and Neil was uncertain. Then again, he had an appointment, he should probably hurry.

So Neil got into a shower stall and tried not thinking too much about all the people in the room next to him or the possibility of someone rushing in. And for once in his life, simply showering didn’t stress him out all too much. Neil thought perhaps he had grown in this respect.

The hot water felt good on his sore muscles, relaxing them a little, and when he wasn’t sticky with sweat anymore, Neil felt a lot better.

As always, he had taken his clothes with him, and when he reentered the locker room with water still dropping down his hair but at least in fresh clothes, he smiled. Andrew laid there, a leg dangling off the bench while he scrolled through his phone.

He sat up when he saw Neil, on his feet almost instantly. Neil couldn’t believe that this was… well… that it was something.

“I’ll hurry so you won’t be waiting for too long,” he promised, and Andrew’s eyebrow shot up a little.

“You are going alone?” he asked, and Neil was about to leave when he froze. He hadn’t realized Andrew would even consider coming.

“Stuart will be there,” he said, shrugging a little. “And it’s Ichirou Moriyama, there will be a conversation, nothing more. He’s too clever to be in the city when someone is being killed,” Neil assured him further, and Andrew looked at him for a long moment, eyes moving quickly, searching for something on Neil’s face. Whatever it was, Andrew didn’t find it.

“Don’t get yourself murdered, try keeping the smart mouth shut,” Andrew said almost indifferently as he sat back down, taking his phone out again.

“I thought that’s what you liked about me,” Neil said with a laugh, and Andrew glared at him from below.

“Bold of you to assume I like anything at all about you,” he said, and Neil couldn’t help smiling at that. What an idiot.

“I’ll hurry,” he repeated, and Andrew shrugged as Neil left the locker room.

Stuart stood in the hallway with his shoulders back and head straight, next to a man dressed in a black suit. He would have seemed unfriendly even if he hadn’t been wearing sunglasses indoors at night, and his Uncle exchanged a look with Neil that suggested he thought the same.

“You are not to speak unless spoken to,” the stranger reminded Neil, who simply nodded. Next to the man, he felt weirdly childish in his sweatpants and the loose shirt he was wearing, hair still
clammy and clinging to his forehead.

Neil was glad Stuart was here with him. Glad he wasn’t going to be there on his own.

He still felt uncomfortable when the man led them around some corners and towards an emergency staircase Neil didn’t even know existed. He unlocked fire doors and led them down a set of metal steps in a dimly lit stairwell. The sound of their shoes on the creaking underground left Neil feeling uneasy.

He thought he knew every inch of the stadium, but somehow it had never occurred to him that it had a basement.

Neil didn’t like the narrow corridor with an unsettling amount of doors going from it. He liked even less that this place he called home seemed so strange to him now.

He could see metal pipes on the ceiling, the walls were grey and all the lights were dusty and flickering. It was freezing and smelled strangely synthetic.

Neil took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, looking at Stuart for a second before nodding to himself. Whatever was about to happen, it wouldn’t change anything about the past year Neil had experienced. He’d obviously rather not die, but even if he did, Neil had managed feeling alive before dying. Maybe that was what it was about.

Or maybe he’d specifically remembered every single turn they’d made so he’d be able to run if things got out of hand.

Finally, the man stopped, opening the door to a room.

When Neil entered it, he was blinded for a second. The lights worked properly here, and it had a sofa, a desk and a few chairs. Even the walls were in a good condition. Neil wondered if they’d set up this thing just for this occasion or if literally anyone else had been down here in the past decade.

More unsettling than the room’s appearance were the other people in it. Riko sat on the sofa, expression empty as he stared at the wall, eyes dull. Neil could see a wide white bandage through the thin fabric of the shirt he was wearing and felt warmth spreading inside him. Andrew had apparently damaged his ribs with the kicks.

Behind the fallen Raven King stood Tetsuji, and between two bodyguards in a corner, the head of the Moriyama family bored his eyes into his little brother’s head.

