If You Must

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Summary

Neil's whole world went up in flames the minute he burned his mother's dead body. Mary prepared him for almost every possible scenario, except this one. Now he's stuck in the middle of California trying to restart his life.

Andrew's world had been dark long before Neil Josten came into town. He's been barely living the past few years but he was working on that.

Together these two strangers who only knew how to survive take on a new challenge: learning to live.

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Featuring the other foxes, the bad guys, copious amounts of music, and, hopefully, happiness.

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Basically a high school au with music. Enjoy.
This story is titled after the song "You" by Keaton Henson.

I will try to put all the warnings for each chapter at the beginning. If I somehow forget one feel free to message me on tumblr or whatever and I'll update it.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Notes

Warnings for his chapter: mentioned character death (Mary, shocking I know), non-consensual drugging, brief mention of throwing up, implied/referenced rape/non-con, intrusive thoughts, homophobic language (Seth), mentions of Drake, Nathan, and abuse

*If you must mourn*

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*When I was a child I’d sit for hours*

*Staring into open flame*

*Something in it had a power*

*Could barely tear my eyes away*

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In his fourteen years on the earth, Andrew Minyard had seen more than most people three times his age. After having been thrown from foster home to foster home, he had developed a sort of 6th sense for suspicious behavior. So, he liked to think he knew something strange when he saw it. And as he stared down at the mousy boy standing in the middle of the foyer he knew that this Neil Josten most definitely fit that word to a tee.

There was something that was just off about him. He wasn’t sure what tipped him off; it could have been his bad dye job, or his bland eyes, or the fact that he was clinging to his duffle bag like it contained his only supply of oxygen. These things alone were not enough to warrant suspicion; a lot of strange characters came to the foster home on Marbury and Fourth.

However, the two men that brought the kid into the building were unlike any of the other social workers Andrew had ever seen. Their suits were too nice and much too expensive. They also gave off a vibe of authority, something that made Andrew’s skin crawl even from his perch on the stairs overlooking the entryway.

It also didn’t help the new kid that Andrew was a naturally suspicious person.

Not that Andrew could afford not to be.

The suits had flanked Josten’s side since they had arrived and neither they nor Josten had said anything aside for their names since they had entered. Currently, they were waiting to be called into Madera’s office. They didn’t even seem to be bothered by the fact that she had left them standing there for almost half an hour. (Another very strange thing, honestly. Most people who came in wouldn’t stand to kept waiting that long. They must be really desperate to have Josten admitted there.)

The suits kept their bored stares trained on the “artistic” paintings on the walls, their thoughts and
feelings masked by their impassive expressions. Josten’s face was also emotionless and his eyes were
distant. The only indication that he was alive was his near constant fidgeting, and the periodical
tightening of his grip on his bag. They stayed out there until Madera came out to greet them and then
lead them into her office.

Everything must have been in order not long after she had shut the door, Madera was reopening it
and leading them out of the room. Andrew turned and walked up the stairs before Madera could
catch him spying.

He turned down the hall to where half of the bedrooms on that floor were located and leaned back
against the wall between two of the doors. He waited casually in the hall for Madera to call them all
down as she always did when there was a new kid.

And true to her predictable, predictable form, she called them down not a minute later. The doors of
some of the rooms exploded open, banging back against the wall due to its inhabitant’s excitement
and energy. He watched some of the younger kids perk up and race down the hall and stairs to meet
the new kid, excited to see a new face. The older residents were more reluctant to leave their rooms,
having seen too many foster kids pass through the halls to be impressed by yet another one. Andrew
peeled himself off the wall and filed behind the last, straggling residents of the Marbury-and-Fourth
hell.

They lined up to see the Josten, and Andrew found that, even up close, he was still unimpressed.
Josten was small and stood with his head ducked and back hunched. By doing that he managed to
make himself look almost impossibly smaller. It was like he was trying to make himself seem weak,
like he was not a threat. Like he wanted to be invisible.

Andrew could understand the sentiment. Going through all of the seven circles of hell on earth
tended to make someone want to be left alone. The only difference, really, was the method that they
used to achieve their goal. Instead of hiding, Andrew opted for acting as imposing and threatening as
possible, so that people would keep their distance. He wasn’t going to roll over and let people walk
over him.

Not anymore.

But, as he studied Josten a little longer, he thought maybe the new kid wasn’t going to let that
happen either. Though he wasn’t moving much, he sure as fuck wasn’t catatonic. his fingers never
kept still, they were constantly fiddling with the straps of his bag, weaving and looping around the
strap rapidly.

Andrew also didn’t miss the way Josten’s unimpressive eyes were sharp underneath the dull brown,
the way his eyes were secretly studying them all even underneath his shitty fringe.

And really, what was up with that truly unflattering haircut? The suits got paid well enough to drop
$500 on a suit but they couldn’t afford to get the pathetic kid a haircut?

Though, the longer he studied the suits and their unveiled disapproval of Josten’s attire, the more he
thought Josten was more likely the one who refused a makeover. The clothes he wore were much
too old to have just been given to him. Even if he had been gotten clothes from a thrift shop, they
would have likely been in better condition than the clothes he was wearing right now. And, now that
he thought about it, the hair did fairly well at hiding Josten’s identity from the people around him.

He looked dull enough and acted small enough to pass by without notice. He didn’t want to be
identified. It was actually pretty clever.
It was just too bad that Josten’s pathetic attempts to remain unseen were the things that got him on Andrew’s radar in the first place.

*Sucks to suck, asswipe.*

Madera, on the other hand, payed no attention to the newcomer’s strange antics, clearly already thinking about all the other work she had to do.

“Alright, kids.” Madera rubbed her face, betraying her exhaustion “this is the new kid, Neil. Say hi Neil” she yawned, gesturing vaguely in his direction. Neil didn’t wave until a minute later but she was already moving on.

“Seth, he’s rooming with you since you’ve got a spare bunk” this last part she said to the tall, dark haired athlete on Andrew’s far right. He looked like he was about protest, but Madera was already beyond caring, running her hands through her greying hair as she turned and made her way back to her office. It was all quiet even as the door slammed closed, causing the new kid to flinch.

Interesting.

Seth was fuming but he complied, waving a blunt *follow-me* gesture to Neil as he began to head up the stairs. Neil followed, pulling his bag impossibly closer to his chest as he hurried up the stairs behind him. The other kids went their own ways while Andrew and his smaller roommate, Leroy, who had stowed himself to his left followed behind Seth and Neil.

Seth and Neil came to a stop when they arrived at the room beside the one that Leroy and Andrew shared. Seth leaned forward and opened the door revealing his- now his and Josten’s- room. He led the way in paying no mind to the prying eyes of Leroy and Andrew in the hallway.

Seth stopped in front of the bunkbed. “I already have top bunk so you’re going to just take the bottom one.”

Josten simply nodded and sat on the edge of the bed and readjusted his hold on his bag. He flexed his fingers absently to keep them from cramping, eyes already distant. He never fully let go of the bag, though.

Leroy inched into the room while Andrew leaned against the doorframe. When Seth saw Leroy enter, he waved him in with a sigh and Leroy’s face lit up with excitement as he took up the place on the floor in front of Neil and stared at him expectantly.

Leroy was a young kid, not one of the youngest at Marbury, but nowhere near the oldest. He always had a friendly smile and he was the only one that never complained about having to share a room with Andrew, despite the fact that he was incredibly intimidated by the older kid.

Leroy always had too much enthusiasm- something Andrew didn’t understand how anyone could possess, especially someone who had been stuck in the system. The only thing that seemed to ever drag him down was boredom. Andrew could relate. And like Andrew, Leroy had found the same reprieve from their summer boredom: Josten. Being the center of attention to a nine year old was not something to envy. Andrew might have felt bad for the new kid, if he wasn’t also curious to see what Leroy could pry out of him.

Leroy leg bobbed up and down restlessly as he waited for Josten to say something. When he remained silent, he took it upon himself to make the first move.

“What’s your last name?”
Josten blinked and came back to earth. The look he gave Leroy was casual, but Andrew could see the sharp appraising look hidden under what Andrew could now see under closer inspection were obviously fake lenses. This made it even clearer that Josten was hiding something. It made the hackles on the back of Andrew’s neck rise and he could feel tension twisting up his spine.

“Josten,” he replied smoothly. More like Lied smoothly.

Leroy believed it anyway. That made him perk up even more and lean forward excitedly.

“Why are you here? Do you still have parents? Because we haven’t seen you here before.”

“My mom’s an addict. She’s in rehab right now. I’ll probably be back with her soon,” Neil replied.

Andrew couldn’t help the scoff that escaped his throat at that blatant lie. Like he hadn’t seen Josten checking the place for exits and assessing the lineup of residents for risks since the moment he walked in. As if he couldn’t see the way Neil’s eyes darted around cataloguing exits. As if he couldn’t see the way Josten was poised and prepared make a shot for the exit at the first available opportunity.

A runner, he surmised. Finally he found the word. He rolled the word around in his mind. Runner. It fit. He looked back at him and knew it was correct.

And, more than that, he was alone.

Andrew knew what someone looked like when they had no one. When they were used to keeping themselves alive. And Neil was that picture, personified. He went from place to place, disappearing and reappearing like a ghost.

At his noise, Neil’s eyes turned sharply to him, narrowing almost imperceptibly. Interesting. It seemed that the little ghost was more alive than he let on.

“Yes?” he asked. The challenge so subtle that if he hadn’t been paying attention he might not have noticed it. He felt the pleasant bubbling of interest in his stomach. Seemed that there was more to the kid than a weak spine and cowered stance.

Leroy became visibly tense when he realized who Neil was talking to.

Andrew ignored it and locked eyes with Neil.

“Nothing,” he replied lightly, feigning nonchalance.

Seth rolled his eyes and gestured for Neil to follow him. “I don’t have time for your wordless shit today, Minyard. Neil, Leroy come on. Let’s get this done.”

Leroy followed him eagerly out the door, Neil not far behind him. He didn’t take off his bag and store it in the room, instead opting to readjust the strap over his shoulder so he could carry the bag with him easily throughout the rest of the house tour. Whatever was in that bag was obviously important and something he was obviously not willing to let it out of his sight.

Andrew’s fingers itched to go digging through it, to pull out his secrets. He had learned a lot since he had taken little raven Kevin under his wing. There was more than one type of trauma people could endure. And as he watched Josten with his duffle and knew that this wasn’t just another kid with the typical sob story. Nobody carried that much baggage and wasn’t a threat.

Ha.
Baggage.

As Neil passed by Andrew on his way through the door he pointedly tugged his bag closer and gave Andrew a deadly glare before continuing after Seth and Leroy, who was busy chattering away.

**Dramatic much.**

But as he watched Neil walk away, he felt it confirm of his suspicions. There way definitely something up with Neil and Andrew was definitely going to find out what it was. Starting with that duffle bag.

He smiled internally. This was going to be fun.

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Neil had always considered himself a man of many words. He knew thousands of words in half a dozen languages. Though he hadn’t always been able to use them, he always was able to satisfy himself by being able to articulate his thoughts with the appropriate word or phrase. When the world so often was spinning out of control, it was nice to be able to describe it. It was grounding, in a way.

Yet despite his extensive knowledge of the English language, as well as a few others, he couldn’t seem to find a single word out there that he could use to describe Andrew Minyard.

Oh, wait. Never mind, he could.

Asshole.

Yes. He thought to himself. That word seemed to fit the surly blond kid perfectly.

He tried to act intimidating. He was able to pull it off to an extent. It was impressive really, considering his short stature. And holy shit that kid was small. He was so small he was even shorter than Neil. How old was this kid, like twelve or something?

Neil had only been at this weird house thing a little over a week and the smaller guy was really starting to piss him off. Immensely. He could feel his eyes on him throughout the day, and he was finding it harder and harder to keep himself in check. The only thing holding him back was the fact that he couldn’t afford to give himself a bad reputation.

After-*everything that happened*- he had been trying to keep a low profile, slide under the radar. Like he had with his mother. Even though he didn’t really need to anymore. He didn’t need to run anymore.

His father was in jail.

His mother was dead.

*She is dead.* He repeated firmly. *She’s dead.*

He had to keep reminding himself she was dead. He chastised himself for not having it down by now. She would have beaten him if she had been alive.

But she wasn’t.

*She’s dead. D.E.A.D.*

He used to spend almost every moment with her by his side and now her absence was achingly
obvious.

He found he needed to remind himself constantly. He repeated it to himself like a mantra. Like one of the ones his mother used to have him repeat when he had to learn information about their new identities.

“Remember, Abram. Your name is Alex. You are thirteen. You were born in Luxembourg. Your parents are divorced. Have been for three years. My name is now Lucy.” She never once took her eyes off the road. “Repeat it back to me.”

He remembered fidgeting in his seat but had no hesitation in speaking, almost as if the lies were a reflex. “Alex, 13, Luxembourg, divorced three years, Lucy-”

“Again.”

“Alex, 13-”

He shook his head, dragging himself from his memories. He clawed at his jeans, trying to ground himself.

She’s dead. She’s dead. She’s dead.

She was dead and nothing was the same.

So much had changed that it felt as though months had passed instead of the mere weeks. The memories of her death and the aftermath were choppy and unclear. But he remembered.

He doubted that he would ever be able to forget.

He remembered it hadn’t taken long for Stewart and later Ichirou to get ahold of him after his mother died.

He remembered meeting with the Moriyama head.

He remembered the FBI.

He remembered the hot California sun as it beat down on him. He remembered hearing about California in the movies and it was never portrayed as hot as this. The temperature rose with every mile south.

The heat wasn’t like it was when he had been on the east coast. On the east coast the heat was clingy and clammy and cloying with humidity. It was a place where the line between skin, sweat, and heat was constantly unclear. Where you spent the day sticky with sweat and unable to escape it except when you managed to sneak into one of the air-conditioned stores and buildings that lined the streets. He remembered doing that with his mother when they used to live in Baltimore.

California was nothing like that. It was hot, but in a way that he imagined an oven would be hot. He could feel the sun baking him. Maybe that was why the people were always sun tanning in the movies. Bake and flip over once golden brown and all that. But the heat wasn’t inescapable like it was on the other side of the country; he was able to find respite under trees, where the heat was distant, abstract even, around him. He didn’t know heat was like this. He wanted to ask Mary which she preferred but he couldn’t because she was gone.

She was gone, gone, gone.
Stop. Don’t think about that.

Besides she now knew a whole new level of heat, having been engulfed by the flames-

Stop. Stop thinking about it. He tore his thoughts from her and back to the present, to his surroundings, to anything that distract him from his past.

But still, California was much hotter than he had expected it to be. California as a whole was different. It wasn’t really like he expected it to be at all. The beaches were cold but everywhere else was warm. And hot. So, so hot. There weren’t lush forests around every turn or snowy mountains or endless oceans. Instead there were miles and miles of rolling hills of dying shrubs and dusty mountains, dried rivers and abandoned cars. It looked like death, and not just because he had buried his mother there.

But maybe he was being unfair. Maybe he thought it was hot because he had spent several consecutive days making is way away from the California coast and into the interior on his way to Arizona.

He hoped Arizona wouldn’t be as hot (it was a futile, useless hope to have; no one had bothered to paint Arizona as anything less than Satan’s abandoned hell.

(Was there any water in Arizona? ((He knew there had to be some, logically, but still he wondered.) He would probably die of dehydration and his body would shrivel up until every drop of water had left him body and the sun could ignite his body into flames (like mother, like son))).

He didn’t know how long he had been walking.

That was a lie. He could remember every day after his mother died with painstaking clarity.

But he had always been good at lying.

It had only been a few days after his mother’s death and his father subsequent arrest before a black sedan pulled up next to him as he trekked down the highway. The elite car parked up ahead of him and its tinted windows rolled down to reveal Moriyama gang members. They all had slicked back hair, refined suits and expensive sunglasses. When they shuffled out of the car to usher him in, not a speck of dust deigned to mar their perfectly pressed suits. He marveled at those tailored cuffs and barely noticed their firm hands pushing him into the car, nor their bodies climbing in beside him before they slammed the door shut.

He felt almost resigned as he sat there. He knew it was only a matter of time. He wasn’t nearly as good at covering his tracks as his mother was. And he wasn’t sure he wanted to fight. The heat had drained his energy and he was so, so tired. At least there was air conditioning. Maybe he would die in relative comfort.

The ride to the isolated location was quiet, aside from the muffled scream of his self-preservation instincts through the haze of his exhaustion. The desert was still as he was ushered to a lone car parked in the middle of the California desert. He slid across the leather seat opposite the newly appointed head of the Moriyama gang- Ichirou Moriyama.

On the run he and his mother had heard whispers about Ichirou’s rise to power. It hadn’t taken long for him to take the helm of the company after his father’s untimely death. He was very good at taking initiative. Therefore, it was no surprise when he spoke first.

“Your father, as I’m sure you know, heads the Baltimore division of my business. You are aware of
Neil could only nod dumbly. His mother had informed him of everything. She didn’t see any benefit in him running around blind. Ignorance got people killed.

“After my father’s death, I decided to take it upon myself to reshape the company to fit my vision. It is a fairly simple plan, but it involves a lot of work,” He lifted his hands, inspection his manicure for any imperfections, “my plans for the business are to take what my father created and modifying it so that it fits with this century. But before I can begin implementing my ideas, I need to solidify and strength the structure of this organization. This, of course, means tying up loose ends. For example, cutting off areas that are leeching our resources and hemorrhaging funds very much needed for the business. I need the company to run smoothly. And I can’t have anything standing in my way. Do make myself clear?”

Neil nodded again, throat dry.

“Your father,” Ichirou continued, carelessly inspecting his nails, “is one of those loose ends.”

Neil could almost swear his heart stopped at that moment, but Ichirou plodded on, heedless or just uncaring of Neil’s sudden inability to breathe. His nails were of much more interest to him.

Though, in all fairness, they were impeccable.

“That’s where you come in,” he leveled his gaze at Neil. Neil tried to swallow but realized it was very difficult to do so when your throat was as dry as the dust outside the car.

“Your father has spent the last four years chasing you and your mother across the globe after she stole from his private funds and fled. He has wasted countless resources, time, and man power in pursuit of his petty revenge.

“Now I could just hand you over to him and have him get rid of you, putting an end to this foolishness once and for all. And sure, doing that would work, but for how long is unclear. I don’t know if he would fall victim to his desires again. And by giving him you, it would give the appearance that I approve of this sort of behavior. Something that I. Do. Not.

“My father was much too lenient with him due to their long-standing partnership. I, however, will not put up with it. Removing you father, though, will not be sufficient. He was able to form a very loyal inner circle. I would need to remove his most right hand partners, those whose loyalties lie with him and not the Moriyamas. That behavior is something that is just not acceptable. It is the whole reason that we remove our branches’ children from their care. I do not need people mistaking where their loyalties should lie. This is where you come in.

“I have no quarrel with you or your mother. Your mother came from a prestigious family- one that has strong ties with my own. Though she went against my family, she is dead so she has paid her due. You were but a child when she took you, but you are now old enough to show where your loyalties lie.

“I want you to testify against your father and his partners. This will bring down his control and allow me to replace his branch with people I feel are better suited for the job. People I trust. You will not say anything about the Moriyamas. From there you will be able to live your life in any way you so wish. We will be keeping tabs on you, of course” he leaned back to look at Neil, “and some day we will find a way to incorporate you into the business. Minimal involvement, but we will discuss that much later. Thoughts?”
Neil was desperately trying to regain his ability to speak, which he found was impeded yet again, though this time due to disbelief rather than fear.

“Yes” he replied, vehemently. “I will.”

“And you will not mention the Moriyamas?”

“I have no reason to. My issue lies with my father, not you. As long as he and his people leave me alone I would be happy to do anything for you.”

“Then it is settled.” He snapped his fingers and there was movement around him as the other gangsters opened the doors.

He barely remembered much after that. It was all a confusing haze. The firm grasp of Ichirou’s handshake. The blur of the road, obscured by the dust kicked up by the tires. The hot plastic of the payphone against his hands as he called the FBI number written on the back of some faded business card.

The next days were a high-speed mess of FBI meetings, interviews, personal statements, and recording devices shoved in his face. It was all so overwhelming and confusing, made even more so by the large time gaps that were appearing in his memory. At times he lost a few minutes, other times hours.

He remembered them sitting him down at a cold metal table in one of the interview rooms. They were telling him about the witness protection program was, and what it entailed, and how long he could expect to be there. He found himself speaking before he even knew he opened his mouth.

“No.”

And just like that, it all stopped. Everything came to a grinding halt. The haze around his mind was lifted and he could see. For the first time in days he could finally breathe again.

“What did you say?”

“I said no,” he said, confidence building with every word. “I don’t want to be a part of the witness protection program. It would be like a prison. I haven’t done anything to deserve that” he had but they didn’t need to know what he and his mother had done to stay alive.

He swallowed and continued “Everything I have done I have done to stay alive. I’m not going to throw away everything I’ve done, everything my mother has done, just to end up there. I’m not trading one set of chains for another.”

They looked like they were going to protest but Nathaniel fixed them with such a look that all their arguments died in their throat. He knew it was the same look his father had. Maybe they were scared that they saw that man in the small boy in front of them. Maybe they were afraid. Maybe they should be. Frankly, Neil found he was too tired to care.

They scurried out of the room and after an indeterminate amount of time they came back, clearly unhappy, but with new sets of paperwork. They told him that he had to choose what name he wanted, and to make it good, because he couldn’t run anymore. Nathaniel stared at the forms for a long while, before finally picking up the pen and writing down the name on the last, unused passport he had from his time with his mother.

Neil Josten.
He hesitated a moment, overwhelmed by the thought of her, before adding to it.

Neil Abram Josten.

That name sounded right. It sounded like his own name. The one he was meant to have.

He filled out the rest of the forms, barely able to bring himself to look at the name again, the pain in his throat and chest so overwhelming. It wasn’t much longer until the forms were whisked away and the suits were gone, leaving him standing in the halls of Maybury. Trying to start again.

And he was trying. He had toned down his attitude because it would only draw attention. He had already learned to tamper down his temper over the years on the run, and he couldn’t afford to lose that self-control now. He couldn’t afford to screw up his life, especially when he couldn’t change his identity. Every decision he made would come back to him.

So he made it work. It was easy to just smile and listen to Leroy’s chatter and to throw out a few tidbits to keep him going. It was even easier to be around Seth; the older boy didn’t even acknowledge that he existed most of the time. Instead Seth spent most of his time at work or sneaking out the window with a girl that Neil could always identify by the flash of blond hair he saw before she dropped from the window.

But Andrew- that prick- would not leave him alone. Sure, he never did anything outright to convey his distrust, but Neil knew Andrew was suspicious, just like he knew Andrew knew he knew that Andrew was suspicious of him. And, in turn, Neil couldn’t be in the Marbury house without being suspicious of Andrews every action and move.

So, as of now, they were at a sort of draw, both of them waiting for the other to make the first move. And Neil knew he wouldn’t be the first one. He had to keep way from any confrontation, despite how much he yearned for it. So he was stuck waiting for Andrew to strike.

But, for weeks, Andrew did nothing, and honestly Neil was starting to go out of his mind and his tongue itched to say something, his father’s temper threatening to rise from the ashes like a phoenix and burn his opponent. But every time he was about to say something, his mother came to mind and her death and the fact that he had a new start and the he couldn’t mess it up. Not after all the chances he had been give.

So every time Andrew got on his nerves he forced himself to count in every language he knew until his anger lessened to a simmer.

He had gotten very good at counting in several languages.

But with every counted second, Andrew didn’t appear any closer to making a move. He knew Andrew was watching him, sure. He could feel his eyes on him throughout the day. His gaze was intense much like the rest of him and Neil couldn’t help but notice that almost everyone in the home was intimidated by him. Even Leroy, Andrew’s roommate and one of the most easygoing people he had ever met, seemed to be on edge around him.

Neil had taken to carrying his bag around with him. He worried that if he left it alone, even for a moment, that Andrew would come in and take it. Once it had been clear to everyone in the house that Neil wasn’t going to let the bag out of his sight, he expected Andrew to resort to unsavory tactics to sate his curiosity.

He expected Andrew to use the element of surprise to take the bag, but he should have expected Andrew wouldn’t be so predictable. He never came in when he was vulnerable. He never barged in
when he went to the bathroom and never came into the room at night. It surprised him but it was undeniably true. He knew that for sure.

He could always tell when someone entered or exited the room, but so far it had only ever been Seth who came and left the room at night, in order to see his girlfriend. Even said girlfriend never came in, instead opting to stand outside below their window or climb up the adjacent tree and make the most atrocious bird calls Neil had ever heard in his life.

At first he though the reason Andrew stayed away at night was because of Andrew’s long-standing animosity with Seth. Even at meals the two would barely even look in the direction of the other.

But with Seth gone so often, he wasn’t sure why Andrew never came in. There was no doubt in his mind that Andrew knew of Seth’s nightly escapades; he lived next door and had been living at Marbury much longer than Neil had (and again, the bird noises. Who did they think they were fooling?).

It was all very strange; it seemed that there was more than just Seth and Andrew’s longstanding antagonistic relationship barring Andrew from the room.

Maybe Andrew stayed away from the room because it was a territorial thing, but this didn’t relieve any tension he felt. Andrew could just be trying to lull him into a false sense of security and be waiting for Neil to let his guard down and then steal the bag. For this reason, he slept with his bag between his back and the wall, body tense and ready to fight at any moment.

It was no surprise, therefore that Neil’s vigilance was slowly wearing down. It had been more than a couple weeks since he first came arrived, and his focus was already beginning to deteriorate.

Not to mention, as effective as the bag was for constant travel, it was rather cumbersome for daily use. He still couldn’t quite find a way to store the bag during his morning runs, so he carried it with him. He liked to think it was good preparation for if he needed to run again, but he even that lie was becoming less believable by the day.

He trudged up the stairs to his room and he came to a stop outside the door. His hands hovered over the door handle eyes dropping to the floor. There was a light glowing beneath it. It was hard to notice since it was day time, but Neil had become skilled in detecting disturbances. He breathed in and prepared himself to catch Andrew in the act. He knew that that bastard had been planning something. He was just surprised he had been so careless. He was almost disappointed, really.

He clasped his hands firmly around the handle, and pushed it down and eased the door open. He let go of the handle and let the door swing open the rest of the way.

The person sitting in the chair was decidedly not Andrew. Very far from it, in fact. He had dark brown hair that was styled on top of his head so that it probably gave him an extra inch or two. Even though he was sitting, Neil could tell the boy was tall.

His short sleeve t-shirt sleeves were rolled up and he had turned the fan on to cool himself down. Neil noted the dark marks on the other’s inner arm. Track marks. He was more familiar than many other people his age of what they looked like, having stayed in shelters, abandoned buildings, and on the streets in some of the larger cities where he and his mother had stayed.

The other boy hadn’t noticed Neil’s entrance, too caught up in bopping his head along with the music coming out of his headphones. He was leaning back in the chair at Seth’s desk tapping out the rhythm in the tabletop. His eyes flicked in Neil’s direction a moment before he turned to face him, eyes going wide as he almost lost his balance.
He tugged off his headphones and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Holy shit man. You’re quite. I didn’t even hear you come in. you must be Seth’s new roommate. I’m Matt.

Matt. Neil had heard Seth mention that name before; he was always stopping by to give Seth a ride places because his car was always breaking down.

Neil was stunned at the genuine geniality in his voice and took the large hand offered to him.

“Yeah. I’m Neil. Are you the guy who’s always driving Seth places?”

He chuckled at that and nodded. “Guy’s car’s a piece of shit.”

Neil nodded and released Matt’s hand and then walked over to his bunk and sat down on it, never taking his eyes off of Matt. Matt retook his seat, staring at Neil curiously. They sat there a moment before Matt began speaking again.

“So, how old are you?”

“Going to be a freshman.”

Matt gave him a rueful smile. “Sucks, man. Freshman year’s rough. I’m a sophomore.”

Neil raised an eyebrow and looked Matt up and down skeptically.

Matt laughed. ‘Yeah, yeah, I know. I get that a lot. It’s the height.” he lifted his hand up to his head as if he were comparing their heights.

Neil found himself relax a bit around Matt. He didn’t seem nearly as volatile as Seth or half as conniving as Andrew. He gave the impression that he was just a generally friendly person. It was nice.

“So, how did you meet Seth?” Neil knew that Seth was going into his senior year in the fall.

“Sports?”

Matt gave a small huff, running his fingers through his hair. “Well, yeah. But we met at Wymack’s first.”

The name rang a bell, but he couldn’t quite place it. Matt seemed to get as much before he continued on.

“Wymack works with at risk kids in the community. The disenfranchised youth and all that. Most of the kids are from broken homes or are drug addicts.” He lifted his inner arm to Neil. “I know you noticed it. You don’t have to pretend you didn’t. I’ve embraced it already. Wymack helped me to do that. He’s really there for us. He helps us do something productive. He’s really into the arts and a lot of us are too. Being at his place gives us the space to practice or do whatever. It’s nice, especially because all of us don’t have that sort of safe space to do that.

“He meets a lot of kids, but not many hang around. Right now there’s only a few of us that do. He’s a good guy. And a really good person.” He scanned looked at Neil a moment before adding, “I think you’d like him.”

Neil doubted it. He hardly suspected that there could ever be such a thing as a nice adult, one that cared as much as Matt made it seem. It had to be impossible. But the fact that both Seth and Matt
seemed to like him did something in his favor; getting on Seth’s good side was a miracle in itself. There were people he tolerated and then there were people he hated; there was rarely anything else. But before he could say anything, Seth blew into the room, tossing his stuff to the side.

“You ready to go?” he asked Matt, not even bothering to acknowledge Neil’s presence.

Matt stood, nodding. “I was thinking that we should bring Neil to Wymack’s with us. It’s about time for him to meet him.”

Seth didn’t look entirely thrilled at the prospect, and shrugged begrudgingly. He rolled his eyes. “Whatever. But,” he pointed at Matt, “we’re not bringing the monster.”

Matt grimaced, but, as he turned back to look at Neil, enthusiasm seeped back into his expression.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to. I have-“

“Come on Neil. It’ll be fun. Free food.” He dangled the prospect out there like it was an impossible offer to turn down. “You get to meet Abby, too.”

Neil didn’t have the heart to turn him down. He picked up his bag and followed him out the door. He beamed at Neil, enthusiasm seeped back into his expression.

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Neil didn’t have the heart to turn him down. He picked up his bag and followed him out the door. He beamed at Neil and then turned to lead the way down the stairs. They made their way down to Matt’s truck. When the got there Matt unlocked the doors and they climbed on in.

He fiddled with his seatbelt and looked over at Seth who was sitting in the passenger seat, not even bothering to put on his seatbelt. “I thought you had a car.”

Matt scoffed and Neil could see even in the rearview mirror that Matt was holding back his laughter. “If you could call that piece of shit a car.”

“I don’t want to hear you dissing my ride.” Seth lashed out, crossing his arms as he sunk lower into his seat.

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“Dude something goes wrong with it like every three months.”

“Shut up.”

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“Dude something goes wrong with it like every three months.”

“Shut up.”

Matt started the car and began driving.

It wasn’t long before they pulled up to a closed store front. They climbed out of the truck (Neil had to do a bit more climbing that the other two) and then closed the doors behind them. Matt sidled up beside Neil and pointed above the closed storefront. “Wymack lives up there. Seth do you know who’s going to be there tonight?”

“I think everyone. The monster’s supposed to show, but I’m holding out for a tragic car crash on the way over.”

Matt frowned but he didn’t say anything. “And Aaron?”

“Bastard’s back from fucking rehab. Nicky wouldn’t fucking shut up about it all week.”

“Why you two spend so much time around each other, I don’t know.” He said shaking his head and Neil filed the information away for later. Not so much the fact that someone else didn’t get along with Seth, that was honestly far from surprising, but the names of the other people were interesting to hear about.
Matt dropped the conversation and just walked over to the side of the building. There was a staircase that lead to the second floor. He immediately led the way up the steps until they reached a green door. Matt leaned close to the shiny bronze numbers and fixed up his hair in the reflection. Seth snorted. Matt ignored him. Instead Matt pulled out his key ring and sifted through the keys until he came across the one he was looking for. He slotted the key in the lock and unlocked the door, letting them all in.

The apartment was crammed and cluttered, the walkway was plastered with pictures and art and newspaper clippings that made their way down the hall. There were small side tables stacked with stacks of magazines and newspapers making the cramped hallway even narrower. The hall ended by splitting to three prongs, each leading to a different room. One lead to the kitchen, the other to a closed door, and the last to he assumed was the living area.

Matt didn’t hesitate to walk into the living room. It was a spacious living area that, like the hallway, was cluttered around the edges, but relatively clear in the middle, aside from several teens lounging on the furniture.

There was a young, dark haired teed reading out of a thick music theory tome in his hands as he stretched out across the couch, his left hand in a black hand brace. There were also three girls sitting around the couch. At the sound of them entering all the girls turned and looked over.

The blond girl looked vaguely familiar and he was easily able to recognize her from the times he had seen her outside the window of his and Seth’s room. She had long hair that looked both effortless and also like there wasn’t a single hair where she didn’t want it to be. She had a haughty, yet appraising look in her eyes, betraying the intelligence she was trying to conceal. The other two girls were ones he had never seen before. One had short dark hair and skin who gave off the air of a powerful yet merciful ruler. She gave the impression of someone who would be brutally honest, but not unnecessarily cruel. He could tell she was someone who could get anything she needed to get done, done. The last girl possessed a sweet disposition, what with her pastel hair, pale skirt, and delicate cross jewelry. But he could sense something else about her, like a shark lurking beneath the surface of tranquil waters. There was something off about her, a fact that was made apparent by the fact that she was somehow qualified to be one of the wayfaring kids under Wymack’s guidance.

The blond girl stood up and breezed by Seth, giving Matt a quick hug, before approaching Neil. Her gaze swept up and down the length of his body, and she didn’t bother to hold back her look of distasted at the state of his clothing. However, she appeared much more approving when she looked at his face. In fact she seemed almost pleased. Figures, people’s faces are usually better to look at than their clothes.

Though maybe he should so something to his appearance if it grabbed so much attention.

Or maybe he didn’t need to do anything. He didn’t have to run anymore. He was pulled from his train of thought when she began speaking.

“My name’s Allison, and you are?” She held out her hand to him, all casual ease and confidence.

“Oh, Neil.” He took her hand hesitantly.

She ignored any discomfort he showed and plowed on. “Interesting. Grade?”

“Oh, freshman. In the fall.”

She made a small noise of distaste but smothered it quickly.
“Sophomore. And over there,” she gestured with the hand that wasn’t still occupied with his own, “are Dan and Renee.”

Dan stood up and walked over and held out her hand. Neil pulled his out of Allison’s and shook Dan’s. Her face lit up brightly, putting Neil at ease. Her handshake was much shorter than Allison’s had been. He didn’t know what that was about, though he could guess if the way she kept glancing over at Seth while she did it was any indication. His comfortable ease quickly vanished when Renee came over and waved. Something about her seemed off, her innocent appearance be damned. Flowing fabrics and lace didn’t do much to conceal daggers. He didn’t know how Wymack found her.

A man walked into the room and Neil could only assume it was Wymack. He was carrying a stack of magazines and a hand towel and barely glanced at them as he walked in. “You couldn’t fucking knock. One of these days you’re going to have to learn that you can’t just barge into people’s homes unannounced.”

“If you didn’t want us to, you shouldn’t have given us a key” Seth snarked.

“Don’t be an asshole, Seth” Wymack said absently he glanced at the wall and then just decided to pile the magazines on top of an already precarious pile and turned to the teens. It was then that he noticed the new addition in the room. “Who’s this?”

Neil figured he must look a picture, a small kid with droopy, murky hair clutching a bag to his side like his life depended on it. Neil would have cringed at being seen as so weak before he remembered that was what he wanted. Though the reason was seeming less important the longer he stood under Wymack’s scrutiny. He didn’t want to be pitied.

But even more than that he wanted Wymack’s eyes to leave him. His large statute reminded him of his father and he felt ill at ease. He could almost hear his blood pumping in his ears and he was mentally counting the number of steps he would need to reach the door.

It took his a moment for his heart to slow down and for him to meet Wymack’s eyes. He was surprised to find that here was not pity in Wymack’s appraising glare, only curiosity. Neil felt better. Being seen as confusing was better than being seen as pathetic.

“You must be the new kid at Marbury.” He finished drying his hand before slowly extending it in Neil’s direction. “Wymack.”

Neil hesitated a moment before shaking it back. “Neil.”

“Nice to finally meet you Neil. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Neil didn’t know what he meant by that or who had been talking about him. It was probably Seth.

Wymack continued. “The unsociable one over there is my son Kevin.” He gestured to the dark haired kid sitting on the couch. Kevin didn’t bother to look up. Wymack sighed but continued. “As you can see the bunch is all here. Well almost, we’re still waiting for a few more.”

Seth audibly groaned. “Why the fuck do we have to keep letting that monster-”

Wymack shut him up with a look, and Seth conceded, mumbling.

“One of you can set the table. Dinner’s almost ready.”

The doorbell rang off in the distance, and Wymack headed over to it continuing his rant with no real heat, his voice carrying over his shoulder and down the hall to them “See, manners. Ringing the
doorbell. Like a fucking – Hey, Abby- civilized person.”

“She said holding them out.

“Sweet.” Seth reached over, but she expertly evaded him. She glanced at Neil and smiled.

“Hello. Who are you?”

“Neil.” He said. The more he said it the more it felt like his actual name.

She smiled brightly at him. “Nice to meet you Neil. I’ve heard about you from Seth. I was wondering when everyone was going to bring you around.” She shook his hand. “I’m a nurse at the hospital and also have a contract with Marbury.”

It was a bit much to take in all at once and he was a little overwhelmed by her. She wasn’t someone he could just forget; she had established that her job placed her in his life. If this dinner went poorly he could leave it and manage to avoid Matt, Wymack, Dan, Allison, and Renee if he wanted to. He couldn’t avoid Abby.

But what made a bigger impression on him than her permanent status in his current life was the presence she carried about her. Despite the power she unknowingly held over his life, she wasn’t a threat. He didn’t know what it was about her, maybe it was her unimposing manner or the fact that she smelled like fresh bread, but she seemed safe. Not that that meant she was. He better than most people knew that. He was startled from his thoughts by the sound of the door opening once more.

The door hurled towards the wall at an impressive speed, only narrowly prevented from hitting the wall by a lanky teen who barely managed to catch the door in time.

“Shit,” he said as he caught it. Smoothing his hand along the edge as if to reassure himself that it wouldn’t slip out of his fingers. “Shit.” And just as suddenly as he had entered, his expression morphed in one of enthusiasm as he flashed a bright smile to everyone in the room. “Hey everyone!”

“Hey Nicky” voices responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

He was so busy trying to figure out what those differing receptions meant about Nicky that he almost didn’t notice that the darker teen hadn’t arrived alone. From behind Nicky was stepped a small blond kid that looked unmistakably like Andrew.

Just at that moment Nicky’s eyes caught on Neil grin widening. “Who’s the new kid?” he walked over to Neil and held out his hand. “I’m Nicky. The silent one behind me is my cousin, Aaron.”

Neil shook his hand, confused.

The confusion must have shown on his face because Nicky took it upon himself to try and explain.

“Oh! His mom and my dad were siblings. My father met my mother in Mexico and then their lives were blessed when they had me.”

Neil nodded absently, but his other question still remained.

“Are you related to Andrew?”

“Um, yes. Why?” His face became pained. “Don’t tell me you met him before us. Some of us like to make good impressions.”

Seth scoffed. “Like you could ever make a good impression.”
“Fuck off, Seth.”

“I need you guys to bring the food over.” Wymack called from the kitchen.

Nicky seemed eager to end that particular conversation and hurried to the help.

Neil figured he’d have to make do with that answer and went over to help Wymack bring the food to the table. “Yes, sir.”

“Polite. Take note.” he said, pointing the tongs at the rest of the kids.

Nicky snorted.

They all set the food on the table and picked their seats. Wymack sat at one end of the table while Abby sat at the other. Neil sat next to Abby. Allison pulled up the chair next to him, pulling Renee into the seat next to her, but not before delivering a pointed glare in Seth’s direction. Dan settle in next to Wymack and Renee with Matt taking the chair across from her and next to Wymack, as well with Seth throwing himself in the seat next to him with a huff, glaring at Allison, while she pretended not to notice. Instead she seemed to have a sudden interest in Neil’s arm, patting it gently. Saying something. He didn’t really know. He wasn’t paying attention. He tucked his bag under his chair.

When Seth saw what he was doing he scoffed. “You still carrying around that bag? You have to set it down one of these days.”

“I will, when I don’t have to worry about someone looking through it.”

A variety of expressions washed everyone’s face, most of them decidedly unpleasant. All of them except Seth had some degree of a cringe on their face.

Dan just looked sad for him, and when she spoke she sounded exhausted beyond all measure. She rubbed her face “Please tell me that the monster doesn’t have it out for you.”

At that moment it all began clicking, and Neil wanted nothing more than to leave. He started to pick up his bag, getting ready to stand, but was startled back into his seat by a voice spoke up behind him.

“Where are you heading off to? Don’t tell me the little runaway is living up to his name.” Neil’s whole body tensed and he turned around to face Andrew.

“This was what I was saying about knocking.” Wymack muttered

“I’m not a runaway. I’m just staying in the home until my mom gets out of rehab.”

“Sure, sure.” Andrew waved him off. He stood back and let a woman around Abby and Wymack’s age slide into the seat next to Seth.

“This is Bee, Neil. The resident shrink. Get to know her. I can already tell you’ll need her guidance.” Neil narrowed his eyes in a glare at Andrew before facing the smiling woman.

She waved cheerily. “Hi, I’m Betsy Dobson, but most everyone calls be Bee.”

“Neil, ma’am.” He said absently, unable to pull his eyes away from Andrew, who was taking the seat across the table from him. He didn’t figure he would need to remember her name. He had no intention of going to see her.

They all settled down and began passing the dishes around the table. Everybody made the unspoken agreement to ignore the tension that had appeared between Andrew and Neil. Instead, several of the
kids bickered about who would got dibs to what dish first. Neil passed each dish silently, watching everyone and studying their interactions.

They all fell into comfortable chatter occasionally exclaiming about whatever they felt was interesting. The only one who wasn’t speaking was Andrew. Neil snuck a glance at him out of the corner of his eye. Andrew was slumped in his seat, legs sticking out in front of him, almost touching Neil’s under the table, though he kept a distance. Andrew was watching all their faces with an impassive look on his face. Until his eyes flickered over to Neil’s. They both sat there, frozen for a moment. Neil felt like a deer caught in the headlights until Andrew coolly looked away that Neil could breathe again.

Neil forced his attention back to the conversation at hand, but found it difficult to keep up with the four or so intersecting conversations. He marveled at the ease they all felt with each other, the way they were able to be so open and themselves. Neil couldn’t help but want the same thing for himself. It was a stupid, pointless desire but he wanted it all the same.

*You could have this* a voice, clearly rooted in dreams and fantasies, said. *You’re out. This is your chance for a normal life. These could be the people to do it with.*

And they could be. Neil had a pretty good sense about people at times and though these people seemed that they could be assholes, they didn’t come across as malevolent. How they could just be so open when they all were apparently “lost cause” kids was beyond him.

Though, maybe he could learn. Maybe-

A sharp pain shot up his leg and he pulled himself back to attention. His head whipped over in Andrew direction and he fixed him with a glare. Andrew simply gave him a blank look that said *Pay attention.* Neil frowned. Andrew turned his bored look away from him and back to the conversation at the table.

Neil fumed. He really hated that asshole.

But despite the fact that he wanted to piss Andrew off, that he didn’t zone out again. Instead he opted to listen to the conversations being volleyed around the table. With every conversation he was able to pick out small things about each of his dining mates.

He caught how Matt’s gaze would linger a little longer when he was talking to Dan, how his eyes would sneak back over to her for half a second when she wasn’t looking. He also noticed that sometimes she did the same.

Nicky was trying very hard to fit in. Almost too hard. He made it seem like it was his life mission to get Aaron involved. Like his acceptance hinged on whether or not he could get Aaron to contribute to the conversation.

Conversely, Aaron seemed like he would have rather been anywhere other than there. Only breaking off his glaring at Nicky to stab his food. Neil had never seen someone stab mashed potatoes with such ferocity.

Something was going on between Allison and Seth and neither of them was doing anything to hide it. Allison was pointedly not looking at Seth despite all his efforts to catch her eye. Instead she had her body almost completely facing Renee as they talked.

Wymack was talking with many of the people at the table, getting up to date on what was happening while also trying to get his son to be sociable, though he stopped about halfway through when it
looked like it was a lost cause.

Kevin was reading his book underneath the table and trying to keep his father from noticing. Whatever he was reading was it was obviously that he was obsessed with it.

Abby and Betsy were taking about some sort of medication trail that was supposed to be implemented soon and how current legislation was preventing it.

Andrew, surprisingly enough, didn’t stay silent the entire night. He peppered his silence with sparse sentences that he threw to Wymack, Renee, and Betsy, of all people. However over the course of dinner he said less and less.

Towards the end of dinner Neil snuck another look at him and saw that Andrews’s eyes were distant, looking though the salt shaker on the table. In that moment, Neil couldn’t help his deep, petty instincts and gave Andrew’s shin a sharp kick under the table. It was almost remarkable to watch his eyes go from vacant to completely present in the span of a few seconds. Andrew looked up at him, and a small frown pinched his brows together. It was barely noticeable and he knew that if he hadn’t been watch he probably would have missed it.

Neil returned it with a glare. *How do you like it, Asshole?*

If he hadn’t been watching, Neil wouldn’t have noticed the way Andrew’s frown deepened, just barely. *Fuck off.*

Neil shrugged and looked away.

It wasn’t long before dinner was finished. There seemed to be some unspoken agreement what the meal was officially over, as everyone all began to get up and clear the table at the same time. He followed their lead, stacking his dishes to bring them into the kitchen.

“Neil, a word.” He startled, and if he had been holding his dishes, he might have dropped them. He had almost perfected hiding his starts every time he heard a voice that could belong to someone the same age as his father. However, the look Andrew gave him on the way to kitchen showed him that he hadn’t perfected it enough.

Neil turned to Wymack, confused. Wymack gestured over to him and walked to the adjoining living room. Neil followed, being careful to leave enough space between them. Wymack just looked at him, like he noticed, but didn’t say anything.

“I wanted to give you this.” He help out his hand in front of him, dangling a key.

“This is a key to the apartment. It doesn’t sound like you have anyone to support you right now, so just know that if you need anything, you can come here. You don’t have to. You could choose to never come here again. But you can. You’ll probably find one of them” He gestured to the group, who were somehow managing to argue about how to clean the dishes, “Here almost any day.”

He lifted up the second key on the keyring. “This one is to the file cabinet over there. This is the only key. You can stash your things in there so you can take a shit without having to haul it in with you. If you ever need anything, anything at all, you can come and ask me or Bee or Abby or any of the other kids. And when it gets closer to the school year, you can ask them or me for help signing up for your classes and everything.” He nodded his head at Neil’s hand and Neil obediently held it out. Wymack dropped the keyring into it and Neil held onto it, and stuck it in his pocket. Wymack nodded before heading back to the kitchen. “You have to scrape the food off before you wash it, you heathens. And for the love of- No, Seth you’re not washing them again.’
“Come on that was one time-“

And Neil was left standing in the living room, staring after them, bewildered and breathless. He felt as if he would float away. He was only anchored by the cool key pressing into his palm.

***

It was morning. Too fucking early in the morning.

Not that he hadn’t already been awake, but still.

He dragged himself out of bed after he heard Leroy leave the room and pulled on some clothes and padded down the stairs. He grabbed a bowl from the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of cereal and walked over to the eating area.

As much as he didn’t care for it, Andrew still ate at the long table where the rest of the residents of Maybury ate their meals. And this morning, like almost every other morning, all of the residents were eating together.

Well, all of them except for Neil. He seemed to have this annoying habit of being out running and not getting back until breakfast was half over.

Seth settled in to the seat across from Leroy, who was sitting a ways off from Andrew, much to Andrew’s satisfaction. The more space people put between him and them, the better.

“I fucking swear, that kid’s so weird.” Seth muttered murderously as he stabbed at his cereal with his spoon.


“Yes, Neil.” He viciously stirred his corn flakes. “That bastard wakes up at the ass crack of dawn to go do- whatever it is he does. And he won’t even get changed in the room if I’m there. It’s not like I’m gay or anything. I’m not going to check out his dick, so I don’t know why he does that. And he does that stupid thing where you change out with one shirt without taking the other one off and it’s just. Stupid.” He exasperatedly flung his spoon into the bowl earning him a glare from Madera which he ignored. He raised his hands and began gesturing with them instead. “And I fucking swear, he must be fucking that bag or something, he never lets it go. I think he fucking sleeps with it.”

“We are all different.”

“There’s different and there’s weird ass freak.” He said pointedly before taking another bite of his breakfast.

Andrew listened to their conversation, his curiosity peaking for the umpteenth time since he had met the boy. He didn’t know what it meant that this kid was quickly becoming the most interesting part of his day. He decided not to dwell on that and instead on Josten’s suspicious behavior.

He was definitely hiding something. That much was obvious. Unfortunately for Andrew, that paranoid brat never seemed to leave his bag alone long enough for him to investigate, and it was thoroughly starting to piss him off. Despite not having any successful attempts at the bag, the exhaustion on Josten’s face was a nice consolation prize.

He knew that Josten’s tale of drug addict parents was a load of horse shit. Honestly.

He didn’t doubt that Josten’s home life was less than ideal; that much was obvious. But he doubted
that it was caused by parental addiction. Andrew suspected he was from a bad home. Probably a
very bad home if he was still refusing to change around Seth even after a few weeks. He didn’t
know what sort of damage had been done but he knew it had to enough to be unmistakable under his
clothes, but not enough to impede his movements.

Every morning he went out to run, bag still strapped to his back. He ran for a while but he always
came back. He was fast, Andrew would give him that, with strong legs. Fitting for a runner he
thought, drawing the train of thought away from where it was heading.

Josten had probably tried to run away before and had been caught. Probably multiple times.

He watched as Neil waked into the dining hall and trudged up the stairs in frustration. He had to
figure what was in that bag.

***

After coming back from his run after breakfast Neil tossed his bag on the floor in frustration. He
couldn’t stand carrying it around anymore.

Wymack was nice enough to let him store his bag in his old, locked file cabinet while he was there
but he didn’t feel comfortable leaving it there over night or times when he wasn’t there. He needed to
be able to easily access his bag if he needed to.

What it boiled down to was that Neil needed to get something to lock away the more sensitive
items in his bag. Something impenetrable, something only he would be able to open.

He needed to get a safe, he concluded.

It would have to be today. Andrew always seemed to have to be gone from 3 to 4 every Wednesday,
though for what, Neil had no clue. Neil took a seat on his bunk and looked at his watch. It was 2:45.
He spent the time waiting for Andrew exit his room mapping out the route to the nearest shopping
center and back. A good safe would be too big to carry along with his bag, Seth would be out
working or with Alison for the foreseeable future. And most of the kids avoided the room like the
plague for fear of facing Seth’s wrath.

Neil decided to take the risk and left his bag behind.

Neil exited the room silently, and went down the stairs and out the building before his speed walking
smoothly shifted into a run as he made his way to the shopping center.

***

Neil Josten had surpassed suspicious and had become a walking mystery.

Scratch that- a fucking enigma.

The kid was trying to stay alive and Andrew felt himself captivated, to a degree by that passion. He
hadn’t felt that way in- he didn’t know how long. But here was this kid, who was probably younger
than him, fighting tooth and nail to save his own skin. And he kept his secrets clutched tightly to his
chest, even now, when he was at Marbury. What had happened before to get him to end up here?
What had been so bad that this secretive boy’s life got exposed and the authorities got involved?

Despite how much he would readily deny it, especially to Bee, he found Josten’s mysterious
appearance and behavior interesting.
Maybe he had a really low bar for what constituted as interesting.

Things were getting too boring around that damn town.

And that wasn’t even an exaggeration. There was almost nothing to do. There wasn’t much to do around town, only a couple of parks, an ice cream parlor, a handful of restaurants, and a movie theater. He could always spend time around the other foxes, but he didn’t want to hear them bitching or asking him to help with their pointless ventures into the musical world. He got enough of that from Kevin.

Instead his days blurred together, one nondescript day bleeding into the next. It should have been reassuring, after everything he had gone through and his hectic switch from foster home to foster home, but the complacency left him on edge. He always felt like something was going to happen.

It was Wednesday, and he had a session with Bee again. They chatted easily, with her asking about his wellbeing and his week. He gave her the brief overview of what was going on with his job and what the other residents were doing this week and what annoying things Josten had done. He didn’t mention his suspicions to her much, though; he knew better than to make accusations without any proof. Besides, he didn’t think that Bee would approve of his unwillingness to cut Josten any slack. She’d probably want to help Josten or something; she had a thing about helping lost causes.

Actually, he should stop bring up Josten at all. It would be better that way. He cringed at the thought that he was becoming sort of attached to the scrawny boy. It wasn’t so much the kid himself that was interesting, but the air of mystery he possessed. The sooner he figured out what was in the bag, the sooner he could stop obsessing over him.

The kid probably wasn’t even that interesting. Few things ever were. Besides, Josten probably would be off sooner rather than later.

Also, he needed to stop bringing up the younger kid during his sessions with Bee; he didn’t like the pleased look on her face every time he mentioned the smaller kid.

“Stop smiling.”

“I can’t help it Andrew. I think that is the first time I’ve ever really see you take an interest in something that wasn’t tied to protecting other people.”

“I protect people because I take an interest in keeping them safe.”

“And that’s good, I’m not saying it isn’t. It’s very noble for you to want to protect others.”

Andrew wanted to scoff but he didn’t. Noble his ass.

"But Neil, isn’t like them, is he? Something about him is different. And you want to know what that something is. It’s good that you want something.

He frowned at her for that. She just sipped her cocoa.

He stayed frowning.

“I want nothing.”

When he finally got back to the house, he was irritated and just wanted quiet. Hopefully Leroy wouldn’t get it into his head to try and talk to him today.
He was almost to his room when he noticed it. He back tracked and then walked over to the room next to his own. Seth and Josten’s room door was closed. Seth was working, as hectic as Seth’s personality was, his daily schedule was fairly stable. But more important than that, Josten never had the door closed when he was inside. He seemed to like to have his escape route as easily accessible as possible.

He leant his ear against the door and listened. There were no sounds coming from inside.

He eased the door open carefully, just in case anyone was still in the room, and found that the lights were off and that the beds were empty. He slid in easily, gently closing the door behind him. The room was decorated with Seth’s magazines and posters hanging up on the wall. Though they might have been Josten’s.

Who was he kidding? He had seen the inside of the room enough already to know which trashy posters were Seth’s. Josten hadn’t added anything to that shit storm. He probably didn’t have anything like that when he ran. It would take up too much space in his bag.

But despite that Neil hadn’t taken the time to add anything to the room. There was nothing in there that really differed from how the room had been before he had moved in. The bottom bunk’s sheets were perfectly made, hiding any trace that they had been slept in. The only thing that could be associated with Josten was that bag.

*Speaking of that bag...*

He looked over at Josten’s bed and saw the strap of his bag peeking out from underneath. He pulled it out and sat down on his haunches. It was uncomfortable, but he wasn’t planning on staying like that for long.

He looked down at the bag before him, satisfied glee registering faintly. He situated it in front of himself and mentally took it part. The bag had obviously seen better days but it had been kept in fairly good condition. There were parts where it had been resewn and there were old mud stains on parts of the bottom. And the bag carried with it the smell of long hours of travel.

*He remembered the time the Spears had taken him camping when he first started living with them. They pulled old suitcases and sleeping bags out of a shed. Every piece had an old, musty smell, that wouldn’t come out no matter how many times they waved them in the sun to air them out. He didn’t know that smell was so universal, or that it would be so nostalgia inducing.*

*He hadn’t even met Drake yet. He was nothing more than a story. Nothing more than a name that slipped fondly off of Cass’s lips.*

*It still would be fond. It still is. You know she would have chosen him over you. He’s her real son. She will always love him more than you. If she ever really loved you at all. You were just a stand in. A stand in for Drake. You were like a little puppy she got for Christmas- interesting at first but you know she’d get bored of you and pass you off to the next family. You’d lose you novelty just like the Christmas dogs. Ha. It’s fitting. You were Drake’s bitch-*

*Now’s not the time for this.*

He leant forward and unzipped the bag and strategically began to pull out its contents. At the top were all the worn, ratty clothes that Josten had already worn at least five times in the weeks that he had been there. It really was a shame, because Josten had a nice face and a lean enough figure that he probably could have looked good if he ever decided to wear something that fit him or was made in this century. Andrew hated those fucking clothes.
And maybe he got a little more enjoyment than he would like to admit at chucking Josten’s clothes on the ground after he had sifted through them.

After the clothes were removed, the bag was fairly empty. The bag had always seemed so full. So it seemed that although Josten didn’t have a lot of clothing, there had obviously been enough to fill up most of the bag. But these monstrosities were not packed away alone. Far from it, in fact. There were still more contents lurking at the bottom of that bag.

Underneath all that ugly threadbare clothing and those fucking jorts, he was pleasantly surprised to feel the edges of something else. A few something elses.

He reached into the bag and pulled out the box that rested on the top, which happened to be a box of hair dye. The same color that Josten had been sporting his entire stay at Marbury. He checked the top of the box and found that it had been opened and used before.

He looked back at the cover. The woman on the front was sporting what he assumed was supposed to be sultry look, but instead looked like she was trying too hard. Underneath her face was a banner that promised silky smooth locks that were guaranteed to be better than anything else that could be produced with any other product. He looked at the color label. Earthy Onyx. What the fuck was that? Wasn’t onyx already a rock? What did they mean by earthy. He flipped the box over and read the descriptive label

*With this patented color alteration serum, your hair can attain the color of the rich, tropical land of Hawai’i. Our color experts traveled the beautiful Hawaiian Islands and trekked the forests to find the richest browns that lay hidden deep in the earth, untouched by man. They also climbed to the top of the active volcanos to find the rich blacks of the volcanic rock that helped to form the Hawai’ian islands centuries ago. With this natural inspiration in mind, we combined these colors to give you more natural looking hair. That paired with-

He chucked the box to the side and pulled out the next item. He didn’t need a stupid hair dye ad rattling around in his brain for the rest of his life. Knowing his luck it would be the last thing he thought about before he finally croaked.

At the bottom of the bag was a binder and a thick black cloth rolled up and tied with a sturdy cord. He flipped open the binder and scanned its contents. Pages of math homework in plastic slips filled page after page of the binder. The only thing that differentiated them from normal homework were the doodles in the margins. They were fairly good, but they were small. There was no need to keep entire sheets of paper when a smaller part could be cut out. The fact that Josten insisted on running with this binder filled with dead weight was highly suspicious.

He found the slit at the edge of one of the plastic sheets and pried the edges apart. He looked into the plastic binder sheets and found things stashed away between the pages of the math homework. He found contact lenses (he was right) and several hundred dollar bills placed thinly between the pages. That was indeed suspicious. Where had a fourteen year old gotten that much money? Dozens of possibilities flew through his mind but he brushed them away. He could think about it later.

He slipped the binder’s contents back into place and then set it aside.

He turned his attention to the last item in the bag: a short clunky roll of black fabric. He carefully undid the expertly knotted cord and felt his eyes widen. Unrolled it acted as a sheath that held several knives and other tools, each of which was securely strapped into place.

And they weren’t just shitty kitchen knives. These were *high quality* knives. Ones intended to deal
out harm to an unwitting opponent, not much different from the ones he had stashed in his armbands. The ones he had gotten from Renee. But Renee had earned her knives on the street. In order to get them she had to be familiar with the many ways that they could be used to slash and kill if need be.

But these knives weren’t for street fights. They had a sort of class about them. He never thought he’d see classy knives anywhere except on TV. Not only were they fancy, but he could tell that they were carefully taken care of. There wasn’t a spot on the blade and he could bring himself to mar the shiny metal with a single fingerprint.

No, these knives were not for people who learned to fight on the streets; they were people who were raised to kill and fight. People born with a silver spoon in their mouth and a stainless steel knife in their hand.

The knives had unimaginably sharp edges for turning flesh to ribbons, and each blade was coated in a metal so reflective that the wielder to see the darkness in their own eyes before they plunged the knife into their victim’s back. The construction alone was exquisite, from the handle to the tip. And every inch of the blades were kept in pristine condition, no doubt carefully and consistently maintained.

How the fuck had he slipped these by the suits?

He rolled it up quickly and stashed it back in the bag before replacing the duffle bag’s contents. He made sure that everything was back in the same place and even took the care to refold the ugly jorts, which he knew he should have tossed, or at least given to Allison.

Though she might even see it as a sort of peace offering, or as an indication that he wanted to talk to her.

He made sure the jorts were securely in the bag.

He zipped it up and slid it back in place under the bed before quite sneaking back to his own room.

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It ended up taking much longer than he expected. Many of the stores flat out didn’t have any safes in stock. What kind of home furnishing store didn’t have a safe? Were people really that naïve? In his opinion people who were able to buy furniture that fancy probably needed a safe.

The fourth store did have them, but many were much too small. What those tiny safes were supposed to hold, he didn’t know. Maybe jewels or wads of cash. Or office supplies. Actually probably just the jewels and cash. That actually made sense most people didn’t want to lock up their office supplies (which was ironic, he thought, because the only place that had safes was an office supply store).

He had almost lost hope by the time he reached the end of the aisle when he finally found one big enough to store his binder. It was a clumsy thing to carry and it made walking awkward and running impossible.

By the time he made it back to Marbury it was already a quarter past 4. He quickly made his way up the stairs and into his room. He shut the door behind him. He pulled out his bag and already felt something was off. He hoped it was nothing, but with a sinking feeling he knew what happened. He checked the tags of his shirt, which he specially bent in order to tell if they had been messed with and saw that they were flattened like the other tags. He lifted out his clothes to find his stuff hidden at the bottom. Anger began to burn inside him at the thought of that bastard digging through his stuff. Why
couldn’t that fucker just leave him alone?

Neil zipped up his bag, tossed the binder and knives into the safe, and then locked it securely before he made it over to the room next door. Leroy was just walking up the stairs as Neil positioned himself outside the door to his and Andrew’s room, and his face lit up.

“Hey, Neil! How are you today? Did you go out? What did you do?”

Neil cut him off

“Is Andrew in? I need to talk to him.”

Leroy’s smile faded and a look of anxiety replaced it. “Uh, yeah. Do you need me to…?”

Neil waved his hand. “I think it would be better if I spoke to him alone”

Leroy’s face flooded with relief. He gave a quick nod before heading back down the stairs and away from the explosion that was bound to happen.

Neil turned back towards the door and slid in silently before closing the door behind him. Andrew was lounging on the top bunk, book in hand. At the sound of the door closing, his eyes flicked over to him, eyes narrowing behind his glasses.

He had spent a lot of time since he had found that his stuff had been gone through to think about how he wanted to approach Andrew: he could go with a meek approach asking why he did it; he could also feign ignorance: or he could just cut the crap and bring it up.

But as he saw Andrew lying there as though he hadn’t done anything, he discarded his more simpering options. Neil figured that increasing the antagonism would be the best way to start this. Just so there would be no confusion. And it’s not like he had anything left to hide. Weak kids didn’t usually carry a whole set of knives and several thousand dollars. He looked up and Andrew and leaned back against the door, casually.

“How did you get up there? I didn’t think you could reach,” he asked. “Did Leroy have to help you?”

Andrew’s glare intensified and he snapped his book shut.

“Why are you in here?” he asked. “Surely you aren’t stupid enough to think this is your room?”

“Funny, I was about to say the same to you, considering you seemed to have mixed up my room with yours earlier today.” Andrew’s expression didn’t waver so Neil continued. “Stay out of my room and stay out of my stuff.”

“Oh, really,” Andrew pushed himself off the bed, landing on his feet. “And why should I do that? You’re hiding something and I intend to find out what it is.”

“Really, you don’t have anything better to do?”

“Oh, I do.” He said carelessly, crossing his arms. “I just can’t do it with your shifty ass sneaking around.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Well, could you get this stupid hazing ritual of yours over with sometime soon. Like you, I want to get back to doing what I want without having to look over my shoulder or worry about someone digging through my stuff.”
Andrew raised an eyebrow, considering him a moment.

“Friday.”

“Friday?”

“Friday. Here. 8 o’clock. Don’t be late.”

Neil pulled away from the wall. “Fine.”

Andrew nodded as Neil backed out of the room before slamming the door in his face.

Despite feeling that he just dug himself into a hole, Neil found he couldn’t care less.

Friday.

He had until Friday to come up for a convincing reason for the knives and money. Already dozens of lies was spinning in his mind.

*His parents were abusive and he stole all their cookware before he ran away?*

No. he wouldn’t believe that for a second

*Brought knives for self-defense?* No they were too nice.

*His father was a butcher.*

Haha. no.

*Trying to protect his mother.*

That didn’t explain-

The list kept growing longer and longer. He wasn’t sure, but whatever he settled on would have to be good. Would have to be good enough to convince the guy who had seen through him without even knowing him. He realized that he was still standing outside Andrew’s door. He turned and walked down the stairs. He needed to go for a run.

***

It was still light out by the time 8 o’clock rolled around on Friday. However, despite this, he didn’t feel any better about venturing out with Andrew. But he had never been one to be easily deterred.

Neil stood outside Andrew’s door ready for whatever disastrous outing Andrew had planned. Neil rapped on the door with one hand before leaning back, waiting. It only took a moment for Andrew to open the door. He stared blankly at Neil before opening the door enough to allow Neil to pass through. Leroy was laying on the bottom bunk and looked up brightly when he saw Neil walk in. He must have realized that it wasn’t time to talk because his smile dimmed a moment and he quickly picked up his game and hurried out the room.

“Hey, Neil. Guess I’ll see you later. Have fun guys.” He said quickly before disappearing out the door.

Neil turned back to Andrew who appeared to be studying Neil’s clothes.

“That won’t work.”
Neil scoffed. “I don’t really have much else besides this.”

“Trust me, I know.” He scoffed. Neil wanted to scoff right back. Who did this guy think he was? His clothes were fine.

“And,” Neil felt himself insisting, “It’s not like you told me much about where we’re going so I could dress accordingly. Oh wait,” he said sarcastically, snapping his fingers as if he suddenly remembered something, “you haven’t said anything about where we’re going.”

Andrew just gave him a look, before turning back to his closet, digging through it.

“For all I knew,” Neil plowed on “we were going to paint our nails and braid our hair and talk about boys or whatever.

“Your hair’s not long enough to braid.” Andrew said absently. “And I didn’t know you were gay.”

“I’m not. I was just listing things that I heard people do at sleepovers.”

“I figured. You sound clueless as fuck. And as if I’d want to spend the night with you. Here,” he tossed a bundle of clothes at Neil. “These should fit.”

Neil looked down at the clothes in his hands and then back at Andrew, who was crossing his arms waiting for him to say something.

“I’m not… changing with you here.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “I heard you didn’t like changing around people. Didn’t figure you were so self-conscious.”

“What, you were talking about me changing? Is this what you do in your spare time? What other exciting things do you talk about?” he asked with mock interest. “Do you ask Seth to jot down whether I take a shit or a piss? Or do you wait outside the door yourself. If you’re really so curious I’ll tell you. It’s as weird as fuck but I’m not really one to judge.”

Andrew gave him an unimpressed look before rolling his eyes.

“Your buddy was saying it. He’s worried you think he’s going to check you out. He was very upset that you might think he’s gay or something.”

Neil couldn’t hold back the urge to roll his eyes. “I don’t give a shit whether he’s gay or not. He needs to realize that there’s more going on than him.”

Andrew looked at him a moment before walking to the door.

“You have 5 minutes before I come back in here and drag your ass out.” He said before he turned on his heel left the room.

Neil didn’t trust that Andrew wouldn’t just open the door at any moment, but he figured that it was just a chance he was going to have to take. He quickly shed the clothes he had worn and left them in a pile on the floor. He stared at it a minute before balling the clothes up and draping them obnoxiously across Andrew’s bed. Andrew knew about the money and knives in his bag. If he told anyone about that, he would be out of there faster than a rabbit in a fox den. Though maybe, he thought as he pulled the shirt over his head, maybe it would be better off that way. Better to be away from prying eyes. Though, he figured, hopping on one leg trying to get on the black pants Andrew had given him, he didn’t know what he would get at those places. They could be worse for all he
Neil tied his shoes and opened the door to find Andrew leaning against the wall casually. Neil was surprised that he hadn’t walked in, finding out the secrets he no doubt was curious about, but he hadn’t. Andrew glanced over at Neil when he heard the door open. He leant away from the wall, nodding towards the stairs and began to walk. They left the building and made their way down the street. They walked over to the bus stop and waited for it to come by. The stood there silently until the bus came and they boarded.

They rode in silence. Some of the sights were familiar, though others didn’t appear to be.

When they finally reached their destination, Andrew pulled the cord to signal the stop and got ready to get off. Neil followed him off the bus. Their surrounding were vaguely familiar, but they were hard to place in the fading light. Andrew led the way to the back door of a sort of club. He made his way through the kitchen until they walked through double doors into the actual club. And the club was… yikes.

There was so much tasteless leather and so many useless chains adorning the scantily clad patrons. Neil knew that people criticized his clothes, but he didn’t really think that people could really judge him when there were people willingly going out dressed like extras in a vampire sex flick.

Andrew dodged through the dancers to the bar. There was a young individual in training beside an older bartender.

Andrew gestured at the younger. “Roland.”

Roland’s face lit up. “Andrew!” his gaze shifted over to Neil looking him up and down. ”And you brought a friend.”

“I need my usual and a standard for Neil.”

“I don’t drink.”

Roland just nodded before disappearing.

Neil wanted to ask how Andrew knew him but Roland had already reappeared with a glass of honey colored liquid and an opened soda for Neil.

“Enjoy,” she said as he offered them their drinks. “Though, probably away from the dance floor.”

Andrew slid him some money before turning. They found a somewhat empty spot on the outskirts of the dancefloor. The chairs were high off the ground and he felt so obviously out of place that he was sure they get carded and kicked out. Andrew had seemed to have no such worries, easily hefting himself up onto the barstool next to Neil’s own. Andrew gave him a nod before downing his drink. Neil, foolishly, took a sip of his, before almost gagging it up.

It had been so long since he had last has soda, so he wasn’t sure if it was always this sweet, or if there was something off. He had it still lifted to his lips and Andrew tipped it, causing the liquid to flood into his mouth. He dripped the can to ground and tried to open his mouth, but Andrew’s hand was over his mouth pinching his nose, holding him against the wall. He struggled a moment before swallowing the vile liquid. Andrew let go and Neil staggered off. Andrew probably didn’t think that Neil would be able to get very far under the influence of the drugs. He quickly made his way over to one of the exits he had found when the first arrived. He hurried out to side door and forced himself to throw up. He was able to get rid of some of whatever Andrew had given him, be he was already starting to feel the effects.
He felt his way along the walls of the alley, before making it out onto the street. His vision was beginning to blur around the edges and the world was beginning to sway. Or maybe it was just his body. He honestly wasn’t sure.

He burst out onto the sidewalk, trying to find a focal point. All the landmarks were distorted in the darkness, sparse lamplight and unearthly neon warping the streets into a haunting nightmare. Though he didn’t have much of the drugs, he knew that they weren’t helping his perception. All he knew was that he needed to get away, and he didn’t care were. It wasn’t long before he saw the familiar sight of the bus stop. The bus was pulling up just as he stumbled over to it. He fumbled through his pockets before finding his bus pass and swiping it and getting inside. He planted himself into a seat, head spinning. It was getting harder and harder to stay awake and focused. He barely was able to focus enough to get off at a hub stop, switching to a bus that took its riders to the nearby connecting towns.

He boarded one of the busses and put his head between his knees, and drifted between consciousness and unconsciousness.

It seemed like no time at all had passed, before he hear shouting. He blinked awake, to see the bus driver turned around to face him.

“Kid, this is the last stop. You have to get off.”

Neil nodded vaguely and stumbled off. He had no idea where he was but he decided that the fact that he could barely stand was a more pressing matter. He managed to wander a little farther before collapsing on a bench and passing out.

***


He had been looking an hour and he still couldn’t find that son of a bitch. Neil fucking (and he was also certain that that was the little bastard’s middle name; that kid was probably born screaming trouble) Josten a pain in the ass.

But whether or not Neil was a pain in the ass didn’t do anything to help him ignore the fact that he was in shit. Wymack hadn’t taken it well when he had put Boyd through the ringer; he wouldn’t be happy to know that Andrew had put the newest member of the fox family through something similar.

Shit.

He should have followed Neil when he got up. He was fucking runner. Of course he would make it for the exit. Of course he had the exits so ingrained in his mind that he was able to find his way out when he was half drugged out of his mind. When Andrew ahd finally made it out of the club, Josten was already gone. He had vanished. Disappeared. Andrew made his way back to Marbury but Neil wasn’t there.

He searched the streets and couldn’t find him. Part of him was glad he couldn’t.

Maybe after he gets back he’ll leave.

Unless he’s dead.

Not your problem. You weren’t the one that let him out into traffic. He did that himself.

Nice try trying to get yourself off the hook. Really? You know it’s your fault. It always is. Everything
that goes wrong is your fault. Cass. Aaron. What is the common denominator? You.

And back and forth his mind went. All night these thoughts raced through his head until the early morning light appeared and he still hadn’t found him.

Shit.

***

Neil woke up to the sound of squawking and cawing so loud he could feel it rattling and echoing around his skull and the sensation that only came when one spends the night with their face smashed up against harsh wood. He pushed himself up from where he had sprawled out on the bench to look at his surroundings. There wasn’t much to see from where he was. No people. No cars. The only thing that he could see were two seagulls perched on top of a lamppost, no doubt waiting for some unsuspecting person to become the recipient of their unwanted shit. And as he pried his eyes away from them to scan the rest of the area, he felt his stomach drop.

He had absolutely no idea where he was.

It was obvious that he had wondered farther from the bus stop that it had seemed the night before, because it was nowhere to be seem. He righted himself more fully and anchored himself with his hands to keep himself from swaying off the seat. As soon as he was steady he pulled up his foot and dug through his shoe. He had only put a few dollars in them, as he figured that he would have enough time to go back and get his stuff, should he ever need to go back.