The man who’d led Neil and Stuart here walked over to Tetsuji, remaining by his side and not looking at either of them anymore.

Seconds trickled by as slowly as if time itself had gotten stuck in quicksand and Neil did his best to keep breathing steadily. One, two, three, inhale. Four, five, six, exhale. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

The room was so quiet that the only sounds Neil heard were his own breath and the water steadily running through the multiple pipes visible in the room.

Ichirou and Tetsuji exchanged looks again, and the older man nodded once. Neil found it weird that they didn’t talk to each other. Then again, he probably wouldn’t want to know what they had to say.

When he saw Ichirou looking at one of his guards before he was being handed a gun, Neil reconsidered. Perhaps he would in fact like to know what the men had been thinking as Ichirou undid the safety of the gun with his gloved hands.
When Ichirou started moving, Neil almost took a step back, but felt Stuart’s hand on his shoulder, holding him in place in an iron grip. Neil felt his sore muscles screaming for him to run and couldn’t help thinking of how odd this very urge was. As if he’d forgotten to hide his feelings during his time at the Foxes.

Neil remembered how he’d never kneel or beg Tetsuji for anything if he had any self-control left. Right now, though, he was not quite sure if he might be ready to ask for mercy if it got him out of the situation. He wasn’t too afraid yet, just nervous, looking at the gun and wondering what it could possibly—

Oh.

Neil wasn’t sure when he realized what was about to happen. He felt the uneasiness subside when Ichirou crouched down in front of Riko, brothers exchanging looks, but it didn’t fully hit him then.

He didn’t realize Ichirou’s intentions when he brought up a gloved hand and put it in Riko’s neck.

“Brother,” Riko said, and the tone made Neil understand. The dull expression turned into fear, voice so loaded with emotions that even listening was a burden. “Ichirou, please,” the Raven added, and Neil took a deep breath, unable to look away.

And then a ton of weight lifted itself off Neil’s shoulders as Riko’s blood splattered across his family members. Ichirou looked at the boy for a moment before taking Riko’s limp hand into his gloved fingers, pressing the former captain’s fingerprints onto the weapon. The head of the family stood up and came to face Neil as Tetsuji covered what was left of Riko’s head with a blanket.

“I believe this settles his violations of our deal with the Hatfords,” he stated, and Neil’s eyes flickered to the blood on his suit. Stuart’s hand was still on his shoulder blade, and Neil was glad his uncle hadn’t let go.

“We’re satisfied,” Stuart answered, “if you ensure that nothing will go against the contract again.” His voice was steady and Ichirou seemed to respect him.

“I’m sure you have an idea in mind,” the man said, and Stuart patted Neil’s shoulder.

“Since he was harmed, I thought perhaps he’d get to make decisions about his safety,” his uncle said, and Neil swallowed. He didn’t like the thought of saying something, of making demands.

“You may speak,” Ichirou said, and Neil was annoyed with himself by how long he took to say anything at all. Then he exhaled and straightened his shoulders. He was a Wesninski, a Hatford, and he was Neil Josten. He was never at loss of words.

“You just got rid of the Ravens’ captain. I don’t want them to be coached by a person connected to the family business,” Neil said, voice surprisingly strong and steady. He knew what he wanted and he could articulate this.

Ichirou looked at Tetsuji for a single second before turning back around. “Go on,” he demanded, and Neil barely kept his eyebrows from shooting up in surprise. The man had agreed this easily?

But there was nothing else he wanted. There were deals protecting him and the Foxes. Even though Nathan and Riko had put him through living hell, he would be okay now. The Ravens wouldn’t be coached by an absolute fanatic anymore, and all the broken kids had a future. Even the hopeless cases, the –
“I want the contracts of the players to change so they can legally transfer teams if they want to,” he said, even though Stuart’s hand on his back tensed.

“That can be arranged. Are you satisfied?” the man asked, and Neil’s mouth almost stood open. What?

“I am. My people are safe,” he said, and Ichirou looked at Stuart with a blank face again.