He hadn’t expected to be fucking drugged.

He could almost hear his mother yelling at him for letting his guard down, for becoming too comfortable, and he couldn’t find it in himself to disagree with her sharp accusations.

He had been so incredibly stupid. He was lucky no one had come across him while he was sleeping. He was lucky he hadn’t walked into traffic. He was lucky he had lost Andrew. He was lucky he happened to stumble upon what appeared to be one of the most desolated areas to ever exist. He was lucky he wasn’t dead.

Or maybe that would have been a better fate. His head was pounding, his heart felt like it was going to jump out of his chest, and his throat was so dry he couldn’t swallow. He closed his eyes to limit his senses in hopes that it would stave off his impending headache. He focused hard and finally was able to pick up the sound of people. He jerked himself to his feet and followed the noise.

He followed the sound to a local park. He zeroed in on the water fountains by the bathrooms. He dragged himself across the park until he reached that bless’d water fountain. The instant the cool water fell into his mouth he felt immediate relief. He decided he wouldn’t have minded staying there forever. He stayed their gulping in the fresh water until a kid came up behind and had to tell him his turn was up. He wiped away the water from his mouth and staggered away. He nodded and walked more steadily back to the bench.

From the bench he was finally able to get some sort of bearings and find the bus station. Next to the stop was a bulletin board with the bus schedule posted. It was laminated, but so old that the plastic was starting to peel in the corners, exposing the weathered paper. He looked at the itinerary and felt his heart sink. The bus only ran to the city during the week, not on the weekend. He wandered a bit farther until he found small shop and scoured the aisles until he found a map of the area and some water. He brought it all up to the counter.
The shop owner looked him up and down. “Rough night?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” he said absently. He looked around the store. “Do you have a phone? I need to call someone.”

The owner gave him a pitying look before turning the counter phone over to him.

Neil took the phone and typed in the number he needed and waited for him to pick up.

“What do you want?” an irritated voice answered.

“Hey, Kevin. This is Neil.” He twisted his fingers around the knotted phone cord. He hated this awkward conversation shit. “I need to talk to Wymack”

There was muffled sound a moment as the phone got passed from son to father.“-fuck, kid. Where the hell are you? Seth called us last night when you went out and never came back.”

“Not sure. I’ll be back later. Just giving you warning, I’m going to be stopping by your place. I don’t think I can go back to Marbury right now.”

“Sure, it’s not a problem, but Neil-”

“Thanks, bye.” he said, putting the phone back on its receiver.

He nodded at the owner, and left crumpled bills and loose change on the counter as payment, before making his way out to the road. After studying the map a while, he figured he wasn’t more thirty miles away from town. He made his way for the freeway, holding out a thumb for cars heading in his direction.

It took a while before a young couple picked him up. It had been much easier to get a ride when it had been his mother and him. People were much more likely to help a mother and her young son, than to help some teen who looked like just got wasted the night before and slept on a park bench.

They took him about thirteen miles towards his destination and from there he found someone who could take him another nine. From there it was only about eight, which was easily manageable when he’s sober, and only a little less hung over.

Eventually he saw the old faded sign that was outside the town. He found a bus stop and used his pass to get back to Wymack’s place.

When he got to it, he almost let out a sigh of relief. He clambered up the stairs, fishing out his keys and sliding in. He almost wanted to collapse on the floor from exhaustion and fatigue, but managed to keep standing. It was obvious that no one had heard him enter because he could hear Wymack’s frustrated voice, obviously in the middle of an argument.

“-after last time. You almost screwed him over, Minyard. And what about this kid? What did he do that you felt you and to do whatever it is that you did last night.”

Neil was almost shocked to hear Andrew’s voice. “I did what I had to do.” Frustrated grumbling threatened to interrupt him, but Andrew held up a hand to silence him and continued on. “He was keeping something and he wasn’t going to say what otherwise.”

“Well drugging someone one isn’t exactly fucking ideal way to get information is it?” Neil asked, leaning against the wall, in way he hoped mimicked the anger pulsing through his veins and not just a slumped display of exhaustion.
“Look, the runaway came back, Coach” Andrew said gesturing to Neil. “All in one piece.”

“This isn’t simple like that, Minyard, and you know it.”

“Just let me talk to him.”

“There’s no fucking way-”

“No, we need to talk.” Neil agreed, seething.

Wymack shot him an incredulous look. “There’s no way I’m leaving you two alone together.”

“Don’t worry, Coach. I won’t kill him.”

Wymack didn’t look like he believed him but he turned from Andrew to glance at Neil whose steady fuming gaze was on Andrew, before backing off, hands raised in surrender. “You have five minutes. Five,” he emphasized holding up his hands for them to see, “Unless I hear something breaking or someone dying from outside. If that happens, I’m coming in, understood?”

They nodded absently not breaking the deadlocked stare down they had. Neil didn’t turn to watch Wymack leave, but he heard the door close as he left.

“You’re lucky I’m not fucking going to kill you.”

“Oh, look, the runaway speaks.”

“You’re not denying it. You’ve seen what’s in my bag. You better believe that I know how to use it.”

“Ah, the bag. That’s what we’ve been needing to talk about.”

“Why won’t you let this go? Just leave me the fuck alone.”

“No can do. I know you’re lying- about a lot of stuff. And I don’t fucking fancy sitting here twiddling my thumbs waiting for whatever hellfire storm is just waiting to fall on you. I can handle shit but I don’t like surprises.”

There was a darkness in his eyes that Neil couldn’t even begin to fathom as he said the last part. The darkness was one that Neil had only ever seen in his own eyes; not his father’s, his own. It was a darkness of having lived through too much and having to pretend like they hadn’t. It was the look of being very much alone for much too long.

He had always had his mother but they weren’t close. They were merely companions on their rollercoaster ride of pain and suffering. And although he knew Andrew was constantly around Aaron, Kevin, and Nicky, he also knew Andrew had suffered alone. And with that look, within that moment, Neil felt something shifting inside him. He wasn’t sure what it was or if he was going to like it, but something was changing and for some reason that filled him with apprehension.

“Any why should I tell you anything?” he threw out and he could feel the way the question hung out there between them. He could feel the tension, the way Andrew’s answer would determine how this conversation was going to go. Everything was balancing on the edge of a knife point and only Andrew could decide if someone would get stabbed.

“I know about the knives and the cash you have stashed. Madera might be interested to hear about it. She might take them away or kick you out.”
Neil didn’t even bother trying to hide his eye roll. “You think I’m scared of leaving? You’ve called me a runaway. Do you think you threats of making me leave are frightening? Your threats mean nothing to me.”

“Then why, “Andrew sneered, leaning forward, “haven’t you left yet?”

Neil opened his mouth, but he hesitated, the words catching on his throat like a burr on a wool sock.

“I like it here.” The admission was painful, the words tearing away his skin, laying his soul bare. He swallowed and continued “I’ve moved around a lot and I’d like to say in one spot for a while. But,” he added, “I won’t hesitate to leave if I need to. I won’t stay here with you holding this over my head, with the stress that any moment you’re going to loot through my stuff or drug me again. I’m not going to stay with this threat.” He voice was becoming more forced, stronger.

“What about a deal?”

Neil scoffed, eyebrow rising in amusement. “A deal?”

“Yes, a deal.”

“And what, oh wise one,” Neil leaned forward cockily, almost tauntingly “would this deal entail?”

“Two things. The first part would be a guarantee. I’ll stop digging through your stuff, drugging you, et cetera, et cetera, but,” he leaned forward too, his words breathed into his ear, “you stay.”

Neil shot back, brows hiding behind his bangs. ‘Why?’

Andrew shrugged carelessly “You’re interesting.” He said. As if it was obvious. As if it were simple. Nothing in his life had ever been simple.

Neil didn’t know how to respond to that so he mentally shoved it aside for the time being. “What’s the second part?”


“Truth for a truth?”

Andrew just looked at him.

Neil almost didn’t know he was speaking before the words escaped his lips.

“Fine.”

Andrew stared at him, before nodding. “I’ll go first. What are you hiding?”

He paused before looking around the room. He could see Wymack pacing in the kitchen and he knew Andrew had followed his gaze. “Not here. Somewhere private.”

He shrugged in a way that seemed to say fair enough.

Neil didn’t break eye contact with him as he shouted over his shoulder.

“We’re leaving Wymack. Thank you for everything.”

Andrew nodded and then led the way out the door.
All you have is your fire...

And the place you need to reach...

Don’t you ever tame your demons

But always keep ‘em on a leash
FRESHMAN YEAR- FALL

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: mentions of extreme violence, murder, and blood (all relating to Mary’s death), mentions of past abuse, referenced to past drug usage & drugging, pageantry? (Idk if that needs to be tagged, but it’s here), allusions to eating disorders and perfectionist impulses, messed up thoughts (aka, somewhat apologetic thoughts towards behaviors of an abuser)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He has no problem with secrets
He knows how to keep them
He never felt the need to let them show
And I’ve had no trouble with speaking
Or trusting my instincts
That maybe this is one that I should know
But as I’m waiting there
The devil sits on my shoulder and stares
Laughing that the one thing that I can’t get
Is what I need

They made their way back to Maybury quietly. Neil followed after Andrew as he made his way up the stairs to the second floor. However when they got there, instead of going in the direction of their rooms, Andrew veered to go down the opposite hallway. It could have been a replica of their own hallway, with the noticeable exception of the door with a sign reading “Don’t you punks even think about it” at the end of the hall. Andrew discretely slipped some metal tools he must have concealed in his armband out and into the lock on the door. He glanced around casually before the door unlocked with a click. He opened the door and Neil followed after him, closing and locking the door behind them.

He followed Andrew up the steps to the roof. There was flat section with a half wall that lead to the sloping roof tiles. Andrew walked over to the wall and heaved himself up onto it and lit a cigarette.

“Shall we begin?” he asked, gesturing to the spot beside him with a dramatic flourish. The smoke swirled around his fingers making circles and loops in the fading sunlight.

Neil considered the offer. He really didn’t want to leave yet and if this would have Andrew off his back he might as well.

Neil rolled his eyes at Andrew’s dramatics and plucked the cigarette from between Andrew’s fingers.
and held it near his nose. Neil stood there and suddenly felt reckless abandon, like his cares were gone. Suddenly all the lies he had been planning to tell were no longer what he was going to say.

Neil hesitated a moment. He could still back out. He could still use his lies. But as he looked over at Andrew, he knew he wasn’t going to. For the first time in a long, long time he was going to tell the truth.

Well, at least part of it.

“I’m not saying everything,” he admitted as he climbed onto the ledge beside Andrew and inhaled a breath from his cigarette. “It’s a long story and it’s not something I really want to get into.” He paused, and rotated his cigarette in his fingers, unsure where to begin. He looked away from the paper deathstick and looked at Andrew. “My parents are dead, or as good as.”

Andrew studied him a moment, eyes scrutinizing his face before he turned away casually to stare up at the sky.

“You kill them?” he asked nonchalantly, tilting his head back to blow a smoke ring. It stood out against the sky; pale grey against the nectarine heavens. Neil hadn’t realized it had gotten so late.

He ran Andrew’s question through his head again. It was an odd question to be asked and Neil should have been taken aback, but he wasn’t. He felt his resolve solidify. If Andrew was able to except murder, he would likely be able to handle the truth. A diluted version of it, at least.

“No,” he shook his head in answer. But, damn, a part of him wished he had killed his father. “My father was- is- a really bad guy. He had this tendency to become violent with my mom and me,” he said, trying to come off as indifferent. If the way Andrew was looking at him was any indication, he wasn’t doing a very good job. He looked down at his hands and flexed his fingers, watching as the tendons pulled taught.

“Long story short, my mom had enough one day and she picked me up after school and left, but not before withdrawing a fuck ton of money from my father’s bank account.” He glanced at Andrew, but his face was impassive, which Neil appreciated, so he continued “He wasn’t exactly thrilled with the change in the family dynamic or his bank account, so he went looking for us. We had to change identities. A lot. He had some good connections, so it was hard to outmaneuver him. He caught up with us in Seattle,” he trailed off and he desperately inhaled the smoke from his cigarette.

“He got a few good hits at my mom. With a pipe, I think. I don’t really know. Everything was pretty much a blur. We were out of there pretty quick after that.” He swallowed hard, the next words harder to say. They weighed down the back of his throat, heavy in the way truths were when they had not yet been spoken.

“She seemed fine, at first.” Oh, God, it was hard to speak. “But then- ah- she didn’t have any energy and her legs gave out while we were trying to run away. I though they must have just gotten a hit on her legs. No big deal you know, nothing worse than anything else we had already had to deal with.” He tried to swallow but he couldn’t.

“We got in the car and we were driving- I was driving. She was sitting in the passenger seat. She gave me directions. Every time I tried to ask if she was okay she would snap at me to pay attention to the road. It wasn’t much different than how she normal was. I thought she was fine.” His throat burned.

“But them when we were in the middle of nowhere I looked over and- There was all this blood and-” he took a deep breath and Andrew didn’t rush him. “She died.” He pushed out and inhaled a
lunghful of smoke and hurried on.

“He got arrested and the law got involved. The whole thing was a fucking shit show. Since I didn’t have any family I told them I would rather be put in the system than go into witness protection. They didn’t really like the whole idea but they didn’t really have any reason not to agree. They let me change my name and now I’m here.

“He’s not dead,” he continued, for clarification purposes. “He’s not really even convicted yet, but I gave a lot of testimony against him, so there’s not a very high chance that he will get out, but there’s no guarantee. I just want to enjoy however long I have before I have to run again. Before I have to say goodbye to Neil Josten permanently,” he finished and he felt empty.

Saying the words left him feeling raw and exposed. He had not revealed everything to the other boy but this was more honesty than he thought he had ever shared before. Part of him, a desperate, desperate part of him, wanted to take it all back, play it off as a ridiculous story; it certainly was strange enough. Wanted to gather up the truth he spilled before Andrew could absorb it. But he kept his mouth shut and waited for Andrew’s verdict.

Andrew sat there a while, smoking silently, before his head tilted, just enough so that he was able to look at Neil. They sat there a moment. Andrew took the cigarette out of his mouth and exhaled. “Your turn.”

The tension that had been steeped in Neil’s shoulders drained away slowly as he relaxed. He shook the end of his cigarette. He hadn’t realized he had been sitting so still; in the whole time he told the story, not a single bit of ash had fallen. The ashen end was so fragile and delicate that the twitch of his fingers caused it to break off and sprinkle over the street below.

He watched the smoky dust fall and pondered his question. He had so many of them he wanted to ask, each one seemed more urgent than the last. They sat in silence for several minutes before Neil finally decided what he wanted to ask.

“How do you know Roland?” he finally asked.

Andrew’s eyes shot over at him and his eyebrow jumped up until it touched his blond fringe. He clearly wasn’t expecting that question and Neil thought he should congratulation himself for pulling one over on Andrew, but he still felt so numb and shaken he didn’t.

Andrew took another breath of smoke before answering.

“We work together.” He gestured vaguely causing bits of ash to dislodge themselves from the end of his cigarette, sending tiny embers floating out over the edge of the building. “I clean the club during the day. Roland’s training as a bartender but he hangs around most of the time.”

Neil nodded. He leaned back against the wall. He held his cigarette up to his nose and breathed in deeply, letting the smoke fill him.

Andrew didn’t say anything after that, opting instead to lean back and continue smoking. But it was enough for Neil to know that their deal was now in place.

In the haze of the smoke and silence they watched the sun go down and sat there until their cigarettes burned down to their filters before they silently parted ways as if the whole thing had never happened.

But it did, Neil couldn’t help thinking. And he couldn’t pretending like it didn’t. As he discarded his cigarette stub he made his way back to his room. He knew deep inside that things were changing but
he didn’t know how much.

Sitting there, telling the truth made him feel so vulnerable, yet so, so exhilarated. He had been chased across continents, faced down by his father and crew, been shot at by gangsters, and had talked to the mob boss that held his fate in his hands, yet this experience seemed to rival all of that.

He snuck into his room and collapsed back onto his bed and stared up at the crisscross wiring holding up Seth’s bed. Despite sitting clouded in smoke for the past hour or so, he felt like he could finally breathe. For the first time in a long time.

He didn’t know if he could trust Andrew just yet, but he was willing to take the risk at this point. After all, if he needed to he could just leave and never look back. It wasn’t like he had never done it before. What did he have to lose?

***

Neil was hesitant to go back to Wymack’s after the argument that had happened there a few days before.

He had never been one to put off doing something uncomfortable when it needed to be done. When he was on the run with Mary, he had been able to drop everything at a moment’s notice, stitch up a wound without hesitation, and learn a new language without a complaint.

But this, this wasn’t anything he had ever had to do before. Part of him was worried about the reaction Wymack would have in response to the loud argument he and Andrew had had. He didn’t seem like he would act abusively, but Neil also knew that that type of thing wasn’t always clear at first. If he had shouted around his father he would have been beaten until he was unconscious or wishing he was.

He had caused Wymack stress and he deserved to be punished.

But even more than that, he was worried about any oncoming awkwardness that would ensue. Because no matter how Wymack felt about the whole thing, there was no doubt that it would be awkward. Running for his life had fortunately limited the number of awkward conversations he had had to endure in his fourteen years. He was not looking forward to this.

Which was why had been hanging out in the alleyway for the past ten minutes, trying to get the gumption to get this over with. He stared at the stairwell a moment longer before going up the steps to the front door. He lifted his fist and knocked on the door and waited.

Fuuuuuceck. abort abort abort abort abc-

The door swung open revealing Wymack standing in front of him.

“Neil.”

Neil nodded. “Can I come in?”

Wymack nodded backing away from the door to let him in. Neil slid in and stood away from Wymack as Wymack closed the door. He waited for Wymack to go to the living room, and kept the position closer to the door, making sure to leave enough distance between him and Wymack so that he could escape if need be.

“I just wanted to apologize for the disturbance the other night. It won’t happen again.” He said quickly, trying, but not really succeeding, to meet Wymack’s eyes.
“Neil,” he sighed exasperatedly and Neil chanced a glance up and saw Wymack run his hand over his face. “I’m not upset about that. I was mad at Andrew for pulling that type of shit again. But I wasn’t upset with you. I want you to know that if he ever tries to pull something like that again to feel free to come here. I gave you a key for a reason.”

“I…” Neil was a loss for words. “Thank you.” He paused a moment. “When it was all happening I didn’t even know where I was.”

Wymack sighed. “Do you know where he took you?’

“Some club. Eden or something.”

Wymack sighed and rubbed his face again. “Yeah, that figures. That club’s actually not that far from here. We’re in the business district so it’s just a few blocks away. Next time something goes down come here.”

Neil nodded.

“Now I have to go to open up shop, but you’re welcome to stay if you want.”

Neil nodded for what he felt was the thousandth time as Wymack headed down the hall to a staircase that lead to the downstairs shop.

Neil watched a moment before shaking his head and leaving the apartment.

***

After that, things settled into a strange sort of rhythm. He rarely saw Andrew during the day, as Andrew was often at work, but Neil made a habit of going for a run and then stopping by Wymack’s from time to time. Though those times grew more frequent as the summer wore on. The days grew hotter and hotter the further it got into the summer months, making it so that he could only run in the morning and evening, leaving his afternoons free. Without anything to do at the home he often found himself migrating over to Wymack’s apartment.

Aaron and Nicky came by when they could which was rather often. Aaron was rather rude while Nicky tended to make up for it with his extroverted personality. Neil learned that Aaron lived with Nicky’s parents, who were extremely religious and incredibly strict. Neil was honestly surprised, based on what he heard about them, that they were even letting them hang around the Foxes. Neil had a seeking suspicion that they didn’t really know much about the group of kids that their son and nephew spent time with. Aaron never said much, but he would often spend the afternoon divided between watching TV with Allison or texting someone on his phone.

Aaron was silent whenever Neil came, but he was almost always there. It was almost like he had nowhere better to be. He sat curled up on the couch, head on his knees as he stared off into the distance. Sometimes he scrolled through his phone. Occasionally, when was in particularly amicable mood, he would throw out a comment at the TV when someone made a particularly bad blunder on some cooking show, like when woman turned her food processor completely upside down to pour food out of the feeding tube.

Nicky, on the other hand, enjoyed talking and spent a lot of his time doing so. At first he was hesitant, quiet even, but he quickly opened up when after talking a few times. He was a very friendly person and he felt determined to become good friend with Neil before he left. He was going to be studying abroad in Germany for most of his senior year and he was really looking forward to it.

“It’s really cool,” he said showing Neil pictures of the landmarks where he would be staying. Neil
felt a pang of nostalgia when he saw some of them, bringing back moments with his mother.

“And this is Neuschwanstein. It’s this huge castle. It’s not really close to where I’ll staying but Erik says that we could go up some weekend or something.”

“Erik?” He asked as he peered over Nicky’s shoulders to get a closer look at the pictures.

“My pen pal, Erik, the guy I’m staying with, sent me these pictures.”

“You know Erik well?”

“Yeah.” He smiled down at his phone. “I had a hard time when I enrolled in high school some- uh-stuff happened right before and, yeah, I don’t really want to talk about it. But my German teacher saw that I was really into German and she had a friend who was also a teacher in Germany so she set up this pen pal thing and I’ve been writing to Erik ever since.

“You close?”

“Actually, he’s Klose.” He sputtered and laughed. “Sorry. But yeah, he’s my best friend.” Nicky said passionately. “I mean we don’t always like the same things but we like enough of the same things to be happy. I mean, he hikes, Neil. Hikes, like, for fun and everything. I fucking swear. But he sends me pictures of his hikes and its beautiful there, so I guess I can understand it. And he’s funny and nice. He makes a lot of jokes, which I appreciate. People here are lacking in the humor department,” he added, raising his voice so that it carried over to the couch. Allison flipped him off. He laughed and shook his head. “I’ve been wanting to meet him for a while so this is really cool for me.” He said, a fond look on his face.

But other times he would sit silently as he brushed up on his German at Wymack’s table beside Neil while he drew with the spare printer paper that Wymack let him use. And it made Neil wonder what it was like to have a friend like that. It seemed almost absurd, impossible, even. But as he spied Nicky across the table painstakingly gong over everything, he was staring to think that the impossible might be possible.

***

Andrew was quickly beginning to regret his decision to make a deal with the little runaway. Fortunately they managed to stay out of each other way most of the time.

But when they were around each other he was so fucking annoying and he never seemed to stop. He had seen Neil interact with some of the other Foxes, but he always seemed like a diluted version of himself. He wasn’t so sure why it bothered him; maybe it was the fact that he had actually seen Neil as he actually was, all fire and fierce lies and scarce truths, but this other version irritated him.

Neil was obviously restraining himself around everyone, filtering himself so carefully. And it really pissed him off.

Most days he wasn’t there, though. He didn’t know what Neil did to waste the day and frankly he didn’t care. He was too busy working in the club.

Cleaning was relaxing to a degree. He didn’t have to put much thought into it, which allowed his mind to wander. He tried to focus on the future and not the past. Bee had told him it was good to not dwell on the past.

He also tried to avoid thinking about the present at the moment too, because that would mean focusing on how Neil was a big problem and pain in the ass. Or how the Roland’s arms were
becoming more defined as the summer wore on, and despite only being one year his senior, a face
that was growing pretty mature.

Some days Andrew and Roland would have overlapping breaks and they could sit together. Roland
talked a bit too much for Andrew to say he was actively enjoying it, but he knew Roland wasn’t
intentionally boring.

“You’ve got to watch out, Andrew. In high school people will give you a ton of shit for all sorts
shit.”

*Like his life hadn’t already been doing the same thing since he was born.* He couldn’t help thinking.

“Like I don’t tell anyone I’m gay because then they’ll just lump me in with whatever.”

Andrew glanced at him, making sure to keep a neutral expression.

Roland rolled his eyes. “Don’t even think about giving me shit abou-”

“I’m not going to,” he stubbed out his light. “It would be pretty hypocritical for me to do so.”

Roland just looked at him a moment before nodding.

They sat back and Roland continued telling about the hide outs on campus.

***

Sometimes, when Neil was at Wymack’s, Seth and Allison would show up at the same time, and
how the afternoon would go was usually a toss-up. Some days they would stay in opposite sides of
the room, stewing and sending biting remarks the other’s direction until one left. Some days Neil
would walk in to find them making out on the couch. He would often take it upon himself to leave
on those days.

Other afternoons he was dragged in front of the television by Allison to partake in watching what she
called “trash television.”

Allison seemed to take it as her personal mission to get Neil to watch at least one episode of each
“trash-TV show” that had ever aired. Renee sat beside her the entire time in a silent show of support.
Even Dan would even drop down beside them on the couch when she didn’t have work and watch
the mind-numbing programs.

Most of the shows were pretty stupid. He didn’t get them and honestly he didn’t understand how
they had even gotten on air. Why were people running around naked? Why were they afraid? Why
were people buying more things than they needed and where did they even find all those coupons in
the first place? Surely stores had better control of their coupon distribution. He couldn’t imagine the
thought of being in a place so long that he could build a stockpile. And those shows were only the
beginning.

The shows seemed to be on every possible topic that could possibly ever be though about. They
were utterly ridiculous and over-the-top, but Allison seemed to get a kick out of it, which made them
a little more palatable. Sometimes they would watch a wedding dress show and he could see the way
her eyes would light up when she saw the complicated designs and patterns.

“They find dresses for everyone on this show.” She said pointing her spoon at the television,
emphasizing her point. “All sorts of different people. Do you see the detail on those dresses, Neil?”
It was massively impressive. The beadwork was intricate, same as the lace. But he felt his eyes almost bug out of his head every time he heard the prices.

“Eight thousand dollars? How could it cost eight thousand dollars?”

“It’s a wedding dress, Neil.”

“I know it’s a wedding dress.” He replied dryly. “But I could practically live on that a year Allison.”

“It’s not that strange,” she insisted. “My mother would sometimes throw out about three thousand for one of my pageant dresses.”


“Yeah and a lot of times I needed more than one dress to compete. Pageantry is very expensive. Some of the girls I compete against have been doing it as long as I have.”

“How long.”

She tapped her lips with her spoon, pondering the question. “I think my first was when I was eighteen months.”

He sputtered, baffled. “But babies can’t do anything.”

“That doesn’t stop people,” she said solemnly as she ate another spoonful of her yogurt. “But, you learn to do things as soon as you can walk. There comes a time where you have to learn routines, learn talents, wear heels.”

“When you were a teen?”

“Younger. They weren’t very high but they were a pain in the ass. What I hate more than that was the hairspray, though. It took like half an hour to wash all that shit out.”

He remembered more than he wanted to about hairspray. One of his mother’s identities required her to do her hair in a way that made it seem shorter than it really was. But they couldn’t afford to cut it for real; short hair was recognizable. It was one of her favorite tricks. It was harder to find a short-hair person when their hair was suddenly ten inches longer.

But getting her hair up was a hassle and a half. He remembered the way she could extract all the bobby pins at the end of the day and the way her hair would barely move out of place. He remembered his mother applying that horrible spray and he remembered how her hair cramped under his fingers when he touched it, how her hair would knot after applying it.

“My mom used to use that stuff. Fucked up her hair.”

“It does tend to do that.” She nodded sagely before falling silent and then looked at the TV. “Wait, let me look at something.” She scrolled down on the something until her eyes lit up. “No way.”

“What?”

“Neil they have a show about this. Look it’s on. Like, right now. Watch.”

She flipped it on and he was subjected to half an hour of parents dressing up their children like adults and getting mad at the preschool-aged children for not performing perfectly. Honestly the kids put up on stage looked like they were half-child, half-decoration.
“What the fuck.”

“They’re looking for perfection. If it’s not perfect, it’s not worth doing,” she said so automatically and with so much conviction it sounded like it was a mantra. Her eyes widened marginally when she realized what she said but she didn’t take it back.

“But some of the parents were hurting their kids.” He felt a bit hypocritical saying that, considering what his own mother had done. But he reasoned with himself that she was just trying to keep them alive. These parents weren’t.

“Beauty is pain.” Allison said, all seriousness on her face. He wasn’t sure if she was joking or not. Then he remembered some of the things his mother had worn to some of the fancier dinners she attended with his father and the hours of work she put in. He was inclined to think it was the latter.

“Where do you draw the line?”

“I don’t know. I think every parent thinks the line is different for them. Some,” she pointed as the show changed from what they considered a natural pageant to a glitz, “people think that the glitz stuff is barbaric and horrible, while other people think that dragging your kid out to a pageant in the first place is abuse. People have been debating this shit forever.”

He thought about her words. His mother was like that. He knew if he saw someone else treating their kids the way she had treated him he would have thought it looked an awful lot like abuse. He felt torn when he thought about it. He knew that Andrew thought it was abuse and he knew it was, on some level. But he also thought he deserved it. It hurt his head to think about such things. It probably didn’t matter anymore; she was dead. She couldn’t do anything anymore.

He shook away those thoughts and focused back on the show.

“So what’s your talent?”

“I sing.”

“You do?”

“Like a fucking angel.”

He laughed and she laughed with him. Allison was fun and she made conversation easy. He wasn’t used to things coming easily so basked in ever second he had.

***

Andrew’s summer became a blur of summer sun, the nightclub’s messy floor, and fifteen minute kissing breaks interspersed throughout the day. For once his days weren’t characterized by the unique acts of cruelty inflicted upon him. Instead his days were filled with mundane routine, the activities flashing through his memory like the strobe lights that were used on Eden’s dance floor.

The kissing thing was good. Desensitization and all that. Bee would probably be proud of him. It also helped that not of his abusers had ever kissed him.

Sometimes he had stupid thoughts. It wasn’t uncommon; he was a teenager. He had heard that teens were prone to stupid thoughts from time to time. It was probably in Time magazine or CNN or something. Or maybe it was from one of those Reader’s Digests that sat in the waiting room of Bee’s office.
Sometimes those stupid thoughts would come to him and he would think about Neil’s lips. They were always chapped. He wondered how they would feel against his own. He wondered if his lips were like the split cracks in a desert floor. He wondered if anything besides barbs and poison could fall from the other boy’s mouth. If flowers could grow under the right circumstances

Like he said. Stupid thoughts.

***

Despite himself, Neil often found himself looking forward to the days he spent with Matt, the tall teen who had first driven him to Wymack’s place. Matt came most days but he would often leave when the late afternoon came rolling around to walk his dog.

Somedays he would run into Matt walking his dog. She was a nice golden retriever named Macey. She had long silky fur that was soft to the touch.

Neil had never had a pet, and never thought he would be the type of person to like them, but he found himself enraptured by the happy puppy running around pleased as could be. Everything excited her: birds, squirrels, people. Sometimes Matt would stop at the dog park and let her off her leash and let her run around, exploring new holes and making new friends.

Neil knew Macey had never seen the harsh ways of the world and Neil hoped she never would. Matt would often invite Neil to join him on walking Macey and they would often fall into conversation. Neil still wasn’t sure what he could reveal about himself without sending Matt running, so he carefully redirected the conversation back to Matt.

He had a habit of storing up the information he could on the people he surrounded himself with and was pleased to find that Matt was fairly forthcoming with personal information.

Matt was a boxer and a dancer. Apparently he and the other Foxes, as the teens who spent time at Wymack’s likes to call themselves, had a YouTube page and a website where they would post music and dancing tutorials and performances. Matt said he and Dan were basically the only ones who primarily did dancing, but he also helped with music on occasion.

His parents were divorced, and he used to live with his dad before something bad- he always clammed up whenever it came up- happened. Apparently the only good thing that had come out of that time was that he learned how to use the mixing boards that DJs used. After that he moved in with his mother who was, incidentally, the one who taught him to box.

Dan rarely came by Wymack’s, as she seemed to be spending almost every waking moment of the summer working at an underpaying fast food joint. But sometimes, sometimes, they would run into her on one of their walks and she would join them. Matt always became sort of stuttering mess around her, which Neil didn’t get but supposed that meant that he had some sort of crush on Dan. Dan was pretty cool so he could understand why Matt liked her.

But whether Dan picked up on it wasn’t clear, as she obstinately refused to address the topic. Instead she would sneakily pet Macey when Matt wasn’t looking. And he would laugh as he caught her doing increasingly faux-stealthy moves to get around him. Sometimes when they walked together, Dan would offhandedly mention that money was a bit tight at home, and she was just working a bit to help ends meet. But Neil could tell from the bags under her eyes that she was working much harder than she was letting on, but he didn’t press.

He almost never saw Andrew at Wymack’s, though the blond could have stopped by at any time Neil wasn’t there. But the times when everyone was there, the group was polarized. Seth picked
fights with all of Andrew’s gang and the friendship between Nicky and Allison would dissolve as they took sides. Despite the friendships that stretched over both sides, it was clear that they couldn’t withstand the strain they were put under when they all got together.

Neil hadn’t really talked to him much since the deal, though things had become much more civil between them. It was clear, however, that things were less than civil between Andrew and the other kids, a fact that became more and more evident as the summer wore on. They constantly referred to him as the monster, freak, and other names that indicated that they were less than pleased with him.

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However, despite their busy schedules, they all made time to have dinner at Wymack’s every Wednesday night. There was usually a bit of downtime after dinner, and all of the teenagers would sit around the living room wherever they could and chat.

Nicky, like Allison was also always happy to talk to anyone, though he wouldn’t talk as much when Seth was there as Seth typically would begin to insult him. Despite this, he and Allison seemed to have a strong bond over whatever was hip in the news. Nicky and Allison had this weird obsession with paying attention to music trends and were often gossiping about the other artist online and about the Foxes, their singing/dancing group on YouTube.

Music groups on the internet were nothing new to Neil. He used to view the Ravens, a popular music group on the internet. The Ravens were a group of classical musicians and artists who trained at Edgar Allan University, one of the most prestigious fine arts schools in the world. The university was said to be the stepping stone to Julliard. Their best students were Riko Moriyama and Kevin Day. Since they were so young they were never shown in newspapers or on TV, the school choosing to preserve their identities until they were adults, though Neil had listened to recording of their performances posted online almost religiously. He had almost been one of them, if his mother hadn’t pulled him away after years of studying the cello to go on the run.

The Ravens weren’t the only ones online that had climbed to fame; other groups had, too. There were two other groups that were quite popular: the Penns and the Trojans. The Penns were, predictably, in Pennsylvania, while the Trojans were in LA. They weren’t as popular since they didn’t have the prestige of an actual university backing them, but they did fairly well for what they had.

Occasionally Kevin would butt in with a few opinion of his own on the Ravens, but he usually stayed out of it.

Kevin, most of the time, wouldn’t interact unless it had something to do with his immediate interests: music, history, and chess. Sometimes he mixed things up with a little music history when he wanted a break, but overall he stray from it much.

Sometimes Neil talked to him about music theory, dredging up things from his childhood cello lessons. Kevin seemed to appreciate that and his face would light up as he passionately went on about his thoughts and feelings both the perspectives in different books.

But other times, Kevin would be distant and standoffish. Allison explained in hushed whispers that Kevin had been like that since he came to live there after his step-brother had broken his hand.

So on those evenings after dinner, Neil spent his time drawing. Wymack had long since given Neil access to his printer paper and pencils, so Neil spent his time absently doodling. He was in the middle of sketching Wymack’s kitchen from memory when Allison paused whatever fashion disaster of the week was on the screen at the moment and turned to Neil.
“So I think we’ve waited long enough before bring this up addressing the elephant in the room.”

Neil looked up from his sketch to the people around the room all with their eyes fixed on him, hungry for gossip. “What elephant?”

Allison rolled her eyes dramatically.

“What happened between you and the monster in June?”

The door opened and shut. Wymack walked in drying his hands. Andrew following behind him. “That’s something I’d like to know too actually.”

Neil shrugged. “We weren’t getting along, we had a disagreement and then we worked out an agreement.” He went back to his sketch.

Or he was about to before he was interrupted again.

“Like fuck it was that simple. You disappeared for almost a whole day. Wymack said you called from who knows where and then somehow appeared back here,” Seth spat out.

“He says he,” Dan shot a dirty look at Andrew, “drugged you.”

Neil couldn’t help rolling his eyes. That was so three weeks ago.

“Well, yeah that happened. But,” he said with emphasis, “I realized what was going on and left the club and took a couple of busses or whatever. I woke up the next the next day in some town thirty miles away with no buses running that day so I called Wymack and then I caught a few rides to town and then walked the last few miles.” He explained. The rest of the Foxes didn’t look too impressed, and frankly looked a little concerned.

“I called Wymack,” he repeated, irritated that they weren’t focusing on what he did right.

Andrew fixed him with an indecipherable look while Matt mumbled “Holy fuck, Neil” under his breath. Dan, Seth and Allison glared at Andrew. Renee didn’t look particularly pleased or surprised with the revelation.

Whatever. Neil was over it. He tried to get back to his sketch.

“Really, Andrew?” Allison’s biting, murderous tone shocked Neil back to attention. “After what happened with Matt you really wanted to try and mess with this shit again.”

“Allison, I’m fine, I’m over it.” Matt tried to butt in but Allison wasn’t hearing it.

“Doesn’t mean the rest of us are.”

“What happened with Matt?” Neil asked

“What? The little monster didn’t gloat about it when he was drugging you?”

“Why would he be taking about that when he had his own agenda?”

“I don’t know what goes on in his fucking head.” Allison answered indignantly.

“I’m not interested in telling this story. If you want to hear it, ask Matt,” and with that, Andrew left.

Neil shot a curious look over at Matt.
Matt sighed. “I might as well tell you. It’s not really a secret. Basically everybody already knows it.”

he stared off a moment before he began.

“Back when I was living with my dad, right after the divorce, he had the tendency to hang out at places that weren’t what you’d call ‘kid-friendly.’ He wasn’t used to having a kid around and he didn’t want to lose the friends he made so he just he just brought me along and just let me wander around these parties. I think he figured that you just weren’t supposed to leave kids home alone. So he brought me to some parties.” he took a deep breath before continuing.

“I go into drugs pretty deep- you’ve seen the scars.” He rubbed his arm with absently. “Anyway that went on for a while. And then I went to stay with my mom for a while and when she found out she was so pissed. It was hard to get clean and while I tried it was very hard to stay sober and I was just teetering on the edge all the time, even though I didn’t want to be.

“My mom ran into Andrew one day at Wymack’s and somehow or another he agreed to help me get over my addiction. He gave me a shit ton of shit and it jacked me up. Like hard shit. But after I recovered, I was done. I was away from the edge, and my mother was happy.”

Neil felt a mix if emotions at the injustice toward one of the nicest he had met.

“You shouldn’t be mad about it. It happened, and we’re past it.”

Neil left, confused.

***

When Neil got back to Maybury he needed a break and made his way to the roof, easily unlocking the door. He wasn’t really surprised to find Andrew lying on the roof, smoke trailing to the sky. At the sound of his arrival, Andrew looked over. Neil ignored it and laid beside him holding out a hand. Andrew silently place one in his fingers and lit it.

“Hear what you wanted?’

“It was a shitty thing to do.” He said but he knew his tone was lacking judgement.

“But it worked.”

He had been thinking about what Matt had said. There were other things going on at the time as well. He had heard Aaron had been in rehab. Andrew probably figured that Matt slipping would hurt Aaron as well. When he realized it, Neil felt his frustration was dissipate.

He breathed the smoke from his cigarette.

“It was for Aaron, wasn’t it?”

Andrew didn’t say anything, but Neil knew his silence was confirmation.

They said nothing else.

***

It was nearing the end of the summer and Neil was sitting at Wymack’s dining room able trying to figure out what to take for the upcoming semester at school. The packet had haunted him since it first showed up underneath his bedroom door and he had been putting off filling it out for as long as possible. Unfortunately he couldn’t put it off anymore.
So now he was seated at Wymack’s dining table with the class catalogue and the mail-in form covered in lots of tiny dots from where he kept tapping his pen.

A lot of the classes seemed horribly boring, but he knew he would need to take them to graduate. Wymack walked in and glanced down at the forms splayed out on the table in front of the fourteen year old.

“That the school schedule stuff?”

Neil just laid his head on the table and groaned. He knew it was stupid to be overwhelmed by something so simple. He had heard Dan worrying over trying to make her work schedule work when school was in session.

But Wymack said nothing about it being stupid and instead pulled out the chair next to Neil and looked at the classes offered. He began going over the classes, suggesting and debating the merits of the classes, with frequently input from Allison and Matt on which classes were better. With Wymack keeping him on task, Neil was able to fill out the schedule form. He leaned back in his chair with relief. Neil had his whole schedule filled out before Wymack asked him a question.

“What about extracurriculars?”

Neil made a face. He wasn’t thrilled about joining some sort of astrology club or the gardening club.

“Andrew was saying that you run a lot. “Wymack continued, ignoring Neil’s expression. “Have you thought about joining the cross-country team?”

“You get out of P.E.” Allison added.

“There’s also the chess team,” Kevin threw out from his seat at the computer, but Neil barely caught it, attention latched on Allison’s words.

Neil shot a look over to her. He had been worrying about changing out in front of all the other students. His scars had the bad habit of inviting questions he didn’t want answer. Not only was that, but the thought that he would be allowed to- expected to- run was definitely ideal.

He added that down onto the form.

***

As the summer drew to a close, the Foxes began planning their little send off for Nicky. Nicky was tense with apprehension, excited but nervous.

He spent days trying to get everything in order. He ran his packing lists past Alison, the master-packer, due to her long vacations and frequent travels; made sure that Andrew and Aaron had everything they need; and confirmed that “yes Kevin, for the thousandth time, I will be able to run the website and the YouTube page from Germany” and “yes you can email me if you need to tell me something.”

After what felt like no time at al, it was time for Nicky departure. They all decided to go to the airport to send him off.

Wymack drove them down to the airport in his big SUV while matt drove himself and Seth there while Allison drove the girls. Aaron was hitching a ride with Nicky and his parents so that left Abby, Bee, Wymack, Andrew, Kevin and himself to pile into the SUV. Neil made sure to situate himself farther away from bee and beside Andrew. Kevin had called shotgun and since Neil and Andrew
were the smallest they were stuck in the backseat.

The drive down to the airport was uneventful. They all helped Nicky’s parents pull out Nicky’s many suitcases from the back of their minivan.

Neil refrained from asking how much stuff someone would need to travel outside of the country, but he figured his travel experience wasn’t exactly normal.

The airport was large and Neil could feel his skin crawl when he entered it and he half expected his muscle memory to kick in and take him to the nearest plane leaving the country. But he wasn’t the one leaving. Nicky was. And nicky was taking his time getting to the terminal.

He cried a little, and took his time hugging everybody goodbye. His mother was crying and his father’s face was emotionless but he gave a firm nod. The girls and Matt all gave Nicky a hug. Seth only looked him in the face before Nicky walked past him.

Nicky managed to wrangle a short hug from Aaron, though the younger teen came out of the embrace looked very disheveled and grumpy.

He walked up to Neil and held out his arms. “Before I leave,” he said.

Neil shrugged and gave it a shot. It was- strange, to say the least. Very strange to give a hug (well, more like receive a hug because he wasn’t doing much on his end) but it wasn’t too long and it wasn’t too tight. Nicky had decided not to push it.

Nicky let go of him and then stood in front of Andrew. Andrew took in his approach coolly before holding out a fist. Nicky flinched for half a second before he realized that Andrew wasn’t trying to punch him. He returned the fist bump with a huge smile on his face.

“Aww, Andrew. I didn’t know you cared,” Andrew stared at him and Nicky took that as his sign to leave. He gave them an enthusiastic wave before he went through security.

***

The summer came to an end unimpressive end. Nicky’s absence had left Wymack’s apartment a bit somber and the remaining foxes spent the last few days preparing to return to school. For Allison this meant going on vacation, for the working foxes it meant stacking up more hours, and for Neil it meant beginning his training for the cross-country team.

Neil was one of the first people to make it to practice, but he found that that didn’t really matter. By the time practice was about to start, there were only a handful of guys and girls in varying grades.

He walked over to the lineup and began to stretch his legs. After he finished he knelt down to tie his shoes to make sure the laces didn’t come undone while he ran. The last thing he needed was people asking if he was okay after just tripping and falling like an idiot. He was started out of his thoughts when a shadow loomed over his body, loud voice accompanying it.

“Hello.”

Neil looked up to see one of the students and his friends.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” the guy was obviously the leader of his little brigade and he was sizing Neil up. Neil didn’t know if the guy was trying to be imposing or if he was just acting self-important.
Neil nodded.

“Neil.”

“Adam.” he gestured to the others to his sides. “This is Steve, Taylor and Jones. I’m guessing you’re a freshman too?”

“Yeah. How do you guys all know each other already?” He stood up from where he was crouched over his shoe to look at them. He was still the shortest, but that wasn’t exactly a surprise.

“Junior High. This town’s pretty small. We all grew up together. No one really leaves and we don’t really get any newcomers either.”

He nodded like this was all knew to him. It wasn’t.

“Alright everybody, bring it in” a voice carried over the sound of energetic teenagers.

They walked over to the Coach Hernandez as he made introductions and went over the route they would start with. Neil mentally mapped it out, pleased to find that he already knew most of the way. Anything he didn’t know he could pick up later. He glanced at Adam and the others and figured that they could be of some use to him after all. He wasn’t exactly keen to be forming relationships with others and they didn’t seem to be anything like the other kids that hung out at Wymack’s over the summer, but they would have to do.

The relationship with the Foxes was much more personal that he was used to, but it wasn’t really something he could avoid after spending so much time with them. And honestly, it terrified him. He needed to be surrounded by relationships that meant nothing. Spending time with the Foxes almost made him forget he was nothing, too.

This group might allow for the superficial appearance of friendship without ever requiring him to form a deeper personal connection, something he was desperate to regain. The deep instinct to blend in arose like it had in many other times in his life. The survival instinct that he had was buried deep inside of him and it would take more than the fire that burned his mother to remove it.

Eventually Coach Hernandez finished talking and sent them on their way. It wasn’t long before Adam and his group caught up to where Neil was jogging leisurely.

“So why did you move here? I never understand how anyone can end up in this place.”

Neil paused for a moment before he spoke and he felt himself smirk internally. He had prepared a backstory before he had even created the identity of Neil Josten and it would be a waste not to use it.

“It’s between where both of my parents work. They have jobs in different cities and neither of them wanted to give it up so they came up with a sort of compromise.” He lied and he felt somewhat relieved to be shrouded in his lies once again. It was like a protective blanket he had been desperate for ever since the FBI had stepped in. now he had a way to work around soe of the control they had over his life. The FBI said not to lie about his name; they didn’t say anything about his backstory.

‘Wow, are you serious?”

“Yeah.” He nodded

“That sucks.”

“Or,” Steve said, jogging up alongside them, “it could be really good. That means that your parents
let you spend a lot of time by yourself.

“Uh, yeah, I guess. I’m used to it.

“Like,” Greg butted in, “You could have parties or whatever while your parents are gone.”

“Uh,” he grasped desperately. “They’re usually back by nighttime.”

“Damn,” Greg mumbled.

“We could have a party in the afternoon!” Jones piped up.

Steve whacked him on the back of the head. “What kind of girls are going to go to a midafternoon party, idiot?”

“It was just an idea, man.” Jones mumbled

“Keep it up, everybody, two more laps” Hernandez shouted and they silenced, picking up their speed.

Neil and the other guys made it back to campus at dusk, going inside the gym to gather their stuff to go home. Their next practice would be after school on Monday.

“Hey, Neil.”

Neil turned to Adam. “Yeah?”

“You should sit with us on Monday. At lunch” he added when he saw Neil’s confused face.

Neil shrugged. Most of the Foxes had their own friends they hung out with. Andrew probably would be sitting with Kevin and Aaron and there was no way he was sitting with Aaron. It would be too awkward.

“Sure.”

***

The dawn of the first day of school broke bright and early, signaled by the shrill alarm clock ring of his alarm clock in his ear, but Andrew was already awake. He had been for the past few hours. But, nevertheless, he didn’t want to get up.

He wasn’t nervous about the start of the year. Even though they were technically at a new school, the people weren’t any different. He pulled on his clothes and trudged down the stairs. He made his way over to the breakfast table and poured himself some of the sugary-est cereal that Madera allowed on the premises- mini wheats. He stirred the cereal in his bowl and wanted to lay his head on the table and go to sleep.

Alas, he knew sleep would not come to him. Besides he couldn’t sleep out there all exposed.

Leroy was chattering to Seth about how excited he was and Andrew honestly had no idea how someone could have so much energy his early in the morning. Seth looked on the verge of killing him, or his cereal.

Andrew sighed internally. Neil might have humored him but he had already left to run this morning at cross-country so Andrew wouldn’t get to see him.
Not that he particularly wanted to. It was just that the other teen could understand the value of peace and quiet early in the morning and wasn’t Seth. That’s all. He grabbed his backpack and made his way out the door and down to the school.

***

The sharp smell of pencils and cheap printer ink permeated every inch of the campus. The high school wasn't very far from the junior high but it might as well have been the same set of buildings.

It was the same beige stucco, the same gum blackened and stained sidewalk, the same commercial carpet that was barely enough to cover the concrete underneath.

He walked through the gate with his backpack slung over his shoulder and his black combat boots on his feet. The town was very small, so each grade basically consisted of the same twenty or so kids, which meant that everybody had a reputation. Andrew knew his and the other kids in school remembered it too, if the wide berth they gave him meant anything.

The small size also meant that Neil would stick out like a sore thumb.

Andrew picked up his schedule at the table by the front gate and walked to the locker he was assigned to for the next four years. He looked around at all the lockers and found Kevin across the walkway trying to stack several of his books into the locker. He wasn't doing very well, but it made sense with his brace constantly getting in the way.

The break to his hand had been severe. He had seen Kevin's hand once or twice in one of the brief moments he was sans the black cloth and Velcro.

Whatever Riko had done to his hand had made it so that the break wasn't simple. Kevin's hand was scarred from where the broken bones in his hand had pierced the skin. Seeing the contrast, the stark white lines, pale against the rest of his skin, covered by black made Andrew's fingers itch to run over the similar, yet different lines on his own arm.

It was different after all- the marks on Kevin's hand are what got him to leave; the ones on Andrew were made trying to stay.

He walked up to Kevin's arm and stood there, but Kevin didn’t notice, too caught up on trying to prevent his books from falling.

“Hello Kevin.”

“- fuck, Andrew” he said and his books slipped out of thier precarious placement and fell into the ground. Kevin just stared at the ground in dismay as if he blamed it for every bad thing that had ever happened to him, before sighing and stooping down to pick up the books.

“Did you really have to do that?” Kevin asked.

He ignored the question and pulled the books out of Kevin's arms. He flipped the book over and stared at it.

“Haven't you already read this?” He put it up in the locker.

Kevin let out an aborted sputter, hands fluttering. “Books like these can't just be read once.’

Andrew put the rest of the books into place as he tuned out the long winded explanation Kevin was going to give, with or without his contribution.
"-They are classic and the details, the details Andrew. You should read it.”

“I won't.”

Kevin persisted. “You could actually make music, Andrew. You play the piano. You could join the rest of us and you could post your music online. Nicky said he's still mix the tracks together. He also said he taught Renee how to do it too, so that's something.” Andrew shut the locker and Kevin blinked at the noise and he realized his books were no longer out. He glanced from the locker to Andrew to back to the locker and back to Andrew.

Andrew was done. Class is starting soon. He thrust Kevin's planner into his chest. “Don't be late.”

Kevin came back to earth and nodded. “Think about it,” he insisted.

Andrew turned and walked towards his home room.

***

The first day of school came faster than Neil would have liked. He had never been a fan of school, but he still went anyway. He pulled up to homeroom he looked out at the array of desks and students. Many of them were climbing over the desks to get to each other, talking about their summer breaks and what they had done. Neil picked a seat and sat down.

Andrew came in dressed from head to toe in his customary all-black attire and took a seat diagonally behind him just as the bell rang for class to start.

Two minutes after the class was supposed to start, a man in a cobalt polo walked in, carrying a Starbucks coffee.

“Hello, class. I am Mr. Howard.” He set his coffee down on his desk and turned to face them. “I will be your homeroom teacher. As I’m sure you know, this class will be your team for the next four years when there are school activities, like the food drive in November. However, at all other times this will be the place you have to sit for thirty minutes and hope that you accomplish something. Let’s do roll call.”

He went down the list of names one by one marking them off on his chart. After he finished that he had them all sit around in a circle and play some “getting to know you” games which were- and Neil could say this with the utmost honesty- the absolute worst.

They were so uncomfortable. Like, his memory was pretty good, but he had no interest in knowing Susie’s last name or that her favorite color was purple and that she was a fan of polka music.

And despite the fact that he was used to lying under pressure he never was able to think of a single “interesting fact about me” that every teacher in every school in every country that he had been to expected him to have. What was he supposed to say? “Hi, I’m Neil Josten, though my name was originally Nathaniel Wesninski. I was named after my father who is in jail. My hobbies include running, both from the law and for fun, as well as learning the language of whatever country I have to hide my identity in. Oh, and my special skills include constructing car fires that can be used to burn bodies past identification and lugging bones miles up the beach so that they'll never be found.”

No.

He literally couldn’t think of anything. His palms were sweating as he tried desperately to come up with something. He finally settled on a vague account of his summer break.
He told the class that he went with his parents to the beach and he could feel Andrews’s eyes on him while he was speaking, but Neil didn’t care. Just because he told him the truth didn’t mean that he would tell everyone else.

He told the class about how he moved because of his parents’ jobs, sticking with the same story he told to the cross-country team. He didn’t tell them about being in the foster system because he felt that would open him up to a whole set of questions he really didn’t want to answer. As long as he had something seemingly normal, he should be safe from their prying eyes.

He finally exclaimed about the California beach, conveniently leaving out the car fire, the bones, and the meeting with the mafia.

After what was the longest thirty minute of his life, the rest of Neil’s day ran relatively smoothly. He flew through math, english, history, and art before finally making it to lunch.

It took him a while to spot the guys from the cross-country team and made his way over to them. There were a few girls at the table, as well: Katelyn, Marissa, Marcie, Alicia, and Jessica.

“Are you on the cross-country team?”

Katelyn laughed, “Oh, no. We’re on the cheerleading team.”

Neil nodded. “Cool.”

She smiled brightly.


“I’m not dating you Steve.”

“You mean not yet.” He said pointing a piece of bread at her. She rolled her eye, but Neil could see the irritated look in her eye and made a note of it.

They made small chat and giggled at jokes and Neil was easily able to tune them out. He was startled back into the conversation by the sudden shift in tone.

“Holy shit it’s the monster” Marcie said conspiratorially. “I thought he would be arrested by now”

Neil turned to see what they were all looking at to see all eyes on none other than Andrew.

“Why?”

“Uh, are you serious?” Marcie asked in disbelief. “How have you not heard of him?”

Neil shrugged. “I just moved here this summer.”

“Well,” she along with everyone else at the table leaned closer, “where do I begin?”

Adam nodded. “Yeah like there was all this shit about him. From like junior high and like, before that.”

“He was like, this total loner.” Marcie said, waving her hands as she used her hands to illustrate her points. “He doesn’t talk to anyone, ever. He just sits there and broods. And he was always so quiet, until he beat Bryce’s ass last year.”

“Well Bryce did get all up in Kevin Day’s business,” jones admitted.
“Hey, I’m right here.”

“Dude, accept your mistakes.”

“Kevin Day?” Neil asked and he felt his stomach bottom out. All these weeks, he thought Kevin’s last name was Wymack. Not Day.

Suddenly it was all falling together. The abusive step-brother they alluded to who had broken Kevin’s hand was Riko Moriyama. Kevin’s obsession with musical theory. Kevin’s strong opinions about the Ravens.

Shit.

It wasn’t his fault the classical music circle was so poorly covered in the media. How as he supposed to know Kevin would appear a thousand miles away from where he used to live, with a father he didn’t have?

“Uh, yeah. Kevin Day. Weird last name, I know. That dude over there,” he pointed to the guy sitting next to Andrew. “Bryce was all up on Kevin and Andrew straight up decked him.”

Marissa nodded. “It was super intense.”

“Holy shit,” Greg leaned back as he studied the table across the cafeteria, “I just noticed this, but Aaron’s back, too.”

Neil feigned ignorance. He knew Aaron had been gone some of the summer, he had been there. However, no one really addressed where he was during that time, except glossing over the fact that he was in rehab, and Neil didn’t want to seem nosy.

“Oh, okay, okay. So over there,” Adam pointed to Andrew’s lot. “So Aaron and Andrew are twins, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well their mom died last year. Freak accident, car crash or whatever. But then they moved to live with Nicky,” he pointed to where Nicky would have been, and Neil could imagine Nicky gesturing wildly to garner the twins enthusiasm, but to no avail. “Oh shit he’s not here. But anyways he’s their cousin.”

“Like, you didn’t see it” Steve added, “but Aaron was a serious junkie. Like he was getting high all the time, he hung out with the crackheads and everything. But, like when he lost his mom, Nicky’s parents weren’t having any of that shit so they sent him to rehab, like, right before school let out for the summer.”

Katelyn frowned at their words.

“Katelyn’s too nice and innocent.” Steve said as he slung his arm over Katelyn’s shoulder. She tried to shrug it off but he didn’t budge. “She thinks he’s a nice person because they did the science fair together last year.”

Steve rolled his eyes. And dropped his arm from Katelyn’s shoulder. “I doubt he’s clean. He was wasted all the time. It will probably only be a few weeks before he’s snorting lines in the bathroom again.”

Jones snorted. “Not really surprising when he’s brothers Andrew.”
Adam jabbed his fork in Andrew’s direction. “Andrew’s nuts, dude. He sees a shrink. People think it’s because he’s a sociopath or something. When he fought Bryce he just took him down to the ground no second thoughts, nothing. It was crazy man. I thought he’d get suspended for longer but since Bryce technically started it they got the same time.

“Oh my-” Marcie started

“What?”

“Don’t look now but Renee Walker just sat down next to him.”

“What!” Greg whirled around to look to them and Marcie dropped her face into her hands. Neil glanced behind them to seen them talking earnestly. Renee, gentle smile and waving hands, Andrew stone-faced making an occasional gesture to emphasize his point.

“I can’t believe it.”

Neil tuned back to them. “Why?”

Jessica just stared at him like he was stupid. “Renee’s a sophomore and like super nice and everything. Everybody likes her. She shouldn’t be spending so much time around him. She’s like, literally, an angel.”

“Ooh look there she goes.” Alicia commented. Renee stood as soon as Seth and Allison came by making their way over to an empty table, soon followed by Dan and Matt.

“See,” Marcie jabbed her fork in that direction, “That’s where Renee should be spending her time. She hangs out with Matt and Dan and Seth. And Allison is just-”

“Dude just look at her.”

“She looks very nice.” Neil conceded

“‘Very nice?’ Damn dude were you raised by nuns?” Jones asked baffled. “She’d fucking hot.”

“Yeah, I’d tap that.” Adam agreed vehemently.

Marcie rolled her eyes. “Whatever, guys. Like she’d even look twice at any of you. She’s way out of your league. Besides,” she hushed he voice, smirking. “She’s with Seth.” She looked at Neil. “He’s a senior. They’re very off and on but I don’t even know why they would break up with each other. They’re perfect.”

Neil refrained from bringing the glaring issues in Seth and Allison’s relationship- like Seth’s inability to shut the fuck up, for starters- but he said nothing. It wasn’t any of their business what Allison and Seth’s relationship was like.

It was almost funny to him to see these incorrect assumption they made about the people he had come to be pretty close with over the summer. He had always relied on people making these types of assumptions about him, but it was interesting to see that people could really be so far off base with other people.

It became clear to him, in that instant, that the Foxes too wore masks to hide themselves from the prying eyes of the high school gossips. They didn’t see the one Dan wore- the one that was fraying at the seams she was using to hold herself and her family together. They didn’t see the worry lines that snuck onto her face when she thought no one was looking. They didn’t see he brows pinch as
she counted the money she had made and they didn’t see the way she poured over charts, trying to find a way to survive the school year.

They didn’t see Matt’s track marks, hidden away. They didn’t see that way Renee whispered to Allison as she slowly began to eat her food. They didn’t see the cold, distant look that would darken Renee’s usually bright smile, one that was all too reminiscent of Andrew, before it would melt away a second later.

They didn’t see the way Kevin’s body would tense if he thought someone was coming towards him. How the blood would drain from his face every time he thought about the years before he had come to live with Wymack.

They didn’t see that Andrew’s coldness was protective distance, something that Neil had recognized the first time they met and had seen time and time again throughout the summer.

They didn’t even see that Aaron and Andrew didn’t even live together, something that wasn’t even hidden.

In that moment Neil felt like he truly belonged with the Foxes, glad to be a part of their mascaraed. His mask might be more tightly fixed, but it was there just then same, just like them.

Jones was still beyond baffled by the exchange across the cafeteria. “I still don’t know how Renee could even be around them, especially the monster.”

“Well, it’s not like their complete strangers,” Marcie said, ever the diplomat. “Renee and Allison are pretty close and Allison dated one of the monsters for a while.”

Neil turned. He hadn’t heard that. “Really.”

“Yeah. Nicky- the monster’s cousin- used to date Allison. Who knows how they even met, really, but yeah they dated a few weeks while she and Seth were on the outs. They hate each other- Seth and Nicky- and I don’t know if it’s because of all of that or what, but who knows. Allison always dates guys that are older than her. Lucky girl.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that they’re all still monsters. Andrew’s crew is horrible but he is the worst,” Adam said. “See those armbands? People thing they saw him slide a knife into them last year. But no one has any proof that he actually does. And no one wants to falsely accuse him because he carries through on his threats.”


“Shhhh.” Adam whipped his head around almost comically, looking around to make sure that Andrew hadn’t heard. “Do you want to die?” he whispered

Neil shrugged. “I don’t give a shit what he thinks of himself. I’m not going to hide from him with my tail between my legs.”

Steve shook his head. “Your funeral, dude.”

They got up to throw away their stuff and made their way out to the grassy quad area, only to run into Andrew and his crew.

“ Heard you were talking shit, Josten.”

“I wouldn’t call it that. More like making an observation.”
Neil couldn’t hide back the sinister smirk that slid across his face and he knew Andrew could pick up on it, as well as the amusement in his eyes. Neil supposed he should feel bad for stirring up shit, but he found that he didn’t care. School was boring. This might liven things up a bit. If the gleam in Andrew’s eyes said anything, he was thinking the same thing.

Andrew leveled a glare at him for a long moment. Neil and he was sure everybody else in the quad, could feel the tension buzzing in the air. Andrew yanked him by his collar, pulling him close.

“Keep your shitty opinions to yourself,” he said before releasing him suddenly. Neil stumbling back a step, and barely had his footing before Andrew shoved past him, Aaron and Kevin trailing after him.

“What the fuck dude? Do you have a death wish?” Adam scrambled over to him

“No.” Neil brushed himself off. He glanced around the quad and managed to catch the looks Allison, Matt, and Dan were shooting him from across the court yard over Adam’s shoulder. Dan’s was more of a death glare, while Allison’s was more a look of incredulity and amusement, as she recorded the whole exchange on her phone. Matt had his hands on the sides of his head and looked like he was going to lose it. Seth simply sent him a look that said idiot. Renee was studying the whole thing and when he met her eyes she smiled. He looked away and back to the kids he ate lunch with.

He smirked to himself, the one he knew his father wore when he was going to draw blood.

This was going to be a fun year.

***

Neil Josten was an idiot. That was the plain and simple truth. Andrew tossed his backpack on his bunk and breezed past Leroy without so much of a hello and made his way to the roof, taking out his pack of cigarettes as he made his way up the stairwell. He shouldered the door open and made his way out to the ledge he like to sit and wasn’t surprised to find Neil already there, papers and homework spread out around him. The sun was waning around him and it was obvious that he had probably been up there for a while. Though he had cross country after school, Andrew’s shift at Eden’s ended long past that.

He threw himself down onto the ground and lit his cigarette. He had laid down a few feet from Neil.

“You like causing shit?”

Neil looked over at him, unimpressed. The sunlight lit up the edges of his hair, making the dull black-brown give off a warmth it hadn’t before. Andrew found himself absently wondering what color it would be if Neil didn’t insist on dousing it with the dreariest of colors. He mentally shook himself, pushing those thoughts aside.

Neil just leaned back, shit eating grin on his face and went back to whatever he was working on. “If I remember correctly, you’re the one that came up to me and started shit.”

He just rolled his eyes.

Neil continued on. “How did you even hear that anyway?”

“You’re always saying shit.” Neil just looked at him. “Kevin.”

Neil snorted. “Should have known. They say all sorts of shit about you, you know?
He just looked at him and exhaled slowly. And raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“Bryce probably deserved it,” Neil shrugged.

“There’s the validation I’ve always craved.” He said dryly

Neil gave a short laugh. “What can I say? I aim to please.” He scribbled a little more before he spoke up again.

“The whole school probably thinks we had each other.”

“I do hate you.”

“Duly noted.” Neil sat up brushing aside a few sketches that he had been working on and Andrew caught a glimpse of them from where he laid on the roof. None of the sketches were exactly the same. Andrew could see some were covered with rough outlines the top of the roof, while others were rooftop views of the town below. Some of the sketches were of the branches of a tree near Wymack’s, while other sketches were half-formed faces of the irritants that sat at Neil’s lunch table. He also caught sight of a half obscured sketch of a group of three. It was from the confrontation at lunch, through Neil’s perspective. Andrew could make out the tall form of Kevin and what Andrew knew was himself and Aaron. Andrew was pleased to see the determined look Neil was somehow able to convey on his sketch-self even in a halfhearted doodle. He pried his eyes away from them to see what Neil had at his side.

Neil was smirking when Andrew looked back in his direction. Andrew frowned. Neil, true to form, ignored him and handed him the other set of papers he had been working on since Andrew had come up to the roof.

He picked it up and glanced over the contents of the pages. In his hands was a variety of signatures repeated over and over until the signature was basically a series of copies.

He simply quirked an eyebrow at Neil. Neil smiled back in a way that was almost sinister and definitely conniving.

“Great, don’t you think? Mom only had a few minutes to sign all the forms. She’s so busy with her new job.” He faked distress in a way that, without the sarcasm laced in, would have been convincing to anyone who didn’t already know about him and his lies, “Dad didn’t even acknowledge me. He acts like I don’t even exist.” He held his hand to his head in mock distress. “They’re just so busy all the time. I didn’t think they will be able to make any of the open houses or the parent teacher conferences. Unfortunate, right?”

“You’re parents are living now?”

“Just long enough to suit my convenience.” Neil answered, scooting down beside Andrew, until he was laying down beside him. “The foster system begs too many questions. Ones I’m not interested in answering.”

Andrew shrugged it off dropping he papers back beside Neil. Neil held out a hand for Andrew’s fading cigarette and he handed it off. Neil blew through it, reigniting the end. He laid back and watched the smoke trailed up into the sky and it was almost peaceful.

It was strange how one person could be such a contradiction, so wildly unusual, and yet so normal. Neil lived every day like it was his last, and never wanted to waste even a second of it. Everything he did, he did to live. Andrew had never lived like that. Ever. He did things so he could live. He had never wanted to live before. But if Neil was beside him he might be willing give it a try. It certainly
would be interesting.

Life had never been kind to either one of them, and Andrew doubted it ever would. But they were stubborn and it would take a lot more than unkindness to off them just yet.

They left the roof as the last of the light faded away and they went their separate ways. Andrew climbed up to his bunk silently and laid back in his bed, back against the wall and blankets wrapped around his body.

And for the first time in a long while, he fell asleep wondering what tomorrow would be like.

***

My vocal chords have been fighting
My mouth likes to spite me
It never says the words that come to mind
I brought a stick to a gun fight
And I’m stuck with my tongue tied
I run but I can’t hide what’s always there is

[H]e, [H]e is the words that I can’t find
How can the only thing that’s killing me make me feel so alive?
And I couldn’t speak
I couldn’t breathe to save my life
All my chances swim like sinking ships
This time it’s it
I’ll drown or make h[im] mine

Chapter End Notes

Sorry not sorry for the extensive talk about reality TV. A few of the shows mentioned. I have spent a lot of time over the past few months watching basically exclusively reality TV and now I have this fount of useless knowledge.
Bee’s office was located on the other side of town in the medical sector, if one could even call it that. It consisted of a building complex filled with private practices, with dentists on one wing the dermatologists and the psychologists on the other.

Though the town was small, there was no shortage of therapists, and Andrew had gone through twelve before he finally found Bee.

He had expected to dislike Bee from the moment he met her. She was kind and bubbly and she seemed dead-set on having an office full of breakable glass figurines when she knew full well she would be dealing with difficult problem children.

He remembered the first day he came into her office when he was thirteen- after Cass. He was back in the system by that point and they were desperate to reign him in; the system didn’t want word getting out about their self-destructive foster child.

While other therapists had pushed and pushed at him, trying to coerce him into speaking so they could iron out his problems in the fastest possible way, Bee never acted like that. She was quiet, she didn’t make him speak. Instead she taught him to play piano. So he stayed and he spoke with her. And he didn’t regret it.

Which is why he was still seeing her, over a year later after school. He came into the office without ceremony after he was called back and dropped his backpack unceremoniously on the floor beside him.

“Hello Andrew. How was your day today?”

“Fine.”

She smiled. “Sounding a lot like our new friend, aren’t we.”

He gave her a look but she was unperturbed, as usual.
“So school started back up again. Are things going well?”

“I haven't gotten into any fights.”

“Well that's good.”

“Physically,” He felt the need to add. She raised an eyebrow at that. “Oh? Would you care to elaborate?”

“Neil and I got into a- kerfuffle. No, a foofaraw? It was- a mess”

“Interesting word choice. Any reason why you chose that particular word?”

“SAT prep.” He said and Bee chuckled at their little inside joke.

He shrugged. “It wasn't serious or anything. It was more like posturing. We aren't in a fight. But now everybody thinks we hate each other.”

“Are they correct?”

“I don't know.” He thought about it. “I hate him,” he said slowly, though he knew when he said it he knew the words were true. “But it's different, I think.”

“Okay. You don’t have to know everything now. And some things become clearer with time.”

He slumped back in the chair. “I don't like not knowing.”

“I don't think anybody does,” Bee said softly. “But you're very self -reflective so you may figure it out sooner or later.”

Andrew knew she was right and tucked away her words in the back of his mind. But, all the same, he had a feeling that thinking about Neil more than necessary could lead to nothing but trouble.

***

It was all too easy to fall into a sort of routine at school. In no time at all, the teachers were doling out what was simply a ridiculous amount of work. And the work they gave seemed to take up every spare second Neil had that he didn’t spend in school, at cross-country practice, or with the other foxes.

It was weird, to him, that he wasn’t seeing the foxes as much as he used to. It was strange to think that he had become so accustomed to them after such a short amount of time.

Instead ended up spending most of his school days surrounded by the kids he ate lunch with on the first day of school. They could be annoying, sure, but their conversations were mercifully shallow and it gave him practice at pretending to divulge his deepest secrets through only superficial small talk.

It was almost fun to see what stories he could make up that still fell in the realm of realism. A family trip to Disneyland, a nasty camping trip where they all got eaten alive by mosquitos, birthday parties he never had. But all the same, he enjoyed spending time with the foxes much more.

Though only Andrew had a clear idea of his past, he didn’t lie to the Foxes. At least not explicitly. Did he lie by omission? Sure. But he rarely needed to do even that. Every time they got too close to
him he would give them a vague response and they would leave it be. It was refreshing how they would back off when they saw he needed space. They wanted to know all sorts of things about him, but they also knew that there things that he didn’t want to talk about.

Maybe they were so willing to give him space because they knew what it was like to want to keep things to yourself. Sometimes he forgot that they had secrets too. There was still a lot of things he didn’t know about them.

Therefore it shouldn’t have surprised him as much as it did to find Renee and Dan sitting in the lobby of Marbury after school a few weeks after the beginning of the school year. His startled expression must have shown, but Renee just waved him over, smiling.

“Hello, Neil.”

“Uh, Hey.” He grabbed the strap of his backpack and looked over at them. He sat down on the other side of Dan and looked over at them. “What are-”

He was interrupted by Dan suddenly standing. He followed her line of vision to see what caught her attention. Andrew had just walked through the door and Dan was already making her way over to him. She spoke to him in a low voice before he nodded and led the way up the steps to the second floor.

Dan turned as she passed by them.

“I shouldn’t be too long, Renee. I’ll be back soon.” She gave them a quick smile before hurrying to follow Andrew.

***

Andrew made his way up the stairs with Dan trailing behind him. He sent his room a cursory look and then sent Leroy a glance that had him scurrying out the door almost bumping Dan out of the way in his rush.

He gestured for her to shut the door behind her. She complied before looking him in the eyes.

“I need a favor.”

He just stared.

She took it as permission to continue and plowed on.

“I know you have a fake ID. I need to know where to get one for myself.”

He considered it a moment. “I’ll tell you, if you tell me why.”

She huffed an exasperated breath. “I need it to get a job in the city. You have to be at least 18 to work there.” she said. She wasn’t one for mincing words, something he could appreciate.

He thought about it. He didn’t have any quarrel with Dan; she left him alone and never really bothered him.

He pulled out a pad of paper and wrote down the address. She glanced at it a moment before stuffing it in her pocket. She nodded and then turned and left the room

***
Sitting with Renee on the couch in the middle of Marbury was by far one of the most awkward situations Neil had ever been in in his entire life. He wanted nothing more than to bolt up and run, but he knew that would only raise very uncomfortable questions. So he passed the time by counting the seconds until Dan came back.

After three minutes and forty-three seconds, Renee broke the silence.

“You must have been surprised to see us here.”

He shrugged. “I guess I never thought you guys knew where this was. I knew Allison knew and Matt did but—” he trailed off, not really knowing what else to say.

“It’s not that strange to think,” Renee said reassuringly. “Dan didn’t know where this place was exactly. That’s why I came with her.” he fiddle with the edge of her skirt. “I used to live here too,” she added after she noticed the puzzled face he must have been making.

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

Renee smiled. “It’s fine. I didn’t expect you to know.” She paused a moment. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Neil. I’m guessing that’s why you have been avoiding me. My appearance doesn’t really line up with the people I spend my time with.”

“I-. Yeah. Was it that obvious?” he asked, keeping his voice neutral. He didn’t like being thought of as transparent.