“You caused us a lot of damage. We’ve made a contract with your family already. You’re required to play professional Exy in the highest offering team for three years after graduation, half the money will go directly to my family. After that, you’re free to do as you please,” he said, and Neil barely stopped himself from looking up at Stuart in disbelief. Free? In seven years, he’d be free? Just like that?

“Thank you,” Stuart said, ignoring his nephew, and Neil tried holding back, but he couldn’t help smiling. This was real.
He was real.

“You may leave,” Ichirou said dismissively, making it sound final.

Stuart turned around and opened the door after nodding, and Neil stormed out without another word. He couldn’t believe it.

“You’re unbelievable,” Stuart said, shaking his head when they were around the corner. “What makes you think you can talk to a mafia boss like that, Neil?” he asked, sounding mad, but Neil wrapped his arms around his uncle.

“Thanks for the deal, Stuart,” he said, unable to pretend to regret anything.
“Well, seven years is a lot of time, Neil, I told Mary she should have let me do the talking, but – “

“It’s better than anything I ever wished for,” Neil argued, letting go and taking a deep breath.

“If you say so,” he said, climbing the stairs with him and going back to the locker rooms. “I’ll head back to England now. Call me should you need anything, I’m going to do my best. You’re still a Hatford behind this alter ego, don’t forget that. We have your back.”

Neil nodded, suddenly not able to say anything anymore. Neil Josten was in fact able to be speechless.

“Keep your head up high,” Stuart said, ruffling his hair one more time with that smile on his face. Neil was glad to have him. He really was.

And when Stuart turned around and Neil got back into the locker room, he couldn’t help grinning.

“ Took you long enough. What happened?” Andrew asked, getting up and leaving the room with Neil, lighting a cigarette once they got to the parking lot. He probably knew Neil didn’t need one right now.

Suddenly, his smile felt inappropriate. Someone had died, after all, and –

No. He had every right to smile. Neil took a deep breath and nodded to himself. As wrong as it may sound to some, but Riko Moriyama deserved to die.
“I have a contract for the first three years after graduation, then I’m free. No mafia-connections, no mob bosses, nothing,” he said, and Andrew arched an eyebrow before he blew smoke into Neil’s face. It made Neil’s grin widen.

“And what’s making you this unbearable?” he asked, and Neil thought about lying for a second. But he didn’t want to lie to Andrew anymore.

“Riko is gone for good. Suicide, apparently,” he told Andrew, who nodded to himself, understanding the implications without Neil having to spell anything out.

“And that makes you so happy?” he asked, making Neil shrug.

“I know it’s messed up,” he said, but Andrew shrugged, unlocking the car when he stubbed out his cigarette on the wall of the building.

“Wouldn’t expect anything else of you,” Andrew mumbled with a huff as Neil climbed into the car. His smile didn’t fade for the entire car journey, and he couldn’t wait to see his team again. Seven years were nothing. And more than half the time would be his time at college. This was the start of an amazing life.

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Wymack looked up as Neil entered the room with a smile too bright for his face and Andrew by his side.

They were in the basement of Fox Tower, the Vixens had prepared snacks, music was playing in the background, and he and Abby were here to celebrate with the kids for a while before leaving them later. They deserved a totally unsupervised party.

Allison was the first to talk, laughing as she saw them. “Whoa, Neil, I like the post-make-out hair. Suits you,” she said, and Seth nudged her as Andrew looked ready to kill her. These kids were going to be the death of him, one day.

"Where were you?” Matthew asked, going over to Neil, laying an arm around him and ruffling his hair. Wymack couldn’t believe how brotherly the boys behaved.

"I had a talk with Ichirou. Three years of professional sports and I'll be free to do as I please,” he said, and Wymack raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t expected this when Neil Josten had showed up at Palmetto a year ago. The child was broken, closer to death than to witnessing the next day, yet here he was.

He looked around the room, saw Abby's satisfied expression, saw Andrew huff very slightly for the first time since he was off his drugs.