She gave a light laugh and waved it off. “No, not really. I don’t think anyone except maybe Andrew and I noticed.” She said and then sobered. “But really, Neil, if you want to know about me, I have no problems talking about it. Just ask. I’d like to be friends with you some day. We could chat about whatever you’d like.” She paused a moment and then grabbed up her things. “Not today, though, as it looks like Dan and Andrew are done.” She smiled at him brightly “I’ll see you at group dinner, right?”

“Yes,” he nodded and he watched Renee and Dan leave the building.

***

Andrew had found himself in a sort of busy routine now that the school year had started back up again.

The morning after a busy night at the club was never a pleasure to see, but it kept him busy. There was bits of food and always pieces of clothing scattered around the room, hidden and pushed into corners of the room, out of view of the rest of the club. He worked there with Roland for several hours while Roland learned to make drinks at the bar.

He was gone most of the day, though today was an exception, and speaking with Dan of her own volition was equally out of the ordinary. He didn’t know why she needed the ID, but he refused to ponder on it- trouble always came from sticking your nose places it wasn’t supposed to be.

After lying in bed and definitely not wondering what Dan needed with an illegal ID, he decided to pull on his jacket and walk down to Wymack’s.

He usually stopped by Wymack’s after his shift to sit with Kevin and to keep him entertained.

It was a strange thing to watch, Kevin with his violin. He held it almost reverently but also like it might bite him if he held it the wrong was. Kevin spent his time religiously reading musical theory
and practicing his fingering with his right hand all day. Nighttime was when he would finally pull out his violin and try to play with his left hand.

He had a shakier hold on his bow due to the wrist brace that he still wore even a few months after the nasty break. He got frustrated as he repeated songs he used to be able to play with ease but was now having difficulty with. But he kept picking it up and drilling scales over and over again until Andrew finally got tired and made his way back to Marbury.

At night when he made his way back, he always went up to the roof. More often than not he found Neil sitting by the ledge, doodling. Sometimes they talked and traded questions and other times they sat in silence. Neil was annoying but he never pushed him past where he was comfortable. Neil never pushed his boundaries which was… new. He had feeling that, if he asked, Neil would never come back up on the roof.

And as much as Andrew hated him, he didn’t want him to leave. Not yet.

***

After the chaotic first few weeks of school, Neil finally found the time to start going back to Wymack’s. The crowded and cluttered rooms were starting to grow on him and he found it almost hard to leave them to go back to Marbury.

Neil’s favorite spot in Wymack’s house was the dining room table. It was set in the center of the apartment and gave him the opportunity to hear everything going on in the apartment if he wanted too. So, whenever he came over, he often found himself migrating towards the familiar wooden chair and pulling out his art supplies.

Sometimes, when he finished up with the shop early, Wymack would sit across from him and join him. They wouldn’t say much, but Wymack would grab out a stack of pencils, sometimes even colored ones, and would set to work designing a new tattoo for one of his clients. Sometimes Neil’s eyes would catch on the blackness of a particularly vicious curl of ink, ensnared on the bright colors piercing through.

It was getting to be mid-September when Neil first saw Wymack struggle with a design. Usually he was able to form the image in his head straight away, but now, apparently, nothing seemed to look right.

Wymack was drawing design after design tossing them aside, clearly unsatisfied with them. Neil found himself peaking more than once. After about the six design Wymack leaned back and looked out. He caught Neil staring and for a second and Neil froze before tearing his eyes away, breaking eye contact.

“You seem to like drawing” Neil chanced a glance up. Wymack’s face was carefully blank, the way it tended to get whenever Neil slipped up, revealing that his past contained more than just his mother’s alleged proclivity towards drugs. “You want to give this one a shot?”

The offer was intoxicating. Desire burned in him at the thought. His mouth dried in anticipation.

“Sure,” he said, somehow managing to get his voice above a whisper.

Wymack walked over. “My client wants something with nature and shit. ‘Vitality of life’ he called it. Or maybe it was virility. I’ve come up with some stuff but none of it really seems to be coming out the way it think he wants it.

“Color or no?”
“Color.”

Neil set to work drawing the design, an idea already planted in his mind. He sketched a few things before it really started to work together, branches and rivers, trees and tributaries weaving and intertwining into a cacophony of life. He looked over it. It needed to be cleaned up, the lines fixed up a bit, but-

“Holy shit Neil.” Wymack gestured for the paper and Neil handed it over to him. He studied the paper. And then looked back over at him.

“Neil have you ever thought about what you want to do after high school.”

He almost laughed. He was still having trouble thing about what he wanted to do tomorrow, let alone three years from now.

“No.”

“Have you thought college?”

Neil made a face. School was the absolute worst, he couldn’t imagine it getting much better in college.

“Have you ever considered going into tattoo work.” Neil’s face shot up and he stared at Wymack in disbelief.

“If you want I could teach you, give you an apprenticeship. The whole deal. It takes about three years, but if you wanted to you could probably finish it by the time you graduate.”

Neil’s mouth felt dry.

Wymack held up a hand. “Don’t say anything yet. I just want you to think about it, okay?” Neil just nodded looking down at his work.

He could never say yes. He wasn’t allowed to have this. He never was supposed to have this. Ichirou could still decide to kill him after high school finished. And then what? Wymack would have wasted his time on a dead kid when he could have spent it on something more productive. On someone who wouldn’t end up hacked into pieces and dumped in a ditch on the side of the road.

He wasn’t never supposed to make it. He should already be dead. He could see it the burning, the car, his mother, it was all burning. That could be him. That should be him. He should have died. He was about to die. His father was going to find him and kill him-

“Neil, Neil stop.” There was a firm hand on the back of his neck, pushing his head between his legs. It was still so hard to breathe. He could swear he was breathing in smoke from his mother’s cremation.

He didn’t know how long it took him before his shuttering breaths began to slow, before Andrew released him and let him look around. He was up on the roof. And he felt his stomach sink and it was all he could do not to panic. He didn’t know how he had gotten there, or how or when he left Wymack’s. He didn’t even know how Andrew found him. Andrew’s face remained passive when he looked up.

It was too much, looking at his face. He buried his face in his hands.

“How did I get here?”
“You just came up here,” Neil rubbed his face. “Do you know what time it is? Please, Andrew.”

“I don’t like that word.”

“Okay, okay.” He rubbed his face and the roof was quiet.

“Six.”

“Six, he repeated.” The word felt hollow on his tongue. That meant he lost about an hour. He rubbed his face.

“I don’t remember how I got here. I was talking to Wymack and now I’m here.”

Andrew said nothing and they sat together, in silence.

***

It was hard sometimes, to stay there. The walls were confining but they were better than a lot of the places he and his mom had stayed at. Sometimes it hurt, those moments when he remembered his mother. It hurt much more than he could afford to think about.

***

But he still stayed.

***

It was almost Halloween and Neil was once again sitting at Wymack’s kitchen table. Allison and Renee had taken it upon themselves to carve out pumpkins over an array of outdated newspapers. All of the foxes, save Nicky, were there. Neil had a few pieces of scratch paper out and was sketching the foxes at their antics. He never really saw the purpose behind the whole pumpkin-carving thing, but it stirred something inside him to see them so enthusiastic.

“So, Neil,” Allison asked, elbows deep in pumpkin guts, “are you going out with your friends tomorrow for Halloween?”

“Who?”

Allison just leveled her stare at him.

“You know,” she gestured vaguely, pumpkin seeds flying off her fingers and splattering on the newspaper, “the friends you sit with every day. The friends that you see all the time?”

Neil faked a realization at his apparent absentmindedness. He could feel Andrew staring through him but he resolutely ignored it. “Yeah, sorry. I lost track of things for a second. Yeah? What about them.”

Alison rolled her eyes. ‘Do you have plans with them?”

“Oh, no? Why would I?”

“Oh, because it’s Halloween? All of us except the monsters are going to a party at a senior’s house, well not Dan, as she has to work.”

“I couldn’t afford to take time off. My aunt is going to have her baby soon and we need to have enough money while she’s off from her job.”
Allison nodded gravely. “Never blamed you, hun. Hospital bills are a bitch.” She turned back to Neil and fixed him with a stare, letting him know she wasn’t letting him get away without answering her.

He raised his hands like he was caught red-handed. “I’m not really a party person. I was just planning on staying back.”

Allison gave an exaggerated gasp, hand fluttering to cover her mouth. Renee nudged her silently, though she was unable to hide her small smile. “Oh, you wound me, Neil.”

Neil shrugged. Allison plowed on, back to scooping out pumpkin guts. “Don’t get caught up with the monsters though. No one wants to be caught up with them. You’ll probably get framed for something. The sociopath would leave you high and dry without even a second thought.”

There was that word again. Sociopath.

It wasn’t the first time Neil had heard it thrown around in regards to Andrew. He knew the foxes had a bet going on about what they thought Andrew was seeing Bee for. The leading bet was that he was a sociopath. But Neil had been around sociopaths, and Andrew was nothing like that. He was cold and he did shit, but he cared, Neil knew he did. Even if he never wanted to admit it. Andrew could have left him on the roof having a panic attack. Instead he stayed. He stayed and that meant everything.

Aaron’s affronted grunt brought him out of his reflection. “Okay, first of all Allison, we are not the ones who have been spray painting dicks on the police station, so fuck you. Second, Neil’s not coming with us. We’re not even all going to be in the same place. I have a party and everyone else is doing whatever. I don’t know. Kevin’s going to be brooding. That’s all I know.”

Allison nodded sagely. “Yes, Neil, you don’t want to be around Kevin on Halloween.”

Kevin looked offended. “Just because you are willing to put all that crap in your bodies does not mean that I’m going to-“

Neil suppressed a groan. Kevin has taken it upon himself to lecture anybody who would listen about the dangers of candy consumption. It was annoying because Neil didn’t even eat candy anyways, but he knew Kevin’s obsession with health was a remnant of his time at the Raven’s nest.

Neil had never really been there but he knew the strict regime they had their students on every aspect of their lives, not just in music. Bed times, diet, exercise, all of it was regimented. Kevin had been raised there from the time he was a child, but it had gotten more intense after the death of his mother.

Kayleigh Day was a renowned concert violinist, and her son was shaping up to be just like her. She played with the best, Tetsuji Moriyama being one of them. But after she her sudden death in a car crash, her son went to live with the man he always had seen as an uncle, and the boy who was like a brother to him.

But after Kayleigh’s death, things shifted between them. He and Riko were soon in constant battle, both vying for the top position, with Riko always coming out on top. He drew a 2 on Kevin’s face to signify that he would never be better than second chair. And then there was a skiing accident and the prodigy that was Kevin Day was no more, his dominant hand broken. Rumor was that he would never be able to play the violin the same again.

And then he vanished.

The musical circle was fairly small so a lot of news wasn’t spread. It must have been a shock for Kevin to go from a world where he was always in the limelight to one where the arts were barely
acknowledged, let alone appreciated. And Neil knew, from what he had pieced together from the other foxes, that it hadn’t been a skiing accident that broke Kevin’s hand.

He heard that it took Abby four hours to pull out all the splintered wood from Kevin’s hand.

But despite all of that, Kevin never gave up on music. Never.

Neil had seen the art he had made. When he had time, he went to the school library and plugged in his headphones and pulled up the foxes’ YouTube page and the links to their website and social media.

All of them posted their music anonymously, with each of the foxes referring to themselves by their numbers. Each one of them had a profile with a description underneath and it surprised him that he knew them well enough to be able to figure out whose was whose. They used their numbers to indicate which one of them had been a part of the production of the music. He found that the certain foxes’ number always showed up underneath different functions. Allison, Dan, and Renee, vocals. Matt synth, Seth guitar. Nicky had guitar and mixing. Aaron was on the drums and Kevin was on violins and composing. Andrew played piano. Sometimes. All of them had credits for song writing.

But despite the fact that they were all in a group together, there was an obvious division between Andrew’s group and the other foxes. Neither of them were doing super well without the other. The music from Andrew’s group was better, really while the videos produced by the upperclassmen were superior. They had a few popular videos and those were the ones they collaborated on.

He remembered when he noticed it. And he remembered going up to Dan to ask her about it.

“Why don’t you all work together?”

“In case you couldn’t tell, we don’t all get along very well,” she smiled ruefully as she stretched the muscles in her legs as she prepared to warm up at Boyd’s Gym. “We can sometimes get the others to work with us. Matt can usually work with Aaron and Nicky sometimes because he can use the whole synth board and that kind of works with the drums and the mixing. Kevin won’t do anything besides classical music or whatever Andrew does and Andrew won’t work with anyone. And Aaron and Nicky don’t really help out because of- Andrew I think.”

It still didn’t really make sense “Nicky seems like he would be willing to work with all of you.”

“Seth,” she said simply.

“Seth.” And yeah, that should have been obvious.

“Nicky and Seth don’t get along at all.”

He snorted. “I noticed. Why?”

“Well, to be fair Seth’s kind of a dick.” She switched to her other leg and reached for her toes. “Though Nicky can be one at times, too. Seth just really gets mad at Nicky. I think he’s scared Nicky’s going to steal Allison from him.”

“What?”

“They dated like last year. Not very long. Like a few weeks. It wasn’t really much of anything, really. They didn’t kiss very often. Honestly I almost preferred when they were dating. Less PDA and all of that.” She let go of her toes. “But it really wasn’t worth Seth stewing around all the time. Seth and Allison were on one of their off segments and for some reason she and Nicky got together. Really, I
don’t know how that whole thing happened, and like I said it was basically over before it really even began. But Nicky and Seth didn’t get along very well before that whole thing and after that it was just way worse.”

“Why didn’t they get along?”

“Something about Jr. High. Don’t really know.”

“Shit, really? That was forever ago.”

“You’re telling me.” She stretched her elbow above her head, grabbing hold of it with her other hand. “It was pretty serious though. I didn’t know them that well at the time. But from what I remember he and Nicky kind of got along pretty well for a while. But then something went down with Nicky and he got pulled out of school and he missed the beginning of the next year too. Things weren’t the same between them after that. Next thing you know, we all basically got adopted by Wymack when we started high school and now we’re here.”

It was simple, really the issues the group had, but they could never seem to iron them out. And now it was even harder with Nicky out of the country. And Kevin knew this. So he fixated on the things he could control. Like sugar.

“-not only is sugar terrible for your teeth, but it had been found to be even more addictive than cocaine. Just getting off of it is hard enough and with all the sugar they are putting into everything in addition to all the other manufacture-“

“Alright Kevin, we get it. Sheesh. Shut up.” Aaron groaned, leaning back in his chair.

“At least Nicky was fun,” Allison continued as if the whole interruption never happened. “He was really into the whole group activities thing sometimes, before the monsters and everything. He was always a big fan of family activities and all that. But once the monsters came things weren’t quite the same. Andrew controls the whole lot and doesn’t let them do anything without his say-so. I’m surprised he’s even letting Aaron out of his sight tomorrow.”

Neil just nodded and went back to his sketches. As he filled in the details, he found himself sneaking glances at Andrew. They foxes weren’t even censoring themselves even though Andrew was sitting in the same room, just a few feet away, yet they still were accusing Andrew of possessive and sociopathic tendencies. Neil wasn’t sure if he agreed with them.

After he heard the story of what happened between Matt and Andrew, he had thought a lot about it. They all saw the sign that he had been so willing to drug Matt as a sign of his lack of conscious, but Neil couldn’t help but remember the fact that Aaron would have been withdrawing form whatever he was on around the same time. He didn’t agree, necessarily, with Andrew’s methods, but he understood them. And it didn’t really bother him.

No, what bothered him was that Andrew heard them all say this and did nothing.

And it burned him. This standing still when he was accused. Everything about Andrew seemed to burn.

Fire had always been his unfortunate anchor to the truth. The burning iron grounding him in the reality of his monstrous father, tearing him from the web of fragile lies they had been spinning for the authorities at the time; the burning of his mother’s body, incinerating the last bits of truth he had left; the blistering heat of the desert sun, that begot the afternoon he was told to spill the secrets he and his mother had spent years running from, the secrets that he had held pressed so tightly in his palm that
he almost thought them a scar, something permanent and pain-caused.

He never thought anyone else could make him feel that fire again, and certainly not a kid his own age that spent most of his time staring at nothing. Andrew’s promises seared him from the inside-out. They left a mark on him, one that he was proud to bare. For the first time in his life he was an equal, not a child, not a victim, or runner, or criminal. He was a person, a human being, made real with every passing second he held claim to his name. And that promise, that promise Andrew had offered him, the chance to stay, that was everything he ever wanted, everything he had ever needed.

Andrew was a cold heartless monster they had told him. Sharp edges. Hard as stone. But if he was a stone, he was like a sheer-faced cliff, with cracks along the edges, allowing broken birds to nestle on one of his jagged ledges. A cliff who scared those who saw it, who people were too afraid to understand, people who only saw the steep fall and dangerous elements. But if they looked past that, if they tried to understand, they would be able to see that he was beautiful, amazing even. That, thought he was cold, he was safe. He was solid. He was home. And that thought frightened Neil more than anything.

***

Neil was sitting up on his bed when he heard a knock on his bedroom door, Seth had already left to go to whatever Halloween party he and Allison were going to, so he was alone. He rolled over to the side of the bed and got up. He made his way over to the door and opened it to see Andrew standing there.

“‘We’re going out.’”

“What?”

“Out,” Andrew walked past him and tugged the pillowcase off his pillow and thrust a cheap mask into his hands with it as he circled back and made his way out the door. Neil shrugged and clutched the mask and followed him out the door. He fixed the mask to the top of his head and walked down the stairs after Andrew. Andrew walked out the door and made his way down the street. Neil jogged to catch up to him.

“Where are we going?”

“Trick or treating.”

“What? Really? Aren’t you too old for this?”

“We. Not me. Both of us. And no.”

Neil looked down at the mask and looked back at Andrew. With the masks and their short stature they could easily pass for middle schoolers.

“You in?”

Neil shrugged and fiddled with the mask atop his head.

“Sure. I’ve never been.”

Andrew nodded and made his way down the street, Neil at his side. Neil glanced at him, at the blank face Andrew still wore underneath his mask and felt bold.

“You ever been?
“Once. One of my last foster homes let me go out,” Andrew acquiesced. Neil hummed and went silent.

The silence wasn’t uncomfortable as many had claimed it to be with Andrew. He knew that even the members of Andrew’s own group didn’t like it. He knew Nicky was always talking was because he was constantly trying to cover up the empty, soundless, void caused by his cousin. But for Neil it was a relief.

In the silence he could finally breathe again. The classes he took were suffocating. He was expected to function and participate to a level he never had to while he was on the run. He couldn’t leave whenever he wanted, and deep down that was terrifying. Part of him was worried, and probably would always be, that one day his father would get out or that the Moriyama’s would change their minds and he’d have to leave or be killed.

And he didn’t want to believe it, but it was likely to happen. If Ichirou decided he was useless by the time he finished high school or even before then, he would be killed. There was also the possibility that Ichirou would want him to take up some place in the company. Maybe where his father was. He wasn’t sure if he could do something like that.

God only know how much blood he had seen spilt, would know how much of it had been his fault, would know how many deaths he had caused. He had killed, directly and indirectly, before. He knew that every moment could be his last. And yet, it was so easy to become so blasé about his time left on the earth and the seconds he spent. Part of him wanted to live up the moments he had left, but he wouldn’t even know where to begin. The outside world was just too loud, too insincere, too fake. Hours filled with bullshit and small talk. A part of him wanted to live but he didn’t even know where to begin. Or if he even should.

He didn’t know which was better- being no one, fighting tooth and nail for every breath, or carrying out with his days in a mindless daze, with nothing to show for it.

He didn’t know. He couldn’t understand how his peers could live like they did, so carelessly. But the foxes- they didn’t seem to live like that. They knew what the world offered, they knew what it felt like to suffer, to feel pain.

And Andrew. Neil knew he knew. Neil had always been one to rely on his instincts, to trust his senses and pick up on details to save his life. And for some reason he could feel it. Deep in his bones he could. Andrew knew what it was like to be bone-weary with life, to have to survive day after day.

Andrew wasn’t a nice person, but neither was he. And he didn’t have to pretend to be. And for some reason Andrew didn’t tell everyone about the lies Neil had told since he had gotten into town. He knew Neil had secrets. He probably knew what it was like to have some of his own.

As the approached the streets he pulled his mask over his face and followed Andrew to each of the doors and repeated the phrase “Trick or Treat” so many times, he was almost worried that’d be the only thing he’d ever be able to say. After what Andrew deemed was an appropriate amount of time he asked Neil if he was done and walked back to Marbury when Neil said he was.

***

Andrew led the way back to Marbury, Neil following closely behind him. They bypassed their bedrooms and made their way up to the roof. Andrew dumped his candy down on the ground and began to inspect his haul. Neil sat beside him, watching, as Andrew unwrapped a piece and began eating it.
“Aren’t you supposed to check all that for like poison or razorblades or something?’

Andrew only looked him straight in the eyes before unwrapping another piece and putting it in his mouth without breaking eye contact. Neil rolled his eyes and dumped his bag full of candy over the candy Andrew had just sorted in that obnoxious way of his. Andrew looked up at him and Neil simply smiled, sarcastic and full of shit.

“And what did you hope to accomplish?’

If possible, his smile intensified. Even shittier. He was so annoying. It wasn’t the first time Andrew had regretted talking to the little runaway. He could feel himself still looking at that irritating smile. He was fixating on it because it shouldn’t be humanly possible to look that irritating. Yes, that was it.

“Nothing.”

“How do you expect to get your candy back?’

Neil rolled his eyes and leant back, palms on the rooftop, smile turning into something lazier.

“Wasn’t planning on it. I was giving it to you. I don’t like candy. You do.”

Andrew’s glare intensified. This kid was infuriating.

“You’re an idiot.”

“That’s nothing new.”

“I hate you.”

“Thanks, babe,” Neil replied sarcastically, shit-eating smirk on his lips

Andrew glared, unamused.

Neil fell back and laughed so hard he clutched his stomach and Andrew’s stomach jerked. Irritation. Yeah.

“Calm down. Holy shit. I won’t say that again.”

“Don’t say stupid things.”

Neil just laid back and head turned to Andrew as Andrew silently and slowly made his way through more of the candy. Neil was looking at him, his eyes didn’t even have to stray from his pile of sweets to know it. He turned to look over at Neil, still staring at him, studying him, not even trying to hide it.

“Staring.”

Neil held up his hands in a defensive stance and pulled his eyes away.

And they stayed up there, the cool autumn air chilly and refreshing up on the roof. And for someone who was fond of firing off his mouth given the opportunity, Neil didn’t dare disturb the quiet and they fell into a comfortable silence. And though there were still the sounds of trick-or-treaters, rowdy teenagers, and partygoers flooding the streets below, up on the roof they felt removed from all that. It was calm and for that time there was peace.

And up there, shrouded in darkness, it felt like a different place entirely. A different world- one separate from the things they had seen- up there it was easy to push aside those memories. The ones with Cass before Drake, the ones that had been trying to force their way into his mind for days.
Now, he felt far from them, all of those memories as distant as the street below. Up there he felt separate, even just for a moment. For a moment, just a moment, he was in a different world. He was up in the atmosphere. Just him, Neil, and the stars.

***

Neil tried to be silent, he really did. But it was hard when the floor was covered in all the crap Seth had dropped on the floor when he came in late the night before. Said crap rudely jolted him out of his half-awake, half-asleep state by tripping him and making him hit the floor with a loud thud.

Seth looked over the edge of his bed, eyes bleary and a blanket pulled over his head. “Neil what the fuck. Why the fuck are you up?”

“Sorry,” he whispered.

“Fuck man,” Seth grumbled before turning over to face the wall.

Neil rolled his eyes and pulled on his sweatshirt and left the room, trying to be as silent as possible. Outside the window the air was thick with fog and he knew he wasn’t going to run today. Instead he made his way to the roof.

“Seth’s pissed,” he said without preamble as he sat down next to the black bundle lump on the roof.

“He’s always pissed,” Andrew remarked, lighting up. He handed Neil the lighter.

Neil nodded in agreement.

“I woke him up.”

“Thought you were quiet.”

He scoffed. “I am.” He lit his cigarette. “Usually. Dude dumped all his shit on the floor and I tripped. Usually it wouldn’t have mattered. The guy usually sleeps like the grave but he’s back with Allison.”

“So he’s not in his drug induced haze.”

“ Basically. He’s a pain in the ass.”

“He’s moving out soon.”

“I’m counting down the days.” He blew through the cigarette, stoking the flame. “Will I be getting a new roommate?”

“Probably not, lucky fucker. Some of us have had to share a room since we got here.”

“Have you?”

“Sometimes,” he offered. “I’m usually shipped off to foster homes pretty often.”

Neil was startled. He hadn’t thought about that. “Are they going to do it again?

“No. Not for a while, at least.”

“Why not.”

He exhaled casually. “Last home didn’t go so well,” he said vaguely. “They want to make sure I’m
in my right mind before I go on to another place.”

“Didn’t know they gave a shit.”

“I don’t think they do. They had to take a very well off family off of the foster care list. They knew it was my fault, but the procedure called for the family to be reevaluated. Madera would rather keep me here rather than lose more potential foster families.”

“Can they do that?”

“If they don’t get caught.” He said, blowing out a mouth full of smoke. “I don’t care anyway. I don’t want another.”

“I don’t want to get stuck with a new roommate. You got lucky with Leroy. He’s quiet.”

“If you like him so much ask him and Seth to switch. Seth’s stuffs already been boxed up he wouldn’t be hard to move.”

“Then Seth would have to move in with you.”

Andrew froze. “Never mind, then. Offer off the table.’

Neil laughed silently. “Okay,” he waved his cigarette, “new offer. Seth moves out and into yours and Leroy’s room”

“We’re not sharing between three people.”

“-And you move in with me.”

Andrew turned to give him a look that plainly said you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

“It makes sense.” He said pragmatically. “We sleep around the same times we are both quiet and we know each other.”

Andrew stared at his cigarette as he turned it in his fingers, as if he was trying to find the seam where it had been sealed.

“I’ll think about it.”

He stubbed out the cigarette on the concrete and Neil watched as the mass of blankets walked off the roof.

***

Biology wasn’t really one of Neil’s favorite classes. Neil was pulled to a lab table with the other guys from lunch that sat next to a table filled with the girls from.

They goofed around flipping to the sections of the book with the diagrams of genitals and until the girls screamed out how gross they were. And then they drew penises in the textbook every time there was a picture of anything remotely spherical on the page. He strained his ears to hear what the teacher was saying so he could pass the class. He couldn’t fail, not if that meant it a parent-teacher meeting with parents he didn’t have.

There was a reason he made up having parents. Well, many reasons. One was the obvious avoidance of awkward questions, but another was that he wouldn’t have to be held accountable to anybody else. He didn’t know the standard that Madera had for the kids in her charge, but he was used to
living by a different set of rules, rules that had kept him alive over four years as he burned through twenty two different names. Those identities might be dead, but he was still alive, and at the end of the day, that was all that really mattered.

So he was willing to suck it up and try to pay attention during the class. But still, it was hard. He glanced around the classroom. Andrew was taking notes, never looking up at the notes for more than a glance before back down at his paper. There were other snatches of students trying to learn, including Aaron who was furiously writing down everything the teacher was saying. In his ow group, very few of them were paying attention. The only one who really seemed to be paying attention was Katelyn.

She was seated near him and he could see her pretty handwriting cover sheet after sheet of her notebook. But every so often he caught her eyes straying, catching, for just a moment, on Aaron. There was an indiscernible look on her face as she watched him. It wasn’t one of distaste of disgust, but one of concern. She cared, he realized.

He caught up with her as they made their way over to the cafeteria for lunch.

“You were the one texting Aaron over the summer.” It wasn’t a question.

She looked startled at his accusation, but she didn’t deny it.

“We spent a lot of time together doing the science fair last year. We would hang out sometimes. I- we’re friends. She paused and pulled at her lip with her teeth. “I was there when he was crashing.”

“You didn’t leave, though.”

“I couldn’t.” She shook her head. “I’m a lot more familiar with the whole thing than I really want to talk about right now. I’m glad he’s okay. Or recovering, at least.”

“You never defend him.”

“I’ve tried. They don’t listen. So I’ve stopped trying to convince them.”

Neil nodded. “I can respect that.”

“You’re close with them, aren’t you? Aaron, Nicky, Allison and them.”

“Yeah.”

“They’re good people.”

He nodded.

“So you and Andrew aren’t trying to kill each other?” She asked as she readjusted the strap of her backpack.

He shrugged noncommittally. “We’re foxes.

She gave him a wry smile “So are we cool?”

He nodded.

“Cool then.” She held up her fist.

He brushed his knuckles with hers and smiled as she gathered up her things.
“Do you want to do another round?” Neil asked after they burned halfway through their first cigarette.

Andrew looked over at him for the first time all night.

“Sure,” he flicked his stubbed out cigarette away. “What’s with the knives?”

“My father’s favorite. My mother had her own set. I took hers when she died.”

Andrew nodded slowly indicating Neil’s turn.

“Did you kill your parents?”

“Just Tilda.” He flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. “I warned her to leave Aaron alone she didn’t listen. Went out one night and suddenly drove into a median. Unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate.” Neil echoed though he didn’t sound upset. Andrew turned his head to look at Neil’s face staring up at the stars. His face was unaffected and the smoke from his cigarette was carelessly meandering around him making a decorative backdrop for Neil’s plain expression.

Andrew scoffed. “No lecture about my indefensible actions? Though I suppose you know all about the cruelty of the world.”

Neil turned in his direction, looking him in the eye. He said nothing for a moment before looking back up. “It’s not the world that’s cruel, it’s the people in it.”

Andrew nodded and they laid their silently

***

It was cold enough that it felt that it should be snowing but it didn’t. He never thought he would miss the snow. When he had been on the run, it only managed to slow them down and it made it harder for them to escape if they got into a bind. Though, it did provide a sort of cover for his father and his men.

He was drawing snow and the winter as I should be when Dan came bustling in from the outside, stripping off her coat.

“She had the baby.”

Allison, Renee, and Matt leapt up asking for pictures and what the baby’s name was. Dan relayed all the details excited, but Neil could see the exhaustion in her eyes. She had stopped working at the fast-food place, but she had switched jobs to go one that would let her work late hours. It paid better than others, she said. She lost out on sleep but she seemed to be managing, even better now that volleyball season was done. How she would cope now that the baby was here, he didn’t know. The fact that they were in hiding wasn’t the only reason he and his mother tended to avoid hospitals. The bills were astronomical. And the cost to have a baby would have put a significant chunk out of her savings.

He worried.

***

It what was no time November and December flew by in a flurry of pumpkin pie, turkey, and finals.
And soon it was winter break. Andrew had to rearrange his hours at Eden yet again, which was inconvenient, but manageable. He and Roland still managed to line up their breaks so that they were always able to meet up.

The making out still felt nice, but it was getting more intense, and it wasn’t the first time that Roland’s hands had started to wonder, they never got far before Andrew backed away, glaring.

“Don’t touch me.”

Roland looked apologetic.

“Sorry.”

He just shook his head and picked up is jacket where he discarded it on the floor. He brushed it off and pulled it back on.

“You’re almost back on shift. I’m off now.” He turned and left and went out the back door of the club and made his way back to Marbury down the mostly empty evening streets.

It was getting colder and colder, but never enough for it to snow. Cass said that she-

No. stop.

He pushed on and wrapped his jacket closer around his body. He barely took in his surroundings as he passed street after street, and through the doorway of Marbury. He made his way up the stairs and detoured at his room and grabbed his portable radio and his cigarettes and made his way up the steps to the door of the roof. He set the radio up on the raised center and flipped it on turning it up to drown out his thoughts.

The winter months had never been great but this year, so soon after everything with Cass and Tilda, it was just unbearable. He wanted to crawl out of his skin and leave his body. Everything around him was so much greyer and darker. The sad music playing on the radio echoing around the empty caverns what should have held happiness but had long been barren containing nothing but dust and cobwebs.

I heard there was a secret chord

That David played, and it pleased the Lord

But you don’t really care for music, do you?

It goes like this

The fourth, the fifth

The minor fall, the major lift

The baffled king composing Hallelujah

Pain was the only he could feel when he thought about her, even though he desperately wished it wasn’t like that. But his own mind, much like his life seemed set to forsake him. Everything between him and Cass was tainted by the darkness Drake had brought with him. And despite himself the memories of the time he had with Cass always were at the forefront of his mind.

And suddenly it all came back in perfect, painful clarity. As if he could have ever truly forgotten those memories. He was back there in Cass’s kitchen and she was making cookies for the holiday
and she was singing along with the radio. There were jingling bells on her sweater and she had stopped to singing to laugh at some joke Richard had told. And in that moment everything was fine and it hurt so much more than the blades that he had used to cut his own skin.

And suddenly he could feel it all over again the touch on his lower back, the way the pleasant energy had drained away like water down a shower drain. And he was left standing there, breath gone, and pain in his chest.

She tied you to the kitchen chair

She broke your throne, and she cut your hair.

And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah

He slammed off the radio and the music cut off with a start. The words were killing him and they shouldn’t be. Why was it that every feeling could be drained from his mind in a desperate attempt at self-preservation, but the horrible memories still remained? Even the cloying smoke drifting off his cigarette wasn’t enough to tear him away.

Every sense he had was standing on end. Even the gentle breeze causing the goosebumps to rise on his arms at the slightest provocation. He heard the light scuffing of footsteps and turned his head to the side to see Neil slip up onto the roof. Neil took him in slowly and made his way over. Andrew looked away.

Neil leaned back, careful to leave space between them. He stayed silent, as if he knew loudness was not something Andrew could handle right now.

Almost out of habit Andrew found himself lighting a cigarette and handing it over to him. Neil looked over to Andrew and Andrew felt his heart catch the few second their eyes connected. Neil slowly dragged his eyes away and Andrew silently tried to air back into his lungs

“Is that a radio?” Neil asked, his voice an almost whisper.

If it had been another day, if he had been in a different frame of mind he would have said something sarcastic to that, or just given him a look. Instead he shrugged. Neil studied him. “Can I?”

Andrew rolled his eyes and looked back up at the stars.

“Whatever, Josten.”

Neil’s arm reached over him for the radio, switching it on. He glided through several stations until he found one that seemed to fit what he was looking for and turned the music down until it was nothing more than a whisper on the night breeze. He felt the absence of where Neil’s arm had been above him more sharply than should have been realistically possible.

They laid their silently the soft music floating around them. The music wasn’t any of the new stuff on the radio or any of the Christmas carols that had been playing since the beginning of November. The music were older, and the images they brought to mind were duller, like a faded photograph, edges worn and dog-eared, soft to the touch.

I know I stand in line until you think you have the time

To spend an evening with me

And if we go someplace to dance, I know that there’s a chance
He glanced over at Neil who hadn’t said anything, his eyes fixed on the smoke that was mingling with Andrew’s own. Neil didn’t look over at him but he must have felt his eyes.

“This music reminds me of my parents.”

Andrew said nothing just exhaled, the fog from his breath and his smoke indistinguishable.

“Sometimes. When I was younger my dad would turn on this old record player and he would take my mom and they’d dance to some slow song.”

“Didn’t realize the tender moments you had.”

Neil exhaled roughly, “It wasn’t, really. That dancing stopped when my dad decided he wanted to smash my mom’s face into a wall.”

Andrew tore his eyes away from Neil’s face and looked up at the sky.

“During the holiday at my last foster home, Cass used to sing along with all of those shitty Christmas songs.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It was.”

“Stay with her long?”

“She got kicked out of the foster program. Neglect.” He closed his eyes tightly trying to forget it.

“Ah.”

Andrew frowned and looked over at him. “Is this supposed to be some sort of bonding thing? Are we going to start asking each other about our deepest darkest secrets?”

Neil breathed a laugh. “Don’t know. We could, if you want.”

He just looked at him. And looked away.

“I’ll try it though. So Andrew,” he leaned to his side voice lowered to something conspiratorial, “what’s your favorite color.”

He turned away and looked back up at the sky.

“Black.”

“Like the sky?”

“Like the void I’d shove you in if I ever got the chance.” he heard Neil’s light laugh and for some reason, it made something inside him just a little bit lighter, too. He decided he was not a fan of that feeling at all.

He wanted that sound to stop so he asked his own question.

“Yours?”

“Grey.”
“Like your morals.”

Neil met his eyes and Andrew could hear the smile.

“Yeah.” Neil kept looking at him before Andrew turned his head, with more effort than he would be willing to admit, back to the sky.

*The time is right, your perfume fills my head, the stars get red and, oh, the night’s so blue*

*And then I go and spoil it all by saying something stupid like “I love you”*

***

The breakfast table was always a solemn affair, Neil soon discovered after he was forced to stay inside in the mornings due to the foggy weather. He wasn’t quite sure why that was, but he figured it was because none of the people there wanted to be there. Matt had managed to join them, though, so things were a bit more optimistic than usual.

“Seth, man, what do you mean you haven’t thought about it? What do you think you are going to do after high school?”

“Stop bugging me about all of this stuff. I’ll figure it all out, eventually. Not everyone is like you. All optimistic and shit.”

“You have to hope for the best if you want it to happen. Right, Neil?”

Neil glanced up from his oatmeal. “Don’t – why are you bringing me into this?”

“Tell Seth.”

He stirred the oatmeal in his bowl. “It’s good to have a plan, to plan ahead and all that. Fight for every day you have.”

Matt turned back to Seth smug. “See, I told you. It’s important to have hope.”

“Didn’t take you for the hopeful type, Josten,” Seth sneered

“I’m not really. I’m not really one for looking to the future. I’m just trying to get by.”

Matt looked torn between heartbroken and betrayed. Seth laughed. “Look at this kid. He knows what’s up. Things are shit out there, Boyd.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to give up.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and got up to wash his dishes, Neil followed close behind him and washed his bowl beside him in silence.

“Surprised you sided with Seth.”

Neil scoffed. “I didn’t side with anyone. I just stated the truth.”

“For once.”

“We all know how life works. There’s no use pretending it’s anything different than what it is. I mean, what’s a future to someone who can’t even embrace the present.” Neil turned off the faucet and grabbed the dishtowel to dry his bowl. “I’m just going to try and make it through now, if I live to
tomorrow, I’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

***

They spoke like this, in the day, snatches of conversation when they could, but they saved most of it for when the early winter sun fell below the horizon.

The winter became like a series of nighttime confessions, hours of talking underneath the moonlight, just the two of them. Truths passed back and forth between them, never-ending.

***

“My mother used to cellist.” Neil told him one night. “Sometimes she used to tell me my dad fell in love with her because he heard her music one night and fell in love.”

“Did he?”

“Who knows? I don’t think he was capable of love. But my mother was a liar. One of the best of them. She didn’t really lie to me because I knew her tells but she was still a damn good liar. But I was never sure if she was lying about that.”

“Sometimes there are just lies we need to believe are true.”

“Coming from Mr. Honesty himself.

“I lie when it suits me.”

“It isn’t very often, though, is it?”

*

For a generally honest person, Andrew was often surrounded by lies and liars. The lies came from his foster families, from his peers, everyone, but he couldn’t find it in him to care. Still, though, he had a reputation.

Andrew knew he had a reputation. Just because he didn’t talk with the other kids in the school didn’t mean he didn’t know what they were saying about him.

Most of it, he knew, stemmed from the fight he had gotten into last year.

Bryce was an idiot. Really. Andrew had known him since he started even going to school. Not well, but they knew who each other were. And Bryce knew to keep his distance.

But, last year, when Kevin had come, wrist still in a brace, one of the sole members of the chess team, he seemed like an easy target.

Bryce was fairly tall, already six feet tall in junior high. He came over to the table where Kevin sat playing chess, going over chess strategies with that obsessive mindset he had. Bryce smirked to his friends and then leaned over. He said something to Kevin, but Kevin leveled him with an unimpressed look before getting up to throw away his trash.

He slapped the tray out of Kevin's hand, hard if the way Kevin clutched his wrist meant anything. He was freezing, Andrew could tell. The blow too similar to the one Riko his dealt months ago.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”
“Really?” Bryce laughed sneered, looking him up and down. Andrew could admit he wasn’t exactly imposing, physically, but he knew his appearance gave out a warning. His black clothing and cold stare screamed stay away. Most people left him alone. But, like he said, Bryce was an idiot. Bryce ignore the waning signs emanating off of the smaller male in front of him and plowed on with his asinine comments. “The mute does speak.”

“I’m being generous giving you a warning. Leave.”

“Or what? You’re going to make me? What are you? Four feet tall?”

He stood there and waited.

Like he said, Bryce was an idiot.

He saw the first blow coming from the side. It was unpracticed, and it was obvious that he was used to dominating his prey through sheer force and presence alone.

But what he didn’t know was that Andrew had been training with Renee down at the boxing ring. Renee had had a lot of experience fighting bigger men and winning. Andrew had a lot of experience getting hit.

He moved so that Bryce only landed a glancing blow. While moving he shot a fist at Bryce’s stomach, causing him to double over, before decking him in the face.

He usually wore layers or baggy clothes, for a lot of reasons. It covered the scars, the clothes from the foster homes were usually too big. He usually didn’t like it, but it made it easier to hide the muscle mass he had been building up since he joined the foxes. It lead people to underestimate him, something he used to his advantage.

He lifted a leg and smacked it into Bryce’s side, sending him toppling to the floor. He kicked him in the stomach and then punched him in the nose and he could feel it breaking. He crouched down beside him.

He snapped his fingers in his face. “Hey, hey Bryce. Look at me. Look at me” Bryce whimpered and turned to him.

“Good, good. Now I’m going to say something and you’re going to listen this time, do you understand me Bryce?”

Bryce stared wide eyed.

“Nod if you understand.” Bryce nodded.

“I’m going to make this clear for you and, because obviously you have a hard time understanding things, I’m going to spell it out for you. Stay away from me and the people I associate myself with. I will not repeat myself.” He looked out across the cafeteria. “This goes for everyone. If I find out you did anything I will find you. And I won’t give any warnings.” He looked down at Bryce and turned away dismissively. “I’m done with you.”

After that was a shuffle of school officials and a three day suspension for both of them, but when he came back, Bryce made sure to stay away.

“Bryce and I have an understanding.” Was how he summed up the incident to Neil, when Neil
finally asked about it. Really, it was only a matter of time before it came up; he knew Neil lived with an ear to the ground.

“Do you?”

“I beat the shit out of him last year.”

“You’re so much shorter than him.”

“Funny, coming from you.”

“Bryce’s a prick, though so I don’t blame you.”

“How merciful.”

“I’m not really. I don’t have to worry about it. I know you, Andrew. You usually only attack someone if they deserve it.”

“I attacked you.”

“You did. But we cleared that up and now we’re besties.”

“You been spending time with Allison again?”

“Yeah. She thinks I need to learn more slang. Did it work?”

“Technically. But it was weird.”

“Yeah, I was regretting it as it came out of my mouth.”

“Wow is that a first for you?”

Neil smirked and turned to look back up at the sky. “Shut up.”

***

He came back to his room to see Seth sitting on the bed, dressed in all black. He had a somber expression on his face that only grew when Neil entered the room.

“What’s the occasion? “

“I’ve just been informed by His Shortness that he’s going to be moving in with you when I leave.”

“So, you’re fine with it?”

“You are?” his voice was incredulous. And then he shook his head and snorted. “Figures. Always knew you were cracked. Have fun with that fucker.”

“Is that what” he gestured to the black attire Seth was wearing, “all the dramatics are for.”

“Oh, really. You’re going to give me shit for dramatics Mr. I-hitchhiked-like-fifteen-miles-on-the-freeway-by-myself.”

“Okay, first of all, it wasn’t fifteen miles-”

“Irrelevant, short stack. Point still stands. So you’re telling me you don’t want all this effort I put into this? I would have written you an eulogy. Read it the day you two moved in together.
“I would rather you didn’t.”

“Whatever man.” He shrugged and stood up. “It’s your funeral.” And then then he messed up Neil’s hair and walked out the door, leaving Neil wondering what the hell had just happened.

Ass.

***

“okay, so, why do you like ice cream?”

“Because it’s good.”

“What kind do you like?”

“Moose tracks.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s vanilla with chocolate and caramel.” He explained. He paused. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Like ice cream.”

“I like orange sherbert I guess.”

Andrew made a face.

“What? It tastes like fruit.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

“Do you like anything besides sweets?”

“Other things are fine.” He said, adding a mocking emphasis on the word fine. Neil couldn’t help but snort.

*

“Say hi, Neil.” He turned to see Allison sitting on the couch with her laptop opened in front of her and a very familiar face on the screen.

“Hi Nicky.”

“Oh, you remember me. I’m so glad you haven’t forgotten me in my time away.”

Allison stood up. “You two want to talk for a while? I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Uh, sure.” He settled down in front of the computer screen and waved.

“So, how are you liking Germany?”

“Germany is the best Neil. It’s so different. I love it here.”
“That’s good.”

“I miss you all but I’m pretty up to date with what’s going on over there, I think.”

“Allison, keeping you up on the latest gossip?”

“Yeah. Her and Andrew, honestly.”

“What?”

“Shit. Don’t tell him I told you that. He emails me, like once a week. Tells me what’s going on. He said, and I quote “I don’t want to hear you bitching about everything you missed when you get back. We both know that if you do that, I’m going to kill you. But I don’t feel like going to jail for felony charges even if I may get reduced time for having a justifiable reason, so I’m going to give you detailed updates on what I’m going on.” I shit you not, and he has been, but the emails are very thorough. Like, too detailed.”

“Too detailed?”

“I think he’s fucking with me, honestly. One week he included your guy’s grocery list. Side note, you guys eat like shit.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “That’s Andrew.”

“Yeah I figured most of it was his, but seriously Neil, I saw what you’re eating for breakfast. And lunch.”

“Oats are healthy. And peanut butter.”

“Not a lot of variety there, dude.”

“Well I’ll pour myself a bowl of Andrew’s sugary shit tomorrow, if that’ll make you feel better.”

Nicky looked like he was going to get a migraine.

“I fucking swear you two-”

“I’m back.” Allison announced.


“Eat better!” Nicky called after him.

***

Neil stared at the daunting box of cereal, covered in happy, smiling, multicolored Os and finally did it. He poured himself a bowl of sugar loops. And took a bite.

It was disgusting. He almost spat it back in the bowl but stopped when he noticed Andrew was blatantly staring at him, almost daring him to do it. He swallowed the food.

He held out the bowl “You want-”

“If you think-” he said I that monotone way of his, “that I want your half-eaten cereal, you’re sadly mistaken.” He then proceeded to look him dead in the eyes as he poured himself a bowl and ate it. He never even broke eye contact.
Andrew couldn’t stand a mess. Life was chaotic enough already, his personal space didn’t need to be that way too. So he always made sure that everything was in its place when he came and left his room—clothes in drawers, books on shelves, bed made. So when something was out of the ordinary, he noticed it. He picked up the small envelope he found on his fresh bunk and turned it over.

“Leroy.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you know where this came from?”

“Uh yeah. Neil said that it was for you and asked if I could make sure you got it.” He paused and looked a little hesitant. “I was going to go hang out with him and Seth. You could join if you want.”

“No.” Like fuck he would hang out with Seth when he didn’t have to. And he preferred to be around Neil when it was just the two of them. He knew it was more dangerous, and that his traitorous hormones lived for those moments, but he also liked the honestly Neil offered him when they were alone.

Leroy shrugged at his response and left, closing the door softly behind him.

He looked at the envelope. The front was blank so he flipped it over and unsealed it. Inside was a small cat with a gentle face sitting on top of a tub of moose tracks ice cream. He flipped it over and saw a short message.

*Seth told me you talked to him.*

*Thank you.*

*-Neil*

It was stupid. If Neil ever asked he would tell him that he threw it way.

(He wouldn’t tell him that he kept it.)

And that it was resting in a crumpled up ball at the bottom of the Marbury kitchen trash underneath all of the expired hamburger helper.

(He wouldn’t say how he smothered it out and carefully placed it between the pages of his hardback copy of Brave New World.)

He would tell him, if he asked, that it was stupid and that he hated it.

But only if he asked, though.

***

*Oh doctor please*

*This don’t feel right*

*Oh can’t you give me something*

*To get me through the night*
Oh if it all falls apart
And if this thing goes wrong
Oh put me back together
However you want
My mind plays tricks
And I don’t sleep no more

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for such a late update. Hope you like it anyways!
Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter- descriptions of car accidents, non-detailed description of lab dissection, canonical character death, as per usual. Again if there is anything I have missed or you feel needs to be tagged, just hit me up on tumblr or in my inbox or whatever. Hope you enjoy chapter 4!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Might be a sinner and I might be a saint
I’d like to be proud, but somehow I’m ashamed

Sweet little baby in a world full of pain
I gotta be honest, I don’t know if I can take it

Everybody’s talking, but what’s anybody saying?
Mama said if I really want to, I can change, yeah yeah

***

He knew it was a risky decision the minute he made it. But when they had talked about it all those times, all those weeks ago, he remembered the calm incline of his head at Andrew’s points and counterpoints for the whole moving-in-together situation. And when he was nodding, he could almost convince himself it wasn't a mistake.

“I hate you Neil.” Andrew had said the second time he had brought it up.

“Think of the benefits, though.” He waved his hand through the air, the smoke trailing in a crooked line from his fingers.”

“The longer I hear you talk, the shorter that list grows,” Andrew muttered. “But I will. Think about it.”

Neil smirked. “Great. Seth fucking snores.”

"It's going to cost you." Andrew had said, one of those other nights
Neil rolled his eyes and blew on the smoke floating off the end of his cigarette. "Figured as much."

"One truth."
He nodded.

One more truth, he had though, *in the midst of the messy battlefield of honesty and fabrication*. It was a dangerous game, but Neil found he lived for the adrenaline.

Now that winter break was drawing to a close and the date of the move-in was approaching, he found himself thinking about that conversation more and more.

He didn’t fear Andrew. If anything he feared what he, himself, was, underneath all of the false identities he had carried throughout the years. Around Andrew those parts of himself no longer existed. And now they were going to be living together.

They were going to share this room, two people who barely had anything.

Neil anxiously waited for the transition, just wanting to get it over with. He could have packed and unpacked his bag more times than he could count in the span of time that it took for the move to take place, Seth taking his good time, gathering his knickknacks and paraphernalia into boxes.

But the time came sooner than he felt he was ready for, and the door opened and they switched places.

The move went surprisingly smooth, considering Andrew and Seth could barely stand to look at each other.

Neil had taken the top bunk in the weeks leading up to the move, making it easier for Seth to gather his stuff. He watched them all like a hawk from where he sat. Seth grabbed his boxes and Andrew tossed his own on the floor against the wall. And then Seth was gone.

Andrew was silent, not saying anything about the payment he was owed. Not that Neil was expecting him to; Andrew was patient.

The sky turned dark, the lowering sun stretching the shadows of the boxes until they made dark streaks on the floor. Neil watched them from where he laid.

"I'm surprised you agreed to this," he said, his voice was hoarse and startling against the velvet night.

There was a long silence before Andrew finally replied.

"It doesn't really matter." Andrew’s his own voice was cracked. Neil absently wondered if Andrew had really said much in the time they were apart. "I'll be out of here in about a year, anyway."

"Why?" the words felt breathless as they left his mouth and he didn’t know why.

"Emancipated." Andrew said simply "I'll be an emancipated minor."

"Interesting. I should probably look into that."

"Don't want to be adopted? Have a family of your own."

"I've had enough family. I'm not looking for another one."

They laid their silently.

"Night Andrew." He whispered.

Andrew said nothing.
Homeroom was boring. Infinitely dull. Really. Andrew didn’t know why the school had decided to make one here. It was just an empty period, thirty minutes long, filled with kids they would be stuck with for the next four years. The school board had claimed that the homeroom period helped to form a sense of community with their peers, but it really sounded like a load of bullshit.

Everyone was basically expected to entertain themselves during the time. Their particular teacher was an insufferable asshole. He was irritating and ignorant on so many issues that just listening to him was enough to make Andrew feel like his IQ was dropping.

He supposed that the period was supposed to be used by the students to help transition their minds from vacation mode to school mode. He doubted anything could accomplish such a feat.

As soon as Neil had walked through the door he had been dragged over to sit with the rest of his lunch friends to talk about their vacations. He was talking with them, or at least letting them talk and pretending to listen, but even from this far away Andrew could see the boredom in Neil’s eyes.

He was interesting to watch. The way his face hid what he was really thinking. He told himself he was watching so carefully because he was trying to pick up on the younger’s tells, but he knew that that wasn’t the whole truth.

Neil’s face was relaxed and he had an easy smile on his lips. And it was complete and utterly fake. Under that placid façade his eyes glanced around the room, tracking expressions and stowing away information as he found it important. He was subtly scanning their surroundings, his eyes flickered over to him and the corner of his lip twitched ever so slightly. Andrew pointedly looked away and back at the book in his hands.

Mr. What’s-his-face finally decided he wanted to do something, so he sauntered to the front of the classroom and called for everyone’s attention. His grating voice rang out throughout the classroom.

“Okay, everyone. The first semester is over for now. How about we talk about what we did over break.” He left a hanging pause before barreling on. “I, for one, had a fantastic time. My girlfriend came over and spent the holidays with me and my family.”

“How about—” he dragged out the last syllable as he scanned the classroom, “you Andrew? How was your break?”

He didn’t look up from his book. It wasn’t worth it.

“Mr. Minyard,” Never mind. Howard was using one of those tones. He looked up. It wasn’t worth detention to ignore him. He raised his eyebrow.

“I asked how your break was.”

“It was fantastic, Mr. Howard. So fun I’m literally bursting at the seams.” He said dryly before looking back at his book.

He head angry footsteps and looked up just in time to seen Howard grab book out of his hands.

“I’m so sick of you people. You think you’re so great and that you can have this sort of attitude? You have your little emo rebellious faze and go back home to you parents and don’t even bother to appreciate them when they do everything for you Mr. Minyard. You need to learn to grow up and push aside these childish behaviors. You should be more like some of the other kids her, like Mr. Palosino over there.”
Andrew wanted to roll his eyes. Greg had been betting whether his tongue would stick to the flagpole right before the class. Howard’s words were irritating and ironic, really. But he stared forward.

Mr. Howard’s face was growing redder in his peripheral, but he didn’t care enough to do anything.

A familiar voice rang out across the room. “Could you ask someone else? I don’t want to hear about Andrew’s lame ass vacation.”

The room murmured at Neil’s words and Andrew couldn’t help but look at him. That idiot was trying to help him out. He appeared all cool and composed where he sat, leaning back in his chair, but there was a ferocity in his eyes that ran deep to his bones.

He was angry.

It shouldn’t have really been surprising. From what they had told each other about their respective pasts, it was clear that neither of them had had an easy childhood and that neither of them had active parents in their lives anymore. Howard’s accusations and arrogant assumptions were enough to make Neil’s hackles rise.

“Shut up, Josten.” his voice carried across the room to the younger boy and it sent a wave of cold energy flooding across the room. He fixed Neil with a trademark glare and turned his head back to his book.

The others whispered around the room in hushed voices and even Howard backed off a little. He might have been stupid, but he wasn’t deaf. He had surely heard about what Andrew was capable of, even if he had forgotten before. He watch as an almost sick smile flashed over Neil’s face at the sight of their teacher’s face before he covered it up.

As soon as they exited the classroom, Andrew had his hand on Neil’s collar and was shoving him into a row of lockers. There were gasps of the other students around them, but Andrew ignored them. He leaned close to Neil’s ear, making sure that as he spoke he enunciated clearly, even at the low volume. His words would not be mistaken.

“I didn’t need your help back there.”

“I know,” Neil murmured back, lips barely even moving. “I just didn’t want to hear that irritating piece of shit talking anymore. He doesn’t know anything about the real world and people like him piss me off.

“Mr. Minyard!” one of the teachers called from behind them. “Release Mr. Josten!”

He pulled away, making a show of taking his hands off of Neil. “Don’t worry. There’s no problem here. Right, Josten?”

Neil didn’t even say anything, instead only meeting his eyes for a spilt second before walking away without a word, his mindless groupies trailing behind him, pestering him with questions.

***

“I can’t believe you antagonized him again. Do you have a death wish?” Greg gaped.

Neil rolled his eyes. “I have to get to class,” he murmured and that was enough of a reminder to get most of the kids to leave. All except for Katelyn.
She was silent as they both trekked their way across campus from homeroom to beginner’s art. He hadn’t been expecting her to not say anything on the way over, but he definitely hadn’t expected her to say what she said.

“I know you two hang out at Wymack’s,” she began. “I’m guessing you also now more about the whole living situation that the others do too, right?”

He hesitated before nodding his head slightly. She nodded.

“You haven’t told them.” She said, barely glancing his way.

He knew what she was talking about. He had been able to pick up from the snatches of conversation that he overheard at the table that she knew Aaron better than the other teens there, though she never really let on how much. Anyone who had spent even the slightest bit of time with either of the twins would notice that they weren’t as close as everybody thought. She knew that they weren’t even living together.

“You haven’t either,” he found himself saying.

“That’s true.”

“Why?”

Katelyn paused, searching for the right words. “The situation with the twins is complicated,” she began slowly, parsing out the words carefully on her tongue. “Everybody at the table thinks they have it all figured out. They think that they know everything, but this whole thing is a lot more complicated than they would be able to get, you know?”

He nodded and she continued.

“They wouldn’t really be willing to get to know him and I- I just, honestly don’t want to have to deal with that shit.”

“You were the one texting Aaron over the summer.”

She looked startled at his accusation but she didn’t deny it.

“We spent a lot of time together doing the science fair last year. We would hang out sometimes. I was there when he was crashing.”

“You didn’t leave though.”

“I couldn’t. I didn’t want to.” she shook her head. “I- I’m a lot more familiar with the whole thing than I really want to talk about right now and I’m glad he’s okay. Or recovering, at least. But even if I didn’t have all of that shit in the past I don’t think I would have left him to deal with all of that on his own. More than anything, he’s my friend.”

“You never defend him.”

“I’ve tried,” and she sounded so tired. “They don’t listen. So I’ve stopped trying to convince them. Their opinions don’t really matter to him, so they don’t matter to me.”

Neil nodded. “I can respect that.”

She smiled. “So are we cool?”
He nodded.

“Cool then.” She held up her fist.

He brushed his knuckles with hers and smiled as she hoisted her bag up higher on her shoulder and walked into the art room.

***

“No, no, no, no. Mr. Howard. Andrew and Neil don’t work together. They hate each other.”

“What? No.” Mr. Howard said, as if it was impossible for two people to not get along. It was ridiculous, really, considering the fact that he and Andrew had that exact sort of relationship.

“You didn’t see it. Everybody knows it.”

“I’m sure that it was all just some sort of misunderstanding.” Mr. Howard said dismissively.

“I hate that word.” Andrew threw out casually, trying to ignore the prickling in his spine.

Mr. Howard turned to him, and opened his mouth to respond about how individual opinions had no place in the school system or a give a lecture on how “that’s how the real world works, you can’t always get what you want.”

Like he didn’t already know that.

“I hate the implication that we don’t know how to have an argument. What is it? Do you think it wasn’t serious?” Neil piped up and when Andrew slowly drew his eyes over to Neil, he saw the biting gleam in his eyes. Two snarky remarks to Howard in two days. He really didn’t know how to lie low.

“I think you kids don’t even know what it’s like to have a true disagreement. You all were probably fighting about a gel pen. Or something trivial like that,” he patronized.

Neil said nothing, but he did not look pleased. Andrew also had the distinct feeling that Neil didn’t know what a gel pen was. He probably hadn’t really had a chance to see one in whatever hole he had been hiding in for the past few years. Honestly, that kid would be the death of him.

Neil still was having trouble blending in. He still seemed to thing dressing in ragged clothes was low-key. It wasn’t. He was lucky he was good-looking enough for people to ignore his dismal fashion sense. Or maybe not. Neil wasn’t really a fan of people. Andrew could relate.

“That settles it. Minyard, Josten you two will be teamed up together for the fundraiser.” He turned to the class. “Whichever group sells the most tickets to the auction will win a prize.”

“What kind of prize?” one of the kids in the back asked eagerly.

“I- I don’t know yet.”

Andrew leaned back and zoned out the rest of the class. The homeroom portion was always such a waste of time. After what felt like forever of Mr. Howard’s droning words the bell rang and they were able to head to their next class.

***

Andrew are you selling the tickets?
Andrew shook his head. “Fuck, no.”

Neil nodded, relieved. He grabbed a cigarette and leaned forward against the railing next to Andrew. “Good.”

He really was relieved. He didn’t have the time to peddle out those pieces of paper that didn’t really do much to help the school. He wouldn’t have even been surprised to find that the money just ended up in Mr. Howard’s pocket.

He smiled as he watched Andrew attempt to blow smoke rings out into the sky.

***

Neil made a discovery one afternoon at Wymack’s. It wasn’t anything super exiting, but it thrilled him, nonetheless. Wymack had needed something from the closet, an umbrella or a box or something, and had asked Neil to grab it for him. He walked over to the door and opened it. he found what Wymack had asked for. But that wasn’t all he had found. He handed the box to Wymack and stared at the contents of the closet.

“What’s this?” he asked, gesturing to the contents of the closet. Matt walked over to him and peered over his shoulder.

“Oh! That’s the recording stuff.”

“The recording stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t Nicky tell you about that before he left?”

“He mentioned something about music.”

“Yeah, well, we all make music. Not really together, but kinda. Before he left for Germany, he asked if he could store all of this stuff here.”

“Why?” he couldn’t imagine willingly leaving something this valuable behind in a closet.

“Well, it was either that or taking it with him to Germany, which would have been a whole thing and a mess. That and Kevin would have killed him if he didn’t have access to this stuff.”

“He could have just left it at his parents’ house.”

“Um, no. He didn’t really go into it, but he didn’t want his parents getting into his stuff.” He leaned back against the couch. “The Hemmicks are, like, super strict. I don’t think they would have let Nicky hang out here if they knew Wymack was this big dude with tattoos and shit. That’s not really the poit, though. So yeah. He left this stuff and anyone can use it. I use this stuff. You could probably use it too. Nicky definitely wouldn’t mind. Do you play any instruments?”

“Guitar. Kind of.”

“Better than me dude I can’t play any guitar at all. Though I know how to use those techno music- you know what they use at clubs?”

“Yeah.”

“I can play that pretty well. All those times going to those parties with my dad actually did me some
good.” He picked up some of the tech and dropped it onto the couch beside him. “Here I was going to work on some stuff now, if you wanted to see.”

“Sure.” He said and he perched himself up on the armrest of the couch beside Matt. He flipped on his laptop and scrolled thought he files on his email.

“We have a group drive,” he explained. “We all upload our music here and then we edit it or whatever. When we finish something Nicky goes in and makes sure all the sound is balanced out. Like so the music isn’t louder than the singers or whatever.”

He turned onto a mixing stuff and played the vocals and added to the sound. It wasn’t perfect at first as he tried to find the right notes, but soon the music was starting to sound good.

“This is awesome, Matt.”

“Thanks, dude.” He took the sound bite and then attached it to the group drive “And then I email it to Nicky and them he posts it to the website and to YouTube. Here, let me pull it up for you.”

“The website- holy shit” he winced as he got a look at it.

“Yeah, it can be a bit much.”

That was an understatement. The background of the site was a fluorescent orange that made his eyes burn and water. Matt cackled at his scrunched expression. “I’m- I’m sorry due. But your face.”

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh while I go blind, it’s all fine.”

“Seriously, though, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered which just sent Matt off onto another peel of laughter.

***

Marcie slammed her plastic tray onto the table. Neil sighed internally. he was hoping to have a drama free afternoon. Looked like that wasn’t happening.

“Renee Walker and Andrew Minyard are going to the dance together.”

“What dance?”

The look she gave him could only be described as incredulous. “What dance- what dance? Spring Fling, Neil. The biggest dance for anyone who’s not a senior.”

He held up his hands in mock defense. “Okay.”

“I just overheard Allison Reynolds saying it.”

“So what?

“So what? So what? They are miles apart. I don’t even know why they would even speak together. She’s nice, Neil. Like actually, genuinely nice. That’s like, super rare.”

“Did you hear?” Anderson dropped down into the seat beside him.

Neil looked up from his sandwich. Anderson was teeming with eagerness, ready to pounce on whatever response Neil offered him. “What.”
Jessica settled down in the seat next to Anderson and pulled her lunch out of her bag.

"Renee asked Andrew to the formal and," She finished tearing the crust off her sandwich, "he said yes."

"Can you believe it? What’s a nice Christian girl doing going out with him?" Anderson asked indignantly.

“I don’t know.” Jessica replied, picking at the bread. “He’s a complete sociopath.”

“Guys, I literally just told him this.”

“Well obviously you didn’t do a good enough job because his jaw wasn’t dropping.”

“Well you know what, why don’t you suck a——”

Neil stared across the cafeteria to where Andrew was sitting. Renee was sitting casually in the seat next to Andrew talking about whatever it was that they were talking about. They would often spend time chatting with each other.

Andrew didn't have the habit of wasting his time on things or people he didn't like. Even still, he barely talked to those he had claim over. He rarely spoke to Kevin and he had never, to his knowledge, spoke to Aaron. Neil was the only exception, but that was only because they had their truth game going. They had to speak in order to play it. Moreover, Andrew hated him, so there was that.

Not one of the foxes talked about what was going on between Renee and Andrew. He wondered how they were reacting to the news.

***

"I'm surprised that they aren't together yet." Allison told him as she leaned forward on the bench from where they sat outside the sparring area. They had net up there instead of going to Wymack’s that day. Allison had plans with Renee after she was done with Andrew, and for once Neil didn’t want to spend his time alone.

Neil stared at Allison, agape. "Why? I thought you said Renee said that there was nothing between them."

"And that is what she says. But do you know what they're doing?" she asked gesturing out to where their peers were sparring.

Neil was confused. "I thought they were sparring."

"They are."

"So, what's that got to do with anything?"

Alison sighed dramatically. "I keep forgetting you know nothing about the media so you probably haven't seen it." She turned to him hands gesturing. "So you have a guy and you have a girl. They're both wearing less clothes than normal, yeah?"

Neil glanced over at the as they tackled each other on the mat. It seemed technically true. He nodded.

"They're sweating and panting, and it doesn't end until one is pinned on top of the other. Do you catch my drift?" she studied his face intently. "You can practically feel the sexual tension."
Neil's eyes widened. It made... sense, he supposed. Still, he looked over at Allison. "I thought you didn't want them together?"

She waved him off. "No one does. But," she shrugged, "you can't avoid the inevitable. Besides, we have a bet going. Though," she said as she watched the sparrers, "I bet against them. Renee hasn't steered me wrong before. She may not fall for him. But he definitely likes her. She's the only one he talks to. Besides you." She settled against back of the bench and turned her attention back out to the fight.

He watched them more closely. Things didn’t really seem much different. But maybe he just didn’t see it. Maybe there was something he was missing.

It was harder to watch them in light of Allison’s revelation.

***

In true public school fashion, the end of the year was signaled by activities of mass chaos. Seniors were running around and pranking the school, Nicky was planning his trip back to the States in order to make sure he had enough credits to graduate, and Seth was constantly sending his car into the shop to get it ready for when he went off to college.

But, as a sign of their inclusiveness, the school decided to involve the freshman in the nightmare that was the end of the year.

He didn’t know how the school even had the money for such an activity, considering they didn’t even have enough money for paper, but somehow, somehow, they found enough money in the school budget to purchase enough dead squid for all the biology students to dissect.

The room smelled awful, like formaldehyde, and Andrew felt his nose scrunch up at the tangy smell of it. That, mixed with the smell of fish and chemical preservatives was enough to make everyone gag when they walked into the room.

They were asked to split into groups of two to dissect the squid. He watched as Aaron walked over to Katelyn and asked her if she wanted to work with him. He was so focused on watching them stealthily that he almost didn’t notice when Neil sidled up next to him.

The biology teacher walked up to the front of the classroom and droned on about all the procedures they needed to follow and the step by step instructions before she promptly left the room.

Everybody knew, technically, that they weren't supposed to be left alone, but being in a room with a bunch of hormonal teenagers with scalpels and squid was just a recipe for disaster. They sat around the black tables and cut open their squids.

There was a thump on the floor as one of the kids in the back of the room passed out.

Greg ran over to the body to see if he could find any signs of life.

“Shit!” there was a wild, panicked look in his eyes. “What do we do?”

Everybody shrugged and one kid ran out to get the teacher. A minute later she came back looking harried and terrified that she was going to lose her job. She waved over a few of the students "I think we just drag him out of the room." She said and a couple of the students lifted then passed out student and took him outside to get some fresh air. She came back to the room and sat down at her desk, too frightened to leave again.
All of this had happened and there had been no comment from Neil. In fact, Neil had paid no attention to what was going on in the room around him at all. Instead he was staring at the squid in front of him and his fingers were twitching around the instruments. It was disconcerting, to say the least. Neil’s face was terse as he stared at the slimy squid, before his hands tightened around the scalpel. Before Andrew fully realized what was happening Neil was slicing apart the squid.

He did it quickly, with surgical precision. A well-practiced hand. Andrew watched the procedure and jotted down some notes. Neil was hurrying through the process as quickly as he could. The second he finished with the steps up on the board, Andrew brought the tray up to the teacher’s desk and left it there along with the lab write up.

In the time it took for him to walk up to the desk Neil had already left the room and sprinted away. Bryce looked at him. “Dude, Andrew what did you do.”

Andrew leveled him with a stare until Bryce looked away.

He walked outside the room and to the edge of the campus. He opened up the gate to the wilted little campus garden that no one ever went to and found Neil sitting on one of the stone benches, staring out into the parking lot. He reached into his backpack and pulled out his lighter and lit a cigarette for himself and Neil.

Neil didn't even look at it before bringing it to his lips and inhaling deeply. His breath was shaky and his exhale wasn't smooth. He breathed it in again and it was a real testament to how bothered he was that he was actually smoking correctly.

“I don't know why this is bothering me so much,” he said finally. “It's not like anything else.”

“It's close enough.”

Neil stared at the smoke. “I guess it is.” He twisted his finger idly around the smoke, as if it was a ribbon he could wrap around his fingers. “They had me practice on pigs. They weren't dead yet so they didn't smell like- whatever that stuff was. They were a stepping stone.” He didn't need to say what they were a stepping stone towards.

“I guess you weren't kidding when you said you knew how to use them.”

Neil gave a humorless laugh.

“You get one.” Andrew said.

Neil pondered to himself and watched at his cigarette reached the filter.

“Do you know how to use yours?”

So he knew about the knives he hid in his armbands. “I know how to inflict damage.”

“That’s enough, though, isn’t it?”

He supposed it would have to be.

***

Neil went to Wymack’s when he could, which was more often than he was able to do during cross-country season.
Allison was there, like she usually was. Nowadays, though, she usually split her time between Wymack’s and Marbury, trying to scrounge up every last second she had with Seth before he left for college.

He found her there after school. Alone. It was Thursday and Renee was never around on Thursday. Allison was reclined on the couch, tattered paperback in her hands.

“Hey Allison.”

“Hey Neil. She tilted her head backwards so that she was staring at him upside-down. “How’re you?”

“Good.” He took off his backpack and placed it underneath the table and grabbed out his notebook and pencils. Most afternoons he alternated between doing homework and writing music. He didn’t know what to do about his art, considering the fact that he still wasn’t sure whether he was going to go through with Wymack’s offer.

Allison looked over at him.

“You’re always working.”

“Sometimes I’m writing music.”

“And that’s great.” She propped her arms up on the backrest of the couch. “But do you ever do anything that doesn’t involve all of your energy.”

“I don’t like movies, Allison.”

“I wasn’t saying that, geez.”

“Well what do you do?”

“When I’m doing pageants I’m not really allowed to watch anything, so I read.”

“What do you read?”

“Romances.”

“Are they any good?” he asked as he reached out to look at the book she had in her hands. She handed it over carelessly and he gaped at the cover.

It was- and he felt that he could say this because Andrew was always calling him dramatic- over the top. Tan bodies, glistening underneath studio lights, fluffed hair and revealing clothes adorned each of the models. Fiery reds and oranges splashed across the cover.

“Before you say anything, yes, I know they’re trashy. But sometimes it feels good to read something ridiculous. It’s a whole series,” she explained tapping on the cover, “and it’s like a soap opera, I swear. But it’s entertaining. Keeps my mind off things.”

“Can I read them?”

“Really, you want to?”

“I don’t have anything to lose.”

She smiled at him and pointed her book at him. “I always knew there was a reason I liked you.”
He smiled.

***

Andrew walked over to Renee’s house and greeted Stephanie from where she stood at the door. He followed Renee into the living room and sat beside her.

“Are you ready Andrew?”

He just looked at her before she flipped on the TV tuned into a documentary. They did this every Thursday, like clockwork. He came over and they would scroll through Netflix or the history channel until they found something strange enough to capture their interests.

They watched documentaries on all sorts of things. Renee like the ones on nature and animals while Andrew preferred the ones on space. They both, however, liked the informational ones on history or food or trends in society and the media.

Afterwards they would make comments on the videos and what they thought about them. He liked Renee because there were times, days, even weeks, after where one of them would bring up some obscure concept they had learned and be able to pick the conversation right back up again.

He could forget about his life, about school, about Howard and his ugly mustache. It was just him and Renee and that was more than good enough for him.

***

“And you two, Josten, Minyard?” Mr. Howard was walking back and forth across the front of the classroom, tallying up the number of fundraiser tickets each student had brought in. He looked, in Neil’s mind, like a drill instructor.

“Zero.”

“I’m sorry what?”

“Zero. Tickets.” Andrew repeated.

He slowly lowered the page he was looking at and looked back to the class, eyeing Andrew where he sat.

“I could have sworn you said zero.”

“I did.”

“How could you not sell any?” he looked seconds away from slamming his clipboard on the floot in frustration. “You would have to not be trying at all for that to happen. Even your parents could have bought one.”

Andrew just stared at him, sticking his legs out in front of him, leaning back in his seat.

Greg turned to Neil. “Woah, he didn’t even work with you? Even for a school project? That’s cold.”

Mr. Howard turned to Neil. “Is this true, Neil. Did you two really manage to sell nothing over several months between the two of you?”

“It’s true. Like Andrew said.”
“If you two were working together you should have been able to.”

“We weren’t.”

“Weren’t what?” Mr. Howard asked, bewildered.