"Wow," Kevin said, "Congratulations!"

Wymack looked at him, too, and shook his head a little. Every time he saw the boy, he felt a little colder.

He remembered asking Kayleigh when he heard about the pregnancy. He’d called once. Twice. Made sure about five times even after she'd assured him that she knew who the father was. That it wasn't him.

He remembered every time he'd looked at Kevin and mourned his mother. That had changed. He saw someone else in the boy, not only his past.
But Wymack didn't dare to make assumptions about the future.

He didn't know that a few years down the road, he'd have a little girl visiting every few weeks, calling him her Grandfather. He didn't know that Dan and Matt would stick around, and that Dan would coach the team with him for a couple of years. Without him, for much longer.

He didn't even think of other things as a possibility. That he'd visit a wedding on Hawaii, witnessing Allison and Seth turning into responsible adults and pulling themselves together.

That Renee would work in communities, giving children not only a second chance but a perspective.

“And he just… he just let you go?” Nicky asked, and Neil shrugged, getting himself one of the previously filled red cups containing worryingly high concentrations of vodka.

“Well, yeah. And we talked about some things other than that. Speaking of which, Coach, do we have space for another backliner on the line-up?” he asked, and Wymack raised an eyebrow.

“We have three sitting in this room and another one signed for the next season, I don’t think we need one. Who do you have in mind?” he asked anyways. Whether they started with four or five backliners wasn’t important, he’d be able to explain this to the headmaster somehow.

Wymack shook his head to himself. When had he gotten to the point where he trusted these kids with decisions so important?

“Nico Melucci. He’s not made for the Nest,” Neil answered, and Wymack frowned, exchanging looks with both Dan and Kevin.

“Another Raven?” Seth asked, and Allison elbowed him heavily.

“Seth, come on,” she hissed, and he laughed, brushing through her hair.

“I was joking. At least this one knows his position already,” he said, and Wymack was close to rolling his eyes when Neil started laughing.

“It worked out, after all,” he argued, looking back at Wymack then. “So? Can you consider him? He’s not even a Freshman, he won’t be hard to train! I’ll make sure this works.”

“Neil, be careful with the word vomit,” Dan said with a laugh, and Neil nudged her shoulder.

Their eyes were on him expectantly, and he looked around the room.

“I don’t see a problem with it. I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and for some reason it was Katelyn who clapped her hands. Maybe she drank a little too much already, and her reaction made Nicky laugh and Aaron smile.

Seeing both twins smile within ten minutes was unlikely, and Wymack couldn’t believe they’d come this far.

He didn’t know that he’d see Aaron smile around this girl a lot more often in the future and he didn’t know that Andrew would become better and better at letting emotions out instead of burying them within himself. That Nicky would make enough money to fly in for every Fox vacation these kids would plan, every reunion, every wedding and every baby shower.

“Are you okay, David?” Abby asked from where she was sitting right next to him, and he looked over the kids again. He couldn’t believe he would be seeing every single one of them growing into a
responsible adult. That this was the only time every single Fox would use the chance he offered. That these ten children would grow into happy people, into parents and grandparents, into the people he’d invite to the wedding should he ever feel the need to make anything official.

But he didn’t say anything about that, knowing they’d be going their way. That they’d graduate and live by the lessons he’d tried to teach them.

“Yes, sure. I’m just proud of them,” he said, unable to hide the smile creeping up on his face.

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Neil looked around the room, feeling warm. He didn’t know what the future might bring, but with these people, he knew something else.

He’d be ready to face everything as long as he held on to them, knowing they’d be by his side.

He had a family and Neil would never let it go. This was the first step into a future he’d never dared to dream of.

The first chapter of a story he never thought he’d get to tell.