“Working together.” He didn’t say that they hadn’t attempted to at all. It didn’t really seem relevant. It wouldn’t have really mattered. It wasn’t an assignment. They weren’t required to sell any. They couldn’t get in trouble for it. This wasn’t even a class. He knew it. Andrew knew it. They both had exploited it.

Rob whistled. “I told you Mr. Howard, they don’t work together. This rivalry had gone on since, like, the beginning of the year.”

Neil had to fight back a laugh. It was ridiculous how petty some people could be. As if he hadn’t seen things in life that were really worth holding a grudge against. As if Andrew hadn’t either.

“I’ll have to talk to your parents about this at the parent teacher conference.”

Neil shrugged. He managed to push off the sneaking memories of mingling smoke and exhaust. He looked at Mr. Howard offered him a careful smile. Neil Josten was a nice kid. He didn’t snap back, though his temper seemed to grow shorter with every passing day.

High school, in general, was so ridiculous. He had spent years on the run with his mother, trying to stay alive. He understood power hierarchies, had lived at the mercy of them for years. In a way, high school was like that, the fight for popularity and all of that. But they got caught up on such pointless stuff. It was as if they whole world wasn’t happening right outside the gates. Even the teachers’ troubles weren’t that extreme, the petty squabbles and the adolescent back-talk and name-calling. The pointless affairs. All of it. Most of these people had never and would never see cruelty like he had seen in the world.

They would never know what it was like to be so close to death that you could taste it on your tongue. They would never know the feel of a cold steel blade pressed up against your ribs. The burn of metal as it hurled across their skin at 100 miles an hour. The weight of the Kevlar vest against their chest. He looked at Andrew, sitting across the room, staring into the distance. They would never know what it was like to be hurt by those who were supposed to care for you, they would never feel a betrayal of that nature.

They would never know about all those things. But he wouldn’t be the one to tell them. He didn’t want to be. He didn’t want to see the innocence leave their eyes. He already knew all too well what that looked like as he watched the innocence fade and dull from his own eyes, until his eyes were indistinguishable from his father’s.

So he indulged them. He pulled a smile. One that just seemed to say What can you do? He walked up to Mr. Howards desk as the bell rang, once again pulling that smile across his lips.

“Sorry about all that Mr. Howard it just didn’t really seem to work out.”

Mr. Howard sighed and ran his hands across his face. “Yeah, well these things happen. Though im still going to have to have that conference. I still haven’t met your parents yet.”

Neil pulled a sheepish look. “Yeah, well they’ve had to work a lot. But my mother has been really looking forward to meeting you. She thinks you sound like a really good teacher.” His eyes slipped over to Andrew and Andrew flicked his glance over at him for just a moment before resuming his blank stare at the wall. He felt a swell of pride. That made him feel good.
That good mood didn’t last for long. To be precise, it ended the second he walked through Wymack’s front door to find Kevin grasping at his knees so tightly his knuckles were turning white.

“I can’t, I can’t.” Kevin was breathing heavily, and he was doubled over, head pressed between his knees. He was hysterical. And his breath was coming in faster and faster. Wymack knelt by him.

“Kevin? Kevin, you need to breathe. Slow down. Come on breathe with me.”

“I can’t, I can’t.”

“Andrew?”

Andrew nodded and walked over to Kevin and began murmuring to him in a low voice. Whatever he was saying must have been of some use because Kevin’s breath was beginning to slow down, albeit through shuttering, choked gasps.

Neil migrated closer to Wymack.

“What’s going on?”

“Riko is coming.”

Something akin to dread caused his stomach to drop. “His step brother, Riko? The one who broke his hand?”

Wymack looked grim. “Yeah. The one and only.”

“Why.”

“He’s decided he’d like to come to the dance. And he had enough clout as the nephew of Tetsuji to get tickets.”

“Well tell him he can’t come.”

“I can’t Neil. And trust me, I want to send that bastard as far away from Kevin as possible. It’s just that when Kayleigh had him she didn’t put me on his birth certificate- a lot of stuff about keeping the press away. She never even told me he was my son, though I suspected. She wasn’t really seeing anyone else around the same time. But when she died he was legally passed into Tetsuji’s care. She never even told him I was his father.

“But Kevin found a letter to Tetsuji that had the truth. Kevin already knew me- his mother would bring them around a few times a year before her death, but Kevin and I stayed in contact even after that. After the injury he grabbed whatever he had on him and booked a bus ticket over here. And then I picked him up.”

“But your Kevin’s father.”

“We don’t have any proof of that.”

“A blood test,” Neil suggested desperately. He felt like he was grasping at straws.

He shook his head. “Tetsuji has ears everywhere. If he got wind of anything like that he’d drag Kevin back.”
“Why? Why does he care so much?”

“Probably because he doesn’t want to risk Kevin going to court over Riko’s abuse.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Kevin can’t do anything until he’s eighteen. It’s a miracle he even got out in the first place.”

“I almost didn’t.”

They turned to Kevin, who was still curled up in a ball, though he was shaking significantly less.

“It was Jean, the other kid with Riko. He was my- I don’t know. I guess we were friends. He was supposed to take me to the hospital but he took me to the bus stop instead when I asked. He helped me to pool together enough money for a ticket.” He shook his head. “I need to- I need to do something.”

He walked across the room and pulled out his laptop and sat it down in front of him. He flipped open the group drive and began going through everything.

Kevin was antsy. He fingers on his broken hand tapped note formations from songs he had ingrained in his muscle memory, even though months had passed since he had last played them. When that wasn’t enough he closed the laptop and walked over to his violin and began to play.

He was relearning the violin with his non-dominant hand and it was driving him to the edge. It frustrated him that he could never hold the bow or the strings in the exact way he was used to doing, and Neil could only imagine was hard for him to go from one of the best players in the country, if not the world, to a novice whose bow squeaked and squealed across the strings.

Andrew sat in Wymack’s living room while Kevin drilled the same set of notes over and over, frown etched on his face. Neil didn’t know how much time had passed before he moved from where he had been standing and took up a seat in one of the armchairs. He grabbed one of Wymack’s books on tattooing basics from the bookshelf and began flipping through it. He glanced up and stared at the disgruntled look on Kevin’s face.

“Your face is going to freeze like that.”

Kevin’s frown deepened even more, though he never pulled his eyes from the sheet music.

“You could always practice.”

He held up the book.

“I’m learning right now.”

“Not music. How do you expect to be more than a mediocre player if you don’t practice?”

“I do practice,” he insisted.

“Not enough,” Kevin muttered dismissively. Then his eyes looked up from the sheet music to look at Andrew.

“You should practice with us too. You could run scales.”

“No.”
“You’d be good if you actually ever decided to try.”

Neil’s eyes perked up. “You play.”


“I’ve never seen you play.”

“He doesn’t do it very often.” Kevin remarked as he rubbed more rosin on his bow. “Bee taught him.”

“I thought she did therapy.”

“She does,” Andrew answered “I spend a lot of time there. She thought it would be conducive.”

“Why don’t you play here? Wymack has a piano.” He said gesturing to the piano hidden against the wall that Neil knew there was no way Andrew could have missed.

“Because running scales is boring as fuck and there are a dozen other things I would rather do.”

Kevin scoffed. “Like what.”

Andrew looked him dead in the eye. “Nothing.”

Kevin sputtered in anger, thoughts of Riko temporarily tossed from his mind

***

“So when you’re older what are you going to do?”

Neil almost tripped from where he was jogging beside Matt. “What? I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about what I’m going to do.”

He had spent so many years on the run he had never had the opportunity to think about it. He had thought about who he would be, but only in the context of aliases, never himself.

“Oh, geez man.” He pulled to a stop in front of the steps to Boyd’s Gym and sat down, running his fingers through Macie’s silky fur. “I’m not asking about anything that deep. I meant, like, do you want to get a dog or live in the city or the country? Stuff like that.”

Neil reached forward, running his fingers over the top of the golden retriever seated in front of them.

“I don’t know where I’d want to live, but maybe a pet. Though I think I’d get a cat.

Matt gasped dramatically and gently covered the dog’s ears. “How dare you say that, especially around Macie?” Neil laughed.

“I still love you Macie.” He said as he leaned forward to pet her again. Macie panted happily, tongue lolling lazily out of her mouth.

Matt laughed and the stood walked back to the gym. The made it back in through the back door and they found Dan lying on the floor, drenched in sweat. She tilted her head back to look at them. Macie ran forward, licking Dan exuberantly. “Did you guys have a good walk?”

“It went well, except I found out that Neil here is a cat person.”

Dan looked scandalized. “After knowing this beautiful girl? Yes, you’re a beautiful girl. Yes you
are.” She said rubbing Macie behind the ears, her tail thumped excitedly against the floor.

“I don’t dislike dogs, I just like cats a lot.”

She rolled her eyes. “I guess you just have to accept being wrong, seeing as Boyd and I are correct on this issue. Sorry rookie, I don’t make the rules.”

Neil rolled his eyes and laughed. Matt shook his head at them. I’ll be right back I have to run something by my mom. He looked them both dead in the eyes. “I’m trusting her with you. Protect her with your life.”

“It is a duty I humbly accept, sir Boyd.” Dan said with mock fervor.

He snorted and shook his head and left the training room.

Dan shook her head and turned her smile to Neil. It was still as genuine, if only a bit more serious. “Hey Neil. Could I talk to you about something?”

“Um,” no, not if you’re going to phrase it like that, what the fuck? “Sure.”

“Wymack told me the offer he made you.”

He shrugged and turned his attention to Macie. She greatly appreciated it.

“He also told me that you haven’t given him an answer yet. Not a definitive one” He looked up at her.

“What could I say? He shouldn’t-”

“Shouldn’t what? Care about you? Give you a chance? You think I didn’t think the same thing when he made me that same offer? You think I didn’t think about how he had much better prospects than us. How he could have chosen some kid who would have paid. Because I did, trust me. He could have chosen anyone else. But he didn’t. He stuck by me and he’ll stand by you too, Neil.

“Look, I don’t know why you’re in Marbury and frankly I don’t really care all that much. But the adults around us,” she waved her finger in the air. “They don’t determine what we become. They can influence, but at the end of the day we’ll still be ourselves, and they can’t take that away from us. My dad left, walked out on me when I was a kid. My mother left one day, too.

“I live with my aunt, Neil. We aren’t close, not by a long shot. There will be no love lost between us when I leave someday. But I won’t be alone, and that’s the difference. I choose people. I choose my family. I choose my coworkers, I choose the foxes, I choose Wymack, and I choose you. So say no to his offer if you want, but do it because it’s not what you want, not because it’s something you don’t think you deserve.” She paused and left out a small laugh. “okay speech over. I just needed to say that.”

He stared down at the floor. “Hey Dan.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

***

Sharing a room wasn’t that bad. Neil was mostly quiet, though he still got up at the crack of dawn to go running. But, he conceded, he had already known he did that before, so he couldn’t really blame
anyone for that lapse in judgement except himself.

Neil had a lot of strange habits, though.

Neil never fully changed out in the same room. Ever. But Andrew wasn’t really thrilled to change around other people either, so he conceded that oddity.

Neil also had trouble sleeping through the night. As soon as he decided to sleep he was out like a light, but he was a light sleeper. Several times a night he would jerk awake at slight sounds, ones that only Andrew was used to waking up to. He barely made a sound as he woke up, nothing more than a twitch and a shake. Even still, every time he jolted awake, it sent the upper bunk shaking and creaking, like that one squeaky desk that always managed to appear in every classroom.

It was so much like himself that it scared him. He wanted to ask, a small part of him, if it was the same, if Neil had been through the same things. But he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t.

It was six in the morning and Neil had come back from his run. There was no point in pretending to be asleep; they both knew they were awake by this time.

He looked at Neil as he pulled out a faded grey t-shirt and pulled it on over his running shirt. He was doing that thing where he was taking off his other shirt underneath the new one. Weird. He didn’t even seem to care that Andrew was still looking at him.

“Do you want me to avert my eyes?”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I don’t care.

“I just thought I should ask, you know, defending your virtue.”

“I don’t really give a shit.”

“Scars?” he tossed out casually.

Neil froze, one hand half sticking out of his shirt. “Something like that,” he finally said. He resumed pulling his arm through and pulled off the shirt underneath. “Scars invite questions. Questions I don’t want to answer.

“You don’t want to lie? And here I was thinking that was your specialty.”

Neil huffed. “I don’t think ‘I fell down the stairs’ would really cut it”

“It probably would. Adults can be stupid. Sometimes they don’t believe you even if you tell them the truth.”

“Can’t trust anyone except yourself.” He shrugged. Andrew got to his feet and pulled open the window of their room and lit a cigarette for the both of them.

“Sweet sentiment.”

“Thanks, I got it from my mother.”

“Charming woman.”

“She was who she was.” He blew into his cigarette, coaxing the dying embers back to life. “She was horrible and I hated her so much. Still do.”
He drummed his fingers on the windowsill. “I’m sensing a but.”

“I still miss her.” and maybe he hadn’t meant to say it, but the words were out there, floating between them. “After we left, she was all I had and then she was dead and then I had nothing. I am nothing.”

“There aren’t many people who are anything. The only people who are somebodies are people who live past their deaths. Legends. myths. Lies. They become something. Everything.”

“Sucks when everything isn’t even real. But lies are fabrications. Fabrications are creations. Lies are true if you make them true, you know? When my mom and I left we burned the bridge to my past and then made a trail of lies to follow. You don’t want to know how deep it goes. But for years they were all I had. Now I’m an actual person but I don’t know what to do.”

“Newsflash, Neil. Nobody knows what the fuck they’re doing.”

“Even you?”

“I’m just making it through today.”

He waited for Neil to say something about how it was stupid, about how everybody did that, how no one could help but do that, natural progression of time and all that shit. But he saw Neil’s eyes and knew he knew what he meant.

Neil tapped the butt of his cigarette against the windowsill. “Why do you live here?”

He raised his eyebrow.

Neil elaborated. “Surely Nicky’s parents would have taken you in after Tilda’s death.”

“I hate Nicky’s parents.”

“You trusted them with Aaron.”

“They’re a means to an end. Luther and Maria forced him into rehab. I couldn’t get him to stop. If I had my own place maybe I could have dried him out but I didn’t. But I knew Luther and Maria. They care too much about their own damn reputation to let their drug addict nephew ruin it all.”

“You hate them.”

“I can’t stand them.”

“You trusted them.”

“What can I say? A momentary lapse in judgement.” He stubbed his cigarette out on the sill. “I gave him a secret. It didn’t really go well.”

“You give me secrets. I’m a liar.”

“That’s true.”

Neil pieced it together. “Oh.”

Andrew’s eyes flicked over to him.

“The m word. The one you hate. He thought it was that. Your secret.”
Andrew’s eyes bored into him. “90%”

“What?”

“I hate you.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I want to kill you 90% of the time.”

“I don’t know if that’s an increase or a decease.” he shrugged. “I can handle that.”

“We share a room. I could kill you in your sleep.”

“It’ll be fine. If you do kill me, you’ll make it quick. You’re not a sadist.”

“I’m not a masochist either. Drawing it out would just give you more time to talk.”

“But how will I impart my last wishes, Andrew?” He placed hand over his heart. “I’ll leave you my duffle.”

“Neil, if you give me that fucking bag I’ll burn it.”

“If you do, could you mingle its remains with my ashes?”

“Fucking junkie.”

Neil laughed.

***

Nicky walked off the plane glowing and happy. There was a stark contrast between what he was like before and how he was now. It wasn't anything really specific about him. He just seemed- happier. It was a nice look on him.

“Graduating soon” he sang as he walked through the door to Wymack’s apartment. He looked relieved and refreshed.

Kevin leveled him with a look. “Did you get my emails?” he asked seriously.

Nicky rolled his eyes. “Yes Kevin I go your fifteen thousand emails.”

Kevin muttered under his breath.

Nicky was… different. It wasn’t really noticeable unless you really knew him, but there was a change. He was… happier. Neil remembered how he was before he left for Germany. He was quieter then. And seemed more down. Now he was upbeat. He had only been at Wymack’s a few minutes and already his cheery and enthusiastic demeanor was providing a stark contrast to Andrew and Aaron’s dower one.

He had out his phone the moment he entered the apartment ans he was using the table as a place to regal them all with his adventures in Germany. He was constantly holding up his phone to the others
showing them pictures of his travel family and the landscape of Germany.

Allison, nodded along with him, being the only one of them that had admitted to having visited Germany before.

Seeing some of the sites in Germany, the signs and the shops, filled Neil with a nostalgia he hadn’t thought himself capable of. He ached for his mother so bad when he saw the pictures of the picturesque storefronts.

“Germany really is beautiful. Do you think you’ll go back?” Allison asked.

Nicky paused a moment, frozen. A series of emotions flashed over his face before it finally settled in resolve. He tucked his phone back down.

“Oh yeah. I think I will. I’m planning to move back to live with Erik.”

“Erik-travel-family, Erik?”

“Yeah and Erik-my-boyfriend Erik.” He was tense as he said it but he remained unflinching.

“That’s fantastic, Nicky.”

He gave a shaky smile. “Just, uh, don’t tell my parents. They weren’t too happy the first time I came out.”

“Well this shouldn’t be a surprise.”

“Well actually it might be, to them. They sent me to a conversion camp before high school. I came back newly converted. Erik helped me work through some things and now we’re together.”

Allison flung her arms around him.

“Congratulations Nicky. Be happy.” He laughed.

“I am, I am. He’s so great. He makes me so happy.”

Andrew was watching Nicky as he sat there, an unreadable expression on his face.

Neil didn’t know what it was supposed to mean.

***

A high school dance didn’t really look like the sort of place where someone would go to face down with a demon from their past.

It just didn’t really fit the mood. the moment they all walked through the front doors, Neil was thrown off by how much he was not expecting what he saw.

There were party streamers taped along the walls and on folded-up bleachers, and there was a disco ball handing from the ceiling. That and the loud pop music made Neil wonder how Riko planned to make an imposing entrance.
As far as he could see, Kevin’s abusive relative was nowhere to be seen. With the crisis momentarily averted, the foxes spread out across the gymnasium. They all looked nice, the girls especially so. Renee was wearing a blue dress and while Allison looked stunning in silver. Dan, naturally, looked stunning, even as she leaned against the punch table. Neil passed by Matt who was staring off forlornly in Dan’s direct.

“Are you going to ask her to dance?”

Matt startled. “Shit man you come out of nowhere.”

“Well are you?”

“I don’t know man.”

“What’s the worst she can do?”

“Uh, say no.”

“Then ask if you can talk to her.”

“When did you become the expert of romance?”

“Allison.”

He snorted. “Figures. Wish me luck.”

And he strode across the dancefloor.

Neil turned his attention back to Kevin.

There wasn’t much of an indication when Riko arrived, just a simple text that flashed across Kevin’s phone. The blood drained from his face and he turned to look at the door.

Andrew and Nicky watched as he left and Allison and Seth followed behind them, as well.

Neil turned to watch the rest of the foxes dancing on the floor. Dan and Matt doing the Cha Cha slide. Renee was shooting them both finger guns when they didn’t think the other was looking. He would have smiled if weren’t for the crushing feeling of impending doom that weighed down on all of them.

He left the gym and went outside. Across the misty field, he could see two lone figures standing off in the distance. They walked out to them into the night. Thye made their way out past the track and onto the makeshift soccer field. The grass was mostly gone by this time of the year, dried up by the summer sun and kicked away by tennis shoes. The sprinklers had already gone off and there were puddles of mud where the uneven terrain divoted and stooped.

The boy Neil could only assume was Jean played the role of Riko’s silent companion, standing beside the smaller boy wordlessly. He barely met Kevin’s insistent stare that alternated between the taller boy and the shorter.

Riko stepped forward and glanced an appraising look in Kevin’s direction.

“Kevin,” he said as he sized him up. “You haven’t changed.”

Kevin said nothing. Riko continued. “I heard you’ve resorted to posting music on the internet in order to get people to listen to you. A bit pathetic don’t you think?”
Neil had only heard 29 words from this fool and he decided that he had heard enough.

“More pathetic that people having people only see you because your father pays for you to perform. Oh wait,” he snapped his fingers. “It's not your father it's you uncle, isn’t it. Have you ever even met you father or even your brother? Or did they realize how pathetic you were without even having to meet you. I don't blame them for giving you wide berth, you absolutely reek of desperation and mediocrity.”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” Riko seethed through gritted teeth.

“Maybe I don't, but eliminating the competition because you can never do better seems a bit pathetic to me. But then again what do I know? The only people who listen to my music are people who actually want to listen to it.”

You poece of shit

“Dude just get out of our face and fuck off,” Seth said.

Riko turned on his heel and narrowed his eyes.

“What did you just say to me? Do you know who I am?”

“Just because you have talent doesn’t mean you better than anybody else. Oh, and I said fuck you.” He repeated flipping him off with both of his hands.

“Seth,” Allison murmured.

Riko narrowed his eyes. “You’ll all regret you words.” He turned to Kevin. “Be seeing you soon, brother.”

And then he vanished into the mist.

***

They were quiet as they headed back to Wymack’s after the dance. No one really felt like saying much.

“This is bullshit.” Seth finally said as they all sat around Wymack’s dining table. The table was covered in a variety of papier-mâché making products and he didn’t know what Wymack, Abby, and Bee had been up to in their absence.

“We don’t want to be out there when Riko’s this mad,” Kevin insisted.

“Again, bullshit. I’m going to go pick up my car. It should be done in the shop by now anyway. im not going to be scared off by some shrimp.”

“You aren’t drunk, are you?” Allison asked warily.

“Smell my breath, babe. Not even close.”

She pursed her lips. “Okay, fine I'll drive you to the shop.”


“Bye” he waved. “Not you.” he said as Nicky made his way over to him, faux tears in his eyes, arms
dramatically outspread.

“Oh Seth, you wound me. Have fun wherever you fuck off too.” He said waving as he walked away.

Wymack rubbed his face. “Is it too much to ask that you all leave on a good note.”

Seth scoffed. “I know I’m impressive, but I’m not God. I can’t make miracles come true.”

Wymack rolled his eyes. “Bring your car by tomorrow so we can all get a look at it.” Seth nodded and gave him a mocking full handed salute before walking out the door, Allison following behind him.

***

Nicky groaned from where he sat in the driver’s seat. “You know what, he really pisses me off. He’s such a dick.”

“Nicky shut up.”

“Shut your own face Aaron.”

“I will when you will.”

Nicky was about to say something back when his phone rang. “Oh, for fucks sake,” he muttered as he flipped the phone up to his ear. “Hello. I’m driving.”

“You’re breaking the law.”


The silence in the car was palpable.

Nicky looked down from his phone. “That was Wymack. Seth’s dead.”

“What?

“Seth is dead.”

Aaron looked like he was going to throw up. “What? How? Did he-”

“No,” Nicky shook his head. “I mean, I don’t think so,” he clarified. It was that sharp turn, the one over the hills. Drove right off the edge. Everything’s wrecked. They almost couldn’t pull him from the car.


Nicky leaned back against the headrest eyes fixed in the roof of the car. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.” Nicky looked over at him, “Oh shit. You probably need some time. You lived with him.”

He walked out of the car dazed, Aaron following closely behind him, leaving Andrew and Neil alone in the car.

“You okay?”
Neil shrugged. It was shocking but he didn’t feel upset. Death had rarely been upsetting any more. He almost forgot he had been living with Seth for almost a year, Andrew had known him even longer.

“You?”

Andrew shrugged and lit a cigarette.

“Nicky’s parents will kill you if you smoke in their car.”

Andrew exhaled. “Let them.” He blew out another breath of smoke before reluctantly getting out of the car.

He pulled himself up on the hood and laid back, back resting against the windshield. Neil climbed out the other side and climbed up beside him. Andrew didn’t look at him before handing him his half-smoked cigarette. Neil accepted it, the smoke grounding and disheartening at the same time. The smoke only served to remind him of his mother’s death.

He brought he cigarette up to his lips and inhaled, the sharp acidic smoke choking out his lungs, stopping him from breathing, just for a second.

Andrew eyed him as he did so but said nothing. The smoke helped to quell the growing sense of panic he was feeling, slowing his breath.

It was the weekend so the Hemmick’s wouldn’t need their car for a while. Neil laid his head back against the cool glass and closed his eyes.

He was suddenly very tired and he didn’t want to think about the death anymore, about how someone who had a presence in his life wasn’t there anymore.

It was weird. Seth had left and he was never coming back. Neil was used to being the one in the relationship who never came back, and it shook him more than it should have to be standing on this end.

He hadn’t been close to Seth, not many people had been. But to die like that, in a car, rubbed him the wrong way. It was too raw and he didn’t want to think about it. The only one who had left him had been his mother, but he had been there. He had watched her go. He got to say goodbye as she slowly slipped away.

But Seth was just… gone. He just wasn’t there anymore. There was a gap in their group and he felt horrible because he didn’t miss him, he didn’t know if he could ever miss anyone. But he could feel his absence.

He had always been the one to leave. Why hadn’t he left? Why was he still here?

And there were no words he could say in that moment, and he thanked God he didn’t have to try and console Allison. He had no words, not one, not one single one.

But Andrew never asked for one.
So they sat there in silence.

***

R.I.P. to my youth
And you can call this the funeral
I’m just telling the truth, yeah
And you can play this at my funeral
Tell my sister don’t cry and don’t be sad
I’m in paradise with Dad
Close my eyes and then cross my arms
Put me in the dirt, let me dream with the stars
Throw me in a box with the oxygen off
You gave me the key and then you locked every lock
When I can’t breathe, I won’t ask you to stop
When I can’t breathe, don’t call for a cop
I was naïve and hopeful and lost
Now I’m aware and trapped in my thoughts

***

Don’t do it alone

Chapter End Notes

End of Year 1
Chapter Notes

Hey, everybody. Here’s chapter five, as you can probably tell the previous chapters have not been edited, because I am shit at time management, but I am working on it, so hopefully that will be done eventually.

Anyway, so this chapter is going to be a pretty heavy stuff in this chapter. I’ve done my best to treat these issues with the respect they deserve, though if you feel that something has not been handled well or whatever, let me know.

Warnings for this chapter: vague, very vague references to past rape/non-con, discussions of depression, suicide, and suicidal ideation, discussions of eating disorder and relapse, and grief.

If you must fight

***

Don’t give in to that feeling

Don’t give in darkness and faith, yeah

You should be safe, yeah, with someone else

Tell your secrets to the night

You do yours and I do mine

So we won’t have to keep them all inside

***

The problem with a small town was that when something happened, everybody knew about it.

The morning after Seth’s death, pictures of his wrecked automobile, that shitty, shitty car that Neil had never ridden in, were plastered on the cover of every newspaper in town. It felt almost crass the way they turned Seth’s death into some sick source of entertainment. When he went back to school, even though no one outright mentioned it, it was all they talked about.

Very few details of the actual accident were actually released, but that didn’t stop the speculation that buzzed in the background like white noise, didn’t stop them from drawing their own conclusions.

He had been drinking. He had been smoking. He was high out of his mind doing drugs. What the fuck does it matter? He’s dead.

But through the gossip and rumors, Neil could detect the quiver of their voices when they mentioned Seth’s absence. They were fine with talking about what he probably had been doing, but they stuttered silent when it came to the fact that Seth wouldn’t be doing anything anymore.
They were shaken, visibly. Sometimes Neil forgot that the people around him weren’t used to death. Everything around him was different, but Neil felt absolutely the same. It might have been easier to get back to normal if all the foxes had been there, but they weren’t.

The foxes were split apart, none of them really speaking much. But what could they say? As much as the foxes fought with each other, all of them, except for Andrew and himself, it seemed, took it hard. Even Nicky was torn up about it. But slowly they were starting to get better. Sometimes he even saw them smiling.

He didn’t see Allison smiling, though. He hadn’t seen Allison in days.

And perhaps that was the hardest part of all of this. More than anything, he missed Allison. He missed her so much. He hadn’t realized how close they had become until she suddenly wasn’t there anymore. There was no one to talk about the shitty romances novels with, no one to try and teach him about reality TV. He knew the others could, but it just wouldn’t be the same.

He stayed away from Wymack’s for those first few days, the grief there much too raw for him, though Marbury wasn’t much better. The whole of Marbury was somber and quite, but the emotional anguish was significantly less. The hardest part of that was seeing Leroy around, they younger boy’s eyes red-rimmed with grief.

There was a somber air surrounding the first days after Andrew moved in, those first days, the weighty absence of Seth too apparent at times. But they were adjusting. Andrew had the bottom bunk filled with his things and several blankets even though it was nearing the summer.

Wymack came by one afternoon to help Madera. In what felt like no time at all, Seth’s things were packed away and labeled.

They mailed his stuff to his mother.

The box came back, unopened.

***

The only reason Andrew knew where Allison was because Renee had told him. It’s not like he wouldn’t have been able to find out for himself, but Renee always seemed to know what she needed to tell him.

Renee had Allison staying with her.

“She’s taking Seth’s death hard,” Renee had told him, right after Seth had been pulled out of the wreckage. “But she’ll be okay. She’s strong.”

It was all she needed to say. He knew she would take care of her. It was what she did.

So he didn’t really know why he went to Renee’s house Thursday morning before school.

Stephanie opened the door, and for a woman who always looked like she could crush the world in the palm of her hand, she looked, for lack of a better word, worried.

“They’re in the kitchen.”

He nodded and went to the familiar kitchen.

It was mostly silent, aside from the soft words that could only come from Renee.
“You need to eat Allison.”

“I know, I know.” Allison replied.

She sounded like she was lying.

He stepped further into the room and took in what he saw. Allison was partially ready, though not by much. She was wearing sweats and her eyes were red with dark crescent moons underneath. She looked so sick, and it had only been a week.

Renee turned and caught sight of him, offering him a tired and somewhat forced smile. “Hey Andrew. We’re just eating breakfast. Would you like to join us?”

“Sure.” he said and he dropped his bag to the floor.

She nodded to the chair across from Allison. “You can sit with Allison for a while.”

So he pulled out the seat and sat across from her. She looked unbelievably small. She had her legs curled up on the chair her arms wrapped around them. She was glaring at the food on her plate mercilessly. She hugged her knees closer.

“Here you go Andrew.” Renee handed Andrew a few pancakes with a happy face on it in fruit.

His three pancakes looked to be a lot more than Allison’s measly half eaten, half picked at pancake. He started eating.

“I’ll leave you two alone.” She left the room, leaving the two of them to sit in silence.

Unsurprisingly, Allison was the first one to break it.

“I don’t want you to say anything. I know you hated him.”

“I wasn’t going to give any condolences.”

She gave a small, humorless sneer. “I didn’t really expect you to.”

She looked over at him. He was already on his second pancake. “You going to tell me to eat my food?”

“No.” She said nothing to that. He started his third.

“I made a bet.”

“You did?” She looked vaguely amused.

“Whether you’ll make it back to school.”

She scoffed. He continued.

“Some people think you’re going to be too sad to come back. That you’re going to spend the last month of school at home like some southern widow in mourning.”

“And what about you? Where’d you place your bet?”

“I said you would be back.”

“You did.” She confirmed. She sounded skeptical.
“I know you will. If only to spite those people who looked down on you. And to throw it in your parents face.”

A dark smile ghosted her lips. She prodded at her pancake with her fork. “You’re an asshole Minyard.”

“So are you Reynolds.”

“And don’t you forget it,” he replied solemnly. He grabbed his plate and his backpack and left the table.

***

Sunday afternoon the boxes were gone from the hallway. It was weird to think that the things that had once been Seth’s prized possessions were now probably buried in some dumpster out back. But Neil couldn’t think about that, at least not right now. Thinking about that that would drag him down a rabbit hole too deep for him to dig himself out of. He had enough on his plate without that. Like the emancipation thing.

“I’ll do it with you. He had told Andrew. He didn’t know what finally drove him to agreeing with it, but he didn’t want to spend what could possibly be the rest of his life in a group home.

“What?”

“The emancipation thing.”

“The process takes about six months.”

“Really?”

“According to the internet,” Andrew had shrugged. “If we start it around now, we can have it done by the end of January. Then we’ll both be able to leave.”

“You’re waiting that long?”

He shrugged. “It’s cheaper to get an apartment with a roommate than by yourself.”

Neil leaned back. “Okay. That’s true.”

And that had been that.

Andrew hadn’t told him no, hadn’t even questioned it. Not then, not even when they went to Madera and told her what they wanted.

Madera had merely looked at them like they were some special mix of crazy and stupid. She even lowered her reading glasses for emphasis, a move that Neil felt was both cliché and appropriate given the circumstances.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do,” she had asked them, folding her fingers together in a manner that made her seem much older than them. “I know that you both already have a troubled past. The foster program may be your last chance at a fresh start.”

Andrew mockingly folded his fingers so that he was mirror image of her. “People rarely adopt teenagers and I’d rather get a clean start this way than any other.”

Madera scoffed. “You act like you haven’t already had dozens of chances. Like you didn’t screw
Andrew stiffened and Neil felt angry. “If behavior is such an issue,” he bit out, “I’d think you’d think you’d be jumping at the chance to get rid of us.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what? Fine. Whatever.” She reached underneath her desk and started pulling out binders of information and stacking them on the desk. “You’ve flung from home to home and now you’re finally flinging yourself out. I guess I should just be surprised I didn’t see this coming.”

The words that she had said had been nasty, but they did nothing to deter them. They had the books spilled out over their shared room.

“They weren’t really homes, Andrew had told him one night on the roof. “They were just buildings and an adult.”

“I thought they were supposed to be a guardian. Or a parent.”

“They weren’t guardians and they sure as fuck weren’t parents.” He stared at Neil’s face. “Guardians protect people,” he elaborated.

“And I supposed a home is more than four walls and a roof.”

“Theoretically.”

“And what is home, Merriam-Webster.”

“Don’t know yet.” he leaned back, feet still dangling over the edge, back leaning further over the roof.

Neil let the silence envelop them, and flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette.

“I suppose home is a place that is your own. A place you feel you belong.”

“Have you found one yet?”

Neil shook his head. “Not yet. But I’d like to think I’ll know if I find it.”

And Andrew had nodded and refocused his attention on the sparse buildings that dotted the horizon.

***

Marbury was many things, but a sanctuary was not one of them. Though many of the kids were very possessive about their space, there was nothing really stopping one of them form barging into another kid’s room on a whim. It had never really happened to Neil before, the perks of living with a senior and Andrew. But he never expected to hear someone knocking, of all things, on the door. He guessed he just wasn’t used to polite people.

He walked over to the door and opened it. His heart stuttered when he saw the person on the other side of the threshold. Allison was standing there, outside the door.

She looked the same as she always did, pin-straight air, designer clothes. There were, however, two new additions to her wardrobe: a baseball cap and the flannel that Neil had seen Seth wear dozens of times before he had died.

Fuck, he had missed her.
She pulled the plaid around her body like it was a protective blanket. Her eyes were bloodshot but her makeup was in place.

She caught him looking. “Waterproof makeup. One of the best investments I’ve ever made.” She half-smiled. She gestured to the room. “Can I come in?”

He nodded and stepped aside to let her in.

“I came here because I needed to see you.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a multicolored wad of fabric.

“Here,” she said. “I want you to have this. It was Seth’s tie.”

He had seen snatches of it around their shared room, but he had never looked at it up close.

It was a dark blue tie covered in little tiny orange foxes.

“How’d you get this?”

“They gave me his things,” she gestured vaguely, indicating the powers that be, aka Madera. “I came and picked them up when I heard that they got delivered back here. I was going through everything and I found this.” She stared down at it and ran her fingers across the satiny fabric.

“It was a gag gift,” she explained. “When we first formed the foxes. I didn’t know he kept it.” She looked a million miles away. “The foxes meant a lot to him.”

And Neil knew that was true. Despite what a dick he had been, he never gave up or stopped making music.

And suddenly he felt completely unworthy of this gift. A gift that should have been for someone who was mourning Seth, not someone who didn’t even miss him. He tried to hand it back.

“I can’t accept this.”

“It’s not for you Neil, it for me. If you don’t take it I’m just going to give it away. Besides, you cannot tell me you don’t need a tie. You have nothing when it comes to formal wear,” she chuckled a little, throat still hoarse from the days she had been gone. “And you’re the only person I can think of that would appreciate it.”

He swallowed and nodded. “Okay.” He rerolled the silky material and set it on his bed.

“Are you—” he didn’t really know what to say. He always figured he’d be shit at consoling people, but now that that he was actively crashing and burning, there was a part of him that wished it had been him in that car instead of Seth, if only to avoid this conversation.


“Not with your parents?”

She scoffed. “No. We’re taking a break right now. We don’t really see eye to eye.

“My parents and I don’t really get along. At all. Neil. Really. They hated Seth, they just pain hated him and they would have been furious if they saw me crying over him. That coupled with the fact that I was relapsing- I just had to get out.”

“Relapsing?”
Her breath shuttered.

“And they think that- that- fuck.” She tilted her head back, blinking rapidly. “Shit, I need to stop crying over them. This is ridiculous. Honestly.” She touched up the corner of her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. “They thought I was- look I had, have? An eating disorder. And things just were kind of shit. With Seth’s death and all and it was getting to easy to slip back on all the progress ive made. And I don’t want to do it again, really, I mean, I don’t. Mostly.

“There’s this part of me that wants to give into it and I knew that if I stayed with my parents, in that place it’d be too easy to fall back completely. And I didn’t want to do that. Not after I fought like shit to get where I am now.