Chapter End Notes

I am overemotional right now so feel free to skip to the end of the notes if you don’t wanna read about:

A) Headcanons
B) Personal stuff
C) Thank Yous
D) Tumblr

A) Okay so before I start, here are a few of my personal Headcanons for this fic:
Everything Wymack said in his internal monologue is going to happen.
One thing thats really important to me: the rookies for next year are my children and they’ll mess this up so badly. But the Raven Backliner Neil basically adopted? Nico Melucci? He’ll make their time pretty hard, especially considering how he never healthily dealt with anything. Still, he’ll turn out happy. (He’s going to be dating Katelyn’s brother Jared for a while) (he’s also going to talk to Kevin and Neil a lot and kinds finds his way into the Monsters this way, but never really all the way.) (andrew approves of him)

Neil and Andrew say I love you. For the first time in exactly a year after this fic has ended (Andrew says it first because its a truth. A truth so heavy and important he can’t possibly keep it in any longer without feeling like he’s lying.) They don’t get married, just because. They do have promise rings because a promise is really everything that matters.

Kevin gets over his drinking issues when Thea is pregnant and Wymack does so exactly the moment he holds his granddaughter in his arms for the first time.

All of them become happy adults. Content and at ease and all over just… happy.

Life isn’t perfect. Nicky and Erik have some issues after a long night involving a lot of ugly truths. But they wouldn’t be Nicky and Erik if they didn’t manage working that
Allison and Seth get a divorce three years into their marriage. She has a miscarriage and he accuses her of slipping and relapsing. He cheats on her multiple times and when she finds out that there’s a child that’s his and not hers it’s over for a while. They do get back together a few years later. Maybe because love isn’t always a feeling but most of the time a choice. Maybe because it’s just inevitable. They make it work from then on. All of them are happy, and this is a promise.

B)
I know it’s just a fanfic but for me it’s… idek. It’s strangely personal so lemme go straight into overshare mode since its over and I can’t really lose readers over this: When I started this fic, I was sixteen. I was in high school, I was in therapy, I struggled a lot with everything.
Now I’m eighteen. I was accepted by university, I am being offered a scholarship because of my awesome grades, and I signed my first work contract yesterday. I am happy with who I am and how I got here.
The past one and a half years were everything but easy. I slipped and relapsed. I lost some friends because we all took our A levels and that shit is hard. A girl killed herself and I almost crumbled. But I’m okay now. I really am.
Life gets better if you keep fighting.
And that, too, is a promise.

C)
Thank you Darcy, Zoe/Tinkerbell, Elfo, Eleftheria, Lena, and a bunch of others. Thank you for snapchat and whatsapp messages, thank you for calls and memos, thank you for tumbl and for fics I have the honour of betaing a little, thanks for talking to me about this crazy bunch.
Thanks for hour long video calls about Seth and in which light and mood you’d draw him.
Thank you for making me laugh at your reactions.
Thanks for pointing out that “fucker” is a poor substitution for “idiot”.
Thanks to everyone who ever commented because I swear to God I love every single one of you. The ones with angelic runes or anime-characters as icons, the queens of seventeen, the non-users and all the others! Thanks for purple and orange and everything else. Thank you for reading this.
And thank you Saya. Thank you, you cutest cinnamon roll of them all, you sweet lemonade-with-milk love-hater. Thank you for livemessaging about the world cup or F1.
Thanks for betaing all of this and thanks for promising to stay with me all this time.
Thank you a thousand times, thanks for the ugly yellow dress that actually isn’t ugly, thanks for the elevator, thanks for the messages, thanks for making me smile when I cried, thanks. Thanks for talking to me, thank you for delaying the chapters for weeks or months, thank you for being there for me when I felt lost and thank you for being a safe space and a haven, thanks for the honesty and thanks for everything, every word, every call and every mail, every NO and every DELETE. Thanks a lot.

D)
I’m @i-ship-it-verymuch on Tumblr if you feel like talking to me. (Please do!!!( and there’s gonna be a lot more on this account, so subscribe to me or talk to me if you feel like it and enjoyed it!)
I’d appreciate if you commented to let me know what you think of this. You know, now that it’s over…

I feel weird.

Thanks a lot, guys.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!