“But what was one of the worst things about all of it was that they thought I was doing it just to get their attention and it wasn’t about them at all really.”

“Then why?” he asked.

“I thought I was doing it for myself, at the time. I thought I was in control, Neil. My parents? They controlled everything I did. What I said, what I ate, what school I went to, who my friends were, what my hobbies were, everything. And I don’t think I wanted to make them happy but I didn’t want to mess up. I wanted to and I needed to be perfect. So I became perfect.

“At the time I thought I had it handled and then the next thing I knew I was down so much weight and I couldn’t gain it back and I lost it so fast. And I couldn’t control it. I couldn’t. I guess that’s the thing though, isn’t it?

“And you know what’s funny? I think my parent liked me better then. They thought I was absolutely perfect. Their little perfect dress-up doll. My mom and I bonded over makeup, but now I think we just bonded over our love of covering up things we don’t want other people to see. Fuck, you should have seen how hard they worked to cover it up. Told everyone that I was in Europe instead of in the mental ward of the hospital.” She shook her head. “Shit. I don’t even know why I’m talking about this. I don’t know why I’m getting all worked up about this. It feels like it was forever ago.” She took a deep breath and then offered him a simple smile

“I’m doing better. It’s not gone. I don’t think it’ll truly be gone for a while, if ever. I thought was doing better and that I wouldn’t have to deal with it anymore. But then Seth died and it was like everything was out of control again. I felt like I was fucking thirteen again.” She bit out.

“But I’m done being thirteen. That was so two years ago,” she laughed. “And my eating disorder can eat shit.” She looked at him. “Sorry for getting all, you know,” she waved her hand. She laughed. “I’m supposed to be here to give you a tie. And fashion advice. And ive given you the tie, so do you have any need for fashion advice?”

“Is it really that good?”

“What?”

“Makeup. Can it conceal anything?”

“If you find the right stuff, yeah. Contour, cover up tattoos, look like an entirely different person. The possibilities are endless”

“It can cover up scars?”

She looked at him solemnly. “Yeah, bud, it can. If you ever want to learn how, I can show you.” She
let the offer hang there and there were questions he wanted to ask, but he knew he wouldn’t. That was the way people with secrets worked, they shared some if they believed you wouldn’t ask about the others. They all had their secrets. He wasn’t going to take hers.

So he let it go.

***

Allison had come back to school on Monday and heads turned as she walked through the doors. She walked like a model or an actress in a movie, the younger students and even some of the upperclassmen aawestruck by her presence. She was embraced by Renee and Dan when she got to her locker. But as she hugged them she locked eyes with him and a wave of acknowledgment passed between them. Andrew closed his locker and walked away.

But after Allison came back the school could begin to function normally again. The last few days flew by, finals sucking the will to live from almost every one of them and then it was graduation.

Nicky was full of nervous energy in the moments leading up to the ceremony, a fact that he could even see from the several yards he had placed between himself and Luther and Maria.

But soon they were all herded to the stands and the graduates were led to their lines by the teachers with bullhorns.

There was a sea of graduates down in the field below them, each of them indistinguishable from the last in their blue plastic garbage bags. The sun was already starting to set, in that slow way it did in the summer. Even in the dusk it was still sweltering. There weren’t many people who paraded out onto the field, even fewer now that Seth had died. Andrew never cared to know any of the people who were there aside from Nicky, for obvious reasons, and Grif, Roland’s friend who did odd jobs as well as sold fake IDs and Andrew his cigarettes.

There were several boring speeches about college and the future and the bonds that they had that would last for years to come. The usual shit. Them they read through the graduates names as fast as they could and dismissed them with the traditional cap toss that only half the kids did.

By the time he and the other foxes had made it down the stands, Nicky was already flanked by his parents demanding photos of him.

Nicky smiled at the camera holding his diploma, parents sandwiched on either side of him. They looked like a pair of picture-perfect bookends, Luther in his suit and Maria in her white cotton skirt suit with pearls. When Luther and Maria saw the foxes approach the moved themselves to the outskirts of the group, watching them uncomfortably. Their discomfort increased tenfold when they saw how close Nicky and Abby, Bee, and Wymack were.

They tried to make attempts at communication, but their attempts were awkward at best. Nicky evaded their questions about the future, answering vaguely. Like he didn’t already have a job lined up for Erik’s family’s company in Germany.

Andrew didn’t like liars, but he understood secrets. And he knew that Luther and Maria didn’t deserve them.

***

And suddenly it was summer again. The days stretched out before Neil, long and full of possibilities. Most of the time he had spent looking for a job to fill his hours, the anticipated date of his and Andrew’s emancipation growing closer with every passing day. But even that wasn’t enough to fill
the hours of his day. Cross country was out of season and Marbury was boring as fuck without Andrew there. He spent time at Wymack’s studying tattooing and more often than not he was sent to Eden’s to pick up Andrew from his shift so Kevin could practice, or so they could finally begin the fox dinner.

He had only been to Eden’s twilight a handful of times, but each time had been weird. He supposed that was just the only appropriate fate for a place where he had dressed like a kinky clubber, gotten drugged out of his mind for “security”, and then winded up several towns away from where he lived.

So he usually tried to avoid it.

Still, he was a familiar face to several of the workers there, nonetheless. He knew when Andrew was off shift, but, if he couldn’t find him, he’d ask one of the workers where to find him. One time and they told him Andrew was with Roland in the back organizing the stock. The door was closed so he knocked and waited outside it. There was the sound of something toppling to the floor and a muffled shit before the door swung open to reveal Roland. He leaned against the doorway and surveyed Neil standing there. There was movement beside him as Andrew slid past him to get out of the room, pausing when he saw Neil standing there.

“Wymack’s?”

“Yep.”

Andrew nodded and grabbed his bag and gave Roland a nod.

The silence after that had been a bit awkward.

Another time he had walked in to find every single employee trying to chase down a duck that had somehow been smuggled into the club.

Like he said, a weird place.

But now he wasn’t going in that direction, instead opting to head to Boyd’s Gym.

It was fairly busy so he made his way to one of the private back training rooms. Sometimes he could find one of the foxes there.

This time was no different.

He found Dan in the gym in the back. It wasn’t anything new. Though it was strange to find her in a closed off studio with no one else. She had a computer plugged into the wall and she was watching a video. She made her way over to the pole in the center and hauled herself up it and made slowly directed her body through a particular set of motions. She grunted and got back down. And went back over to replay the video.

The dexterity that she had shown was amazing to see and, with every additional run through, the process became smoother, managing to come across as effortless. She stopped to get a drink of water and startled when she spotted Neil off to the side.

“How long have you been standing there?”

He shrugged.

She drank her water but looked unsure what to say.
“How long have you been learning?”

She capped her water. “Uh I’ve been picking it up as I go. But for the past few months now.”

“Okay.”

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“So what?”

“What?”

“Who cares what I’m thinking.”

“Exactly,” she flung her hands up in the air. “Wait, I meant-”

“Yeah I know.

She ran her fingers through her sweaty hair.

“Look I don’t know if you’re going to judge me, but I’m not ashamed of what I do to make money. This pays well. I know you seem to not know about some of the modern things but-”

“You look like you’re doing really well.” He looked at her. “I know about all that type thing. I may not know about pop culture, but I know about the world.”

“It’s not a pretty job.”

He knew it wasn’t. But there was a part of him that wanted to ask her about it.

He had no qualms about stripping for money. The only thing that had ever held him back was his scars. He almost gave up the idea because of them. Scars like the ones he had begged questions, painted him as a victim, something he couldn’t afford in that line of work. However, Allison had provided him with hope. He could cover them up, the marks that his father had given him, if only temporarily. He could do it. He didn’t care about the lying about deceit or whatever it was that that usually prevented teenagers from posing as adults and stripping to their underwear for money.

But he was working on getting emancipated. And it was tied up in the fucking law. The law, which, in his humble and very accurate opinion, wasn’t founded in reality. They wanted him to make money, they wanted him to have a job, but they weren’t willing to let him break the law to do it. Ridiculous. And maybe it was because he was born into two crime families, but he thought that was awfully restrictive.

But he couldn’t jeopardize this. He couldn’t lose what he was working for with Andrew, not when the many facets of the law were bearing down on him from every angle.

He needed a nice, safe job that would keep him away from the law that was also open to fifteen year olds.

But there was no way he could say this to her. No way to convey that he was willing to do whatever it took to live another day. All he could offer her was understanding.

“I know.”
Despite the fact that school was out, Andrew found that there was rarely a day that passed by where he didn’t learn something. Every day seemed to be filled with new things he hadn’t noticed before. And one of the things he was learning very quickly was that Neil had many quirks.

It wasn’t completely unexpected; everybody did. It was just that Neil’s had somehow come to the forefront of his attention. And it wasn’t like he had just one or two. No, there were quite a few of them.

Like the fact that Neil liked to wake up at five in the morning to run every freaking morning.

Or the fact that he loved to eat his breakfast, no matter what it was, with a piece of fruit.

Or that Neil slept as silent as a mouse, except for the moments he jolted awake, rattling the screechy frame of the top bunk.

Or the fact that Neil always did his work in the room.

He wasn’t sure why Neil wasn’t downstairs working in the kitchen like everyone else, be he wasn’t. Instead he would climb up onto his bunk and read up on emancipation. And then every few minutes he would lean upside-down to ask Andrew a question. Or tell him something. Or stop his reading to tell Andrew some important fact about whatever.

About the fifteenth time that this happened he sighed and rolled his eyes as Neil leaned upside-down over his bed to ask something about the project.

“Just come down here it will be easier.”

Neil’s eyes widened, as if that was the last think he expected Andrew to say. Though, to be fair, it was the last thing Andrew thought he would have said, either.

Neil got off his bed and made to sit on the floor mumbling how he didn’t want to because it was hard but did so anyway. Andrew just looked at him and moved over. His whole body was screaming in protest but he did it anyway. Neil looked hesitant and waited for Andrew’s nod of approval before climbing up and sitting next to him, re-opening up his textbook to continue doing his research.

This continued again and again every afternoon, Neil asking permission with a raised brow before climbing onto the bed when Andrew allowed it.

They’d sit there for hours every evening and night, when the sun was too hot to sit out in, and when the cement on the roof was hot enough to burn their skin. They worked that way, strategically turning out the lights when Madera came by for lights-out, using the flashlights they had stored under the bed in the meantime.

They worked and worked until Andrew’s eyes felt heavy and sluggish and the words on the page lost all meaning and blurred away into nothing.

***

Andrew awoke slowly, blinking languidly. The room was still dim, lit only by the faint light of the curtained sun. Andrew was still sitting, back pressed against the wall, book cradled between his chest and his bent knees. His usually cold toes were warm from where they had slipped under Neil’s ribs where he slept face-down sprawled out on top of his text book, breathing softly.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.
Andrew froze, unsure what to do before pulling his foot back and shoving.

Neil jolted and in a flash his hands were on the opened textbook he had been using as a pillow. He grabbed at it with one hand and picked it up, ready to fling it at him. The look in his eyes was one of panic, but utter determination, ready to act. It as new as it was fleeting, leaving Andrew with a small jolt of shock that tingled down his spine.

They stared at each other a moment: Neil heaving, book poised to throw, Andrew calm, with eyes the slightest bit surprised. Neil looked at him and slumped back down, book abandoned at his side as he buried his face in the blanket he had been on. He groaned into it before lifting his head back up.

He pulled himself up on his elbows and rubbed his hair, already messy with sleep. He looked back at Andrew and Andrew was almost startled at how blue the younger’s eyes were. He knew his eyes weren’t really brown, but Neil usually refused to take out his contacts until he went to bed or if it was getting late. Usually it was already so dim that Andrew couldn’t really gage how intense his eyes were.

But now at dawn he could see it, the piercing blue, and the ruffled hair. Now that he didn’t look like he was about to panic he looked really… good.

This revelation wasn’t new. Neil had a nice face. Andrew wasn’t stupid. He knew that someone could have a nice face without being attracted to them. He had eyes after all. Hell, he knew Renee was pretty, but that didn’t mean he was attracted to her or that he wanted to kiss her (and no, he didn’t not want to think about that. that was just- bizarre). Neil being pretty was just like that.

(It wasn’t. that was a lie. He knew, deep in the back of his mind, that he thought Neil was attractive, but that was a thought for another time. He figured he could push it out of the way and not dwell on it. After all, if you ignore something, sometimes it goes away.

Sometimes.)

So he’d do his thing. Aka smothering his feelings until they died. After all, things died if they were deprived of what they needed to survive. It was a basic rule of nature. A flower won’t bloom if it is deprived air. Unless it’s one of those ones from the history- shit he needed to stop watching so many documentaries at Wymack’s. And wasn’t love supposed to be compared with flowers and shit? Hell if he was supposed to know.

(The closest thing he had ever seen of love was lust, which in his experience had been more like a weed than a flower. though he supposed a weed could be killed if smothered, too.)

So here he was sitting in a dawn-dim room with lingering feelings in desperate need of squashing. No. Who even knew if they were feelings? Maybe they weren’t feelings. Maybe he was having a stroke. Or heartburn. There was no real evidence that it was feelings shit anyway.

Feelings were stupid, and frankly, if he’s going to be honest with himself, pretty fucking useless. Emotional detachment was doing him just fine at the moment, thank you very much. So feelings could go suck it.

Neil rubbed his face and blinked groggily.

He looked around where he was and then looked back at Andrew.

“Sorry.” He moved to make it off the bed, but Andrew just rolled his eyes. He needed to get away. Now.
“Just let me get past you.” Neil moved and Andrew propelled himself off the bed and grabbed his clothes and left the room.

***

It was one of those rare days when Neil found himself back at Wymack’s again in the afternoon. He had felt so busy wandering the streets trying to find a job, but now he really wanted to be back there. Almost all the foxes were gone with the exception of Nicky. He was sitting at the table, a pile of paper covered in crossed out words and fragmented phrases. He groaned and tossed another sheet aside.

“What’s up, Nicky?”

“Oh, nothing.” He groaned again.

“I’m just- I’m trying to write something Neil.”

“Write what?”

“I have words.” He gestured to his chest. “In here. And I just- I need to say them Neil. I don’t know what to do if I can’t say them.”

“I could help. I’m not super experienced with writing. But I can try.”

Nicky nodded. “Yeah.”

“I like who I am. Now,” Nicky started and he stared off. “I like who I am when I’m with him. When I’m with Erik I’m the person I’ve always wanted to be.” He stared at Neil. “Neil, I was so low before I met up with him. I just couldn’t stay like I was, be that unhappy.” He paused, like there were words he was trying to find, painful things he needed to say but were getting caught in his throat. “Seth and I weren’t that different you know. I mean, he was a huge asshole. But um- we were both. Um. Yeah. We were both struggling with um, life.

“Seth was suicidal, Neil. I don’t know if you knew that. I don’t think anyone ever brought it up. It think we all wanted to pretend like he wasn’t. I mean he took anti-depressants, but he stopped taking them all the time and every time he went through withdrawal or had to start them back up again he’d always get these symptoms that would just amplify his suicidal ideation. There were so many times, Neil. So many times we thought he was dead, only for him to pull through again.

“The only difference between us in that sense is that I never got around to attempting it. But with his death, I can’t forget how it was, how things have changed. And his death is just reminding me of all of this. Maybe this song is some twisted way of remembering him. I don’t know, maybe a part of it is. Lord knows it’s been a while since I’ve felt that low.”

He didn’t know what to say. “I can try.”

Nicky laughed. “Hey, sometimes that’s all you can do.”

***

It kept happening. Andrew didn’t know why, but it did. They studied together, and even just sat together on the bed until one or both of them fell asleep. Some days they would both be sitting up, Neil on the backboard, Andrew against the wall, until they both woke up, feet over lapping, toes touching. They didn’t say anything about it, though. They had a routine, and it didn’t change on
those mornings. They’d wake up and then Neil would go and gather his clothes and Andrew would grab his own, and then they would turn back to back and get changed before heading down for breakfast.

Their night routine, though- not so set in stone.

Every night wasn’t the same, but it was getting to be a pattern, one that Andrew wasn’t sure either he or Neil would be able to do much longer. The wall wasn’t exactly comfortable, and the metal backrest definitely wasn’t doing Neil’s back any favors.

Yet here they were.

Again.

Neil was leaning against the wall this time, Andrew laying on his back, flipping his pencil through his fingers. They had taken to carrying out their question game here instead of on the roof. This felt infinitely more dangerous, though, seeing as there wasn’t a roof he could fling himself off of if things got bad.

“Alright, here’s my question. Do you know how to use those knives?”

Neil met his eyes and a fierce smirk flashed over his face for a moment. He looked away.

“Yes.”

Neil stared out at the wall as he pondered what he would ask on his turn. The only indication that Andrew had that Neil was going to continue was when Neil looked back over at him.

“Why are you doing this?” he gestured between them questioningly. “I thought you couldn’t stand me.”

“There is no this.” He replied, mockingly gesturing between them. Neil flipped him off. “We aren’t anything. We’re nothing.”

Neil nodded absently. “Okay. I can do that.”

“What? Were you worried I’d say we were friends or something?”

Neil broke eye contact, eyes turn to stare blankly at the wall ahead of him. “I don’t know how to do friendship. I’ve always been nothing.” He blinked and chanced a look over in Andrew’s direction. “You know how that feels though, too, don’t you? You’ve been nothing. I can see it in you.”

Andrew merely looked at him. “You know what I’m saying because you know what it’s like.”

And it was words like that that made him hate him even more. He could read Neil and it looked like Neil was beginning to be able to read him, too. He had always been good at masking what he was feeling. Maybe Neil had taken to studying him the same way he had been studying the younger boy. Maybe it was just because Neil always around.

He didn’t know why Neil always came migrating back to him. Neil claimed he didn’t have friends but that obviously wasn’t true. Andrew had seen how the upperclassman had practically adopted him as one of their own and the way Kevin had so easily become fixated on him. He had embedded himself into the foxes so easily, so seamlessly, that it was becoming hard to remember that he hadn’t always been one of them.

He had even enamored the entire freshman student body. They were all convinced Neil was some
mild mannered and gentle tongued teen who also happened to be helplessly attractive and athletic. He was so convincing at what he did, Andrew was certain that Neil could have adopted any persona he wished, even blending into the background, invisible to everyone, if he wanted to.

Andrew knew Neil could have been anyone around him, but he wasn’t. He embraced nothing, let his walls fall. He felt no shame when he told of the terrible truths that would have sent others shuddering, searching for shelter. But people like them weren’t used to shelter. They took refuge where they could. Barely managing to stay dry from the perpetual downpour. He looked at Neil lounging carelessly against the backrest, pencil held casually in his hands. This is where they were now. He knew Neil was used to running and he knew he wasn’t used to staying. But now they were here together and it didn’t feel like he was soaking in the torrential rains. The fire- he didn’t know if it was attraction or anger or something else- kept him dry. It had him almost feeling, not always numb.

He didn’t know if he was the only one who felt this – whatever this was. But he didn’t expect Neil to feel the same way. He knew that it was impossible. Neil was impossible. He always had been. Probably always would be.

But still when he looked at him he felt that feeling and found himself suggesting the impossible without a second thought.

“You can stay down here, with me if you want.” He almost cringed. That was… too much. Neil wouldn’t want to. He didn’t know why he had even asked.

“You sure.” It was a simple reply.

Andrew glared at him as if to say I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t. Neil looked at him and Andrew knew that he had understood.

“Okay.” He made to lay down and gestured to the spot he was going to take. There wasn’t a lot of room but neither of them really took up a lot of space.

Andrew shrugged. “Whatever.”

“I’m surprised,” Neil said, because of course that idiot didn’t know when to shut up.

“Your bed creaks too much. I’m trying to get a full night’s sleep.” Neil smiled like he knew that was a lie but he said nothing about it.

“I don’t sleep well,” he said instead. He added on like it was careless afterthought but they both knew the weight behind such an admission.

“Neither do I. Stay on your side and don’t touch me.”

“Okay.” He laid beside him while Andrew had pressed his back against the wall. Neil’s head was on his pillow and he looked over at Andrew. He was much too close for talking and lying beside someone was far more intimate than he had anticipated.

“Goodnight Andrew.”

Andrew grunted and Neil turned over until he was facing out, his back to Andrew. Instead of hiding his back like Andrew did with the wall, he was using Andrew as an alternative to the wall.

This definitely didn’t feel like nothing, but it was okay for now. He just wouldn’t become attached. He wouldn’t ever again. But now, just for right now he stayed. And he felt warm.
The summer went by slowly, though the other foxes stayed busy. Andrew didn’t usually have time to go to Wymack’s, but he finally did. It was fairly empty, aside for Nicky, Kevin and Neil, who were all crowded around the table.

“No that doesn’t rhyme.”

“Kevin, every fucking song doesn’t need to rhyme.”

“Well a lot of good ones do.”

“Seriously?” Neil asked. “Are we really having this conversation again?” Neil’s eyes caught on Andrew and he got up while Nicky and Kevin continued their argument.

“Hey.”

“What’s going on over there?”

“Writing a song. It’s Nicky’s. Pretty important to him.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, I was meaning to ask you about this.” He tapped the stack of papers on his fingers. “I know you play the piano, and I was wondering if you wanted to play the instrumental part.”

“You want me to make the piano part.”

“It doesn’t have to be a complicated piece,” Neil hurried on.

“What are you asking for, Neil?”

“Whatever you’re willing to give.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then it’s a no. we’ll figure something else out.”

He grabbed a copy of the lyrics. “I’ll think about it,” he said.

***

It was late summer when Neil had finally landed a job. The only thing was that it was at night. And Madera definitely didn’t not approve of night jobs.

So he waited until it was late, and Madera had already done lights-out before he made his way over to the window. Andrew watched him and he said nothing. Neil had his gear on underneath his clothes. He reached into his safe and slipped out a few knives and concealed them on his person, all while Andrew stared at him blankly. He ignored it for the time being and made his way over to the window. The windows were supposed to be painted down, but Andrew had long since released the edges from their painted confines. He looked over at Andrew as he put a leg outside the window.

“I’ll be back in couple hours. Don’t wait up.” He turned and went out the window dropping to the grass with nothing more than a whisper under his feet as they glided past the grass and into the night. He made it over to the bus stop and waited for the one that would take him downtown and release him into the bustling nightlife.
It was an accident that he found out about the job, really. No one read the newspaper anymore and he never had the time. But he saw it the ad. A night clerk. A job working in the back of an old office filing records and digitizing the files. He was the best candidate for the job. He was a fast learner, quick with his alphabet, and, most importantly, he was the only one who applied for the job.

It was far from Marbury, but as his mother had always told him, beggars can’t be choosers. So he stood out at the bus stop that was barely more than a bench and a streetlight and waited. He waited until the shabby bus pulled up and he climbed the steps. He scanned the aisles until his eyes snagged on a familiar face.

Dan looked up from the book that she had been reading in the dim light of the bus and smiled at him.

“Hey Neil.”

“Hey Dan. What are you doing here?”

She chuckled ruefully. ‘I’m going to work. You?’

“Me too.”

“You finally found one.”

“Yeah. Needed to start saving up money. We’re going to move out soon, Andrew and I.”

“I don’t really get why you’re moving out with him, but I guess I kind of get it. He’s the only one that is able to move out. And it must be hard without Seth there. I know Matt’s taking it pretty hard.”

Neil didn’t know how to tell her that he sort of forgot about Seth and that he was moving to live with Andrew because he trusted him, more than anything.

They sat in a companionable silence as the bus quickly made its stops. After seven he pulled the cord and got ready to leave the vehicle. He gave Dan a quick wave and walked out onto the sidewalk. The downtown was definitely not bustling and he had to ask himself why he ever thought it would be. He walked to the building, took a deep breath, and the walked into the police station.

The hiring process had been almost laughably easy and the interview had been even simpler. They did a basic background check on him and he almost choked out a hysterical laugh when Higgins told him that he had a clean record. It had just all been so normal.

There were only five people working in the station, four officers and a receptionist named Julie who worked up in the front. Since they were so understaffed, they had to reach out and hire Neil.

And in his time there he rarely saw anyone. His desk was in the backroom and Julie was the only one who ever came back there, and only when she needed to bring him a cold case.

It was strange to see these cops, many of them who had barely handled hard crime, who had never even seen a murder. They dealt with shoplifters and speeders and people who drank and walked the streets. The people who peed in the alleyways outside of the bars.

He’d seen more discussion of crime in his living room when he was six.

The biggest case, in face was the case of the Ding-Dong Ditcher, a vandal who spray painted dicks on the police station and had not yet been caught. When Neil had gone on break he saw that there was a whole conspiracy board dedicated to this vandal in the break room, complete with high-res crime scene photos of each of the dicks.
What made it worse was that the police station was the only place to be vandalized.

And they still hadn’t caught whoever had been doing this.

It had been months.

So yeah, he was pretty sure that his mother would have killed him if she was still alive for working with the police, but honestly he wasn’t exactly impressed with their crime-solving prowess.

After work he took the bus back and trekked back to Marbury and scaled the wall to the room.

He snuck back through the fire escape that lined the back wall of the building, slipping in through the messed up roof door. He showered quickly and made his way back into the room. Andrew looked over at him lazily as Neil wandered over. Neil was about to climb up to the top bunk when Andrew moved over a bit to make room for him. He climbed in beside him. He would have said goodnight but it was so quite that it felt wrong to break the silence. Besides it was so comforting, and he was so tired, he was out before his head even hit the pillow.

***

Neil was unsettling. Neil was just there, this presence Andrew couldn’t ignore. He could always sense he was around, almost as if they were in sync with one another. What was up with that?

Neil was a fucking asshole. Like, seriously. Who did the things that he did? Every night he asked if Andrew was okay with then sharing and when he wasn’t Neil said nothing and went up to his own bed to sleep.

He wasn’t sure if the other boy enjoyed sharing Andrew’s bed, but he could deduce that he tolerated it at the very least. You didn’t ask to do something every night if you didn’t want to.

So if he wanted to do it, he didn’t get why he didn’t. That was what people did. And sure, Neil didn’t seem like the type of person to take without asking, it felt strange when he didn’t nonetheless.

And that whole “‘ only as much as you’re willing to give’” shit? What the fuck was that?

Neil was an enigma, simply put.

Sometimes when he was lying in bed and Neil had already fallen asleep, back to Andrew, Andrew would study the set of his back and the relaxed tension in his muscles, and contemplate the mystery that was Neil Josten. He seemed at ease and it was different from when he was awake, always tightly wound, like he was ready to spring into action at moment’s notice. No doubt he had had to before.

But this night Neil wasn’t asleep yet, and for once he wasn’t facing away from him.

“Why are you so comfortable sharing a bed.” He didn’t know why, but it came out as a whisper.

“My mom and I did it a lot when we were on the run. Saved space and also helped us to cover out exits while we slept,” Neil whispered back.

“Doesn’t do much if you can’t protect yourself,” he said, his own horrible nights ringing in his memory.

Neil gave him a sidelong glance. “You’ve seen my knives, do you really think we slept without being armed?” Neil turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “We were willing to do anything to make it to the next day. My mom was dead set on living as long as we possibly could.”
“Strange.”

Neil laughed. “We’re like opposites, in that way. My mother and I were just escaping to live to survive another day. You don’t give shit about how long you live, but more about why you live.

“Point?”

“I think together we could be unstoppable.”

“Who would be trying to stop us?”

Neil huffed a soft laugh. “Ourselves.”

***

It was one of his rare afternoons off and Andrew was set on enjoying it with a nice book when he heard the sound of someone knocking on the door.

He sighed. “Who is it?”

“It’s Nicky.”

“Neil’s not here.”

“I know. I’m here to talk to you.”

He sighed. “What is it? This better be quick.”

Nicky close the door behind him. “I wanted to come and say-”

“Tick tock, Nicky.”

“Fuck, you’re such an ass.” He shook his head “Look I wanted to apologize.”

“What?” what the hell.

“Yeah,” and suddenly Nicky looked nervous. “Look I know I’ve kind of been shit and I haven’t been al that I should have been. Back before Germany. When Tilda died. I didn’t do anything. And I know I was dealing with shit and everything, but I’m still sorry about that. I’m still not better completely, but I’m trying to do better. I haven’t always been there for you and I know I spend more time with Aaron and that isn’t fair.”

“You live with him.” he deadpanned.

“But you should too, Andrew. I should have fought for you. I know you hate my parents, but if it was just me I would have fought for you.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “I know it doesn’t mean anything, but I wanted you to know.” He finished and he sounded like he was on the edge of something.

“I believe you. And, not that it means anything, but I might have stayed. If it was you.”

Nicky gave him a watery smile. “You know, that’s probably one of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. Time’s up.”
Nicky shook his head, but he left.

Andrew closed his book and laid it on his chest. He laid there a moment before he reached underneath his bed and pulled out the stack of paper he had there and looked it over, book discarded at his side.

***

It took Neil a ridiculously short amount of time for to adjust to the feeling of sleeping with Andrew. He knew Andrew did it because of the inconvenience it gave him to hear Neil jolt awake at night. And though they were living in more amicable conditions, Neil didn’t forget that Andrew hated him. Andrew had said as much and Andrew, unlike Neil, had he tendency to tell the truth most of the time.

Most nights they were next to each other and Neil was careful not to touch him. There were two reasons for this, one of them begin that he had been on the receiving end of Andrew being woken up too many times already, and he wasn’t eager for a repeat of that situation. The second reason was that he didn’t want to be too close to somebody else, either. He had tried to cover it up with most of the other foxes, but he didn’t like sudden touches. His mother had never been one to give casual touches so Neil wasn’t used to receiving them. Andrew seemed to realize this and give him space, something that Neil could appreciate, especially when compared to the handsy and touchy peers he had at school.

They found a good balance like this, and it was hard to believe that a year ago they had been at each other’s throats. It was strange.

Though, to be fair, when had his life ever been normal?

And it was, of course in the midst of his contemplation of Andrew and his mannerisms that Andrew walked into Wymack’s apartment. Nicky looked up and smiled at him. “Hey Andrew.”

“I wrote it.”

“Wrote what?”

“The music.”

Neil looked at him in disbelief. There was no way.

“What music?” Nicky asked, still confused.

Andrew sat down at the piano, and pulled up the cover wooden cover that hid away the keys of the piano. He sat in front of the piano. And then he began to play. And then the words came out of his mouth, words Neil had read, had heard out come out of Nicky’s mouth, that he had seen pour out of his own pen.

Those words had been spoken, not sung, but this was something new entirely.

I been on the low
I’ve been taking my time
I feel like I’m out of my mind
I feel like my life ain’t mine
And oh, this was why people did it. This was what he had been missing all those years on the run. Seeing this magic happen in front of his eyes.

The song continued on and nil was blow away. They had done this. All of them.

Nicky picked up the lyrics and joined him

It's the very first breath
When your head's been drowning underwater
And it's the lightness in the air
When you're there
Chest to chest with a lover
It's holding on, though the road's long
Seeing light in the darkest things
And when you stare at your reflection
Finally knowing who it is.

And Neil caught the way Kevin watched Andrew play and then Kevin met his gaze. There was knowing in his eyes, understanding. They both knew that this was something.

And as he turned back to look at Andrew, playing the piano, to Nicky singing, he felt that something too.

And he just knew.

This could be interesting.

***

Save yourself
Oh won't you save yourself
Go on and save yourself for someone else
Yes darlin' save yourself
Oh won't you save yourself
So go on and save yourself for someone else
Woah are you gonna break?
Yeah are you gonna break?
Woah what's it gonna take?
Yeah are you gonna break?
So I wield an iron fist
Grace is just weakness
Or so I’ve been told
I’ve been cold, I’ve been merciless
But the blood on my hands scares me to death
Maybe I’m waking up today

Nothing about Bee’s office ever felt different. There was something constant about it, something that stayed the same, despite the month or time or season. So, if it weren’t for the calendar one Bee’s desk, there would have been nothing to mark the passage of time.

“Hello, Andrew,” she greeted him, leading him into her never-changing office. “Good to see you.”

“Hi, Bee,” he said and he flopped back into his usual chair. Same as always.

She smiled at him. “So, sophomore year is about to start. How do you feel about that?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t feel any different than the first day if school last year.”

She leaned back in her seat and offered him a wry smile. “I suppose that’s true. Okay then, how have you been doing with the emancipation thing? Were the resources I gave you helpful?”

“Yeah. Neil and I are looking them over a lot now.”

“Do you feel confident that you will do it?”

He shrugged. “Why aren’t you trying to stop me?” he asked, because the question had been in his mind for a long time.

“Oh many reasons, I suppose. One, I believe that if you were to truly set you mind to something, no one and nothing could stop you. Two, I believe you have your reasons. And it’s good for you to want things.”
“I don’t want this,” he backtracked before Bee could get any ideas in her head. “I don’t want anything.”

“Have you ever?” She asked, and her tone wasn’t judgmental, just curious.

“Once.”

“What did you want, if you don’t mind saying?”

He stared at the desk long and hard. “I wanted to stay with Cass.”

“Cass Spear?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?”

And how could he possibly explain it, how could he possibly put it into words? “She was nice. She did laundry on Fridays. She made grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. She made sure my shoes fit and that I always had enough soap.”

“That sounds like it was nice.”

“She was.”

“She,” Bee emphasized. She glanced down at her notes. “The same she that was forced to release you from her care due to charges of neglect.” It wasn’t a question.

He stiffened. “It wasn’t like that.”

“I know, Andrew. I’ve read the report your case worker sent over.”

“'Child was found with injuries of a self-inflicted nature,'” he quoted. “You haven’t brought it up.”

“I don’t want to outstep my bounds. You already knew everything I knew coming in.”

“Was it obvious?”

“If I hadn’t read about it before? Not really. Though the sleeves,” she gestured

“Self-injurious behavior,” he edged up the hem of his sleeve to reveal the scarred inner flesh of his arm. To her credit, she didn’t flinch away.

“That is very precise wording.” She noted, absently. “But it makes me wonder. If living with her is what you wished for, why did you do it?”

He pulled the sleeve down his arm. “Everything costs something.” He looked met her eyes. “I paid it.”

“But then Aaron.”

“Aaron shouldn’t have had to pay. Neither should anyone else.”

“So you were careless on purpose and got caught.”

He looked away. He couldn’t look her in the eye right now.
“Do you want to stop for today?”

He hesitated, then nodded.

“Okay.” She smiled at him. “I retuned the piano if you want to play.”

So he did.

***

It was the middle of the afternoon at Wymack’s when Allison finally had enough. School had started back up, and although it took up eight hours of their day, every day, Allison still had too much time on her hands.

“Okay, you need to settle a bet for us all,” she dropped a stack of paper on top the table. Neil looked down at it and then back up at her, expectantly. Everyone in the room was looking over at them, Andrew even looking up for a minute at the noise.

“What bet?” he asked.

She consulted the list she had in her hands.

“What your sexuality is.”

“Why is that such a concern?”

Allison rolled her eyes. “Oh, I don’t know? Maybe because then you would finally date someone. I don’t just want to find out for the bet. I also need to improve your social life. You need to get laid or something. You’re always so tense.”

“And what is that?” He asked pointing at the stack.

“Information on different sexualities.” She slid it towards him. “Good luck.” She turned and walked back to the couch. Neil rolled his eyes. He didn’t get why this was such a big issue. Who even cared? There were things more important than dating. “Sure, whatever.” He said, tucking the packet into his backpack.

***

He hesitated in front of Bee, not ready to sit. He was a bit taller than her if he was standing, and that helped a little.

“Andrew?” Bee looked concerned and she made to get up and walk over to him. “Are you okay?”

It had been a week since the last session, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it. The phantom hands, the pain-

“What it cost.” His throat was dry and strangled. “What it cost to stay with Cass. Bee lowered herself back down in her seat, eyes focused on him. He couldn’t look at her.

“He would come into my room at night,” and his throat hadn’t felt this sore single he had to smother those screams. “Sometimes during the day if no one else was home,” he said and he heard her breath catches on the barbed meaning of his words.

He eased himself into his usual chair and he was almost tempted to reach out and hold onto the armrests and steady himself. When he finally got it in himself to look at her, he didn’t see pity in her
eyes. He saw a fury burning behind those usually kind eyes and a sadness that he didn’t like on her.

“He’s not doing it anymore.” The words were still-born—dead and cold the moment they left his mouth. “There’s no point in being angry about it, Bee.”

“This wasn’t the first time, was it?”

“No. Seven,” he said, to the unasked question on her face.

“Seven?”

“When it first happened.”
The expression on her face was indecipherable.

“I’m not lying.”

“Andrew, I believe you.”

“I was weak.” He had heard the words echoing around his head for years, that there was a part of him that he felt would always believe it.

“You were not weak. You’re strong Andrew. You’ve always been strong enough,” her voice was fierce. “You know what they did to you, right. That what they did to you was wrong?”

“They raped me.” He words were foreign on his lips, heavy on his tongue. It was horrifying to say it out loud, even more-so to admit it. He felt exposed and vulnerable. “I was raped.”

She looked like she was about to say something, but he cut her off. “Don’t say it didn’t change me, don’t say I’m still the same person I was before.”

“I won’t lie to you Andrew. I can see what it’s done to you, and I think I’m only beginning to see the toll it’s taken on you. But your value as a person? That hasn’t changed. You are just as valuable as everybody else.”

He hated her words. “I’m only valuable when they can get something from me.” She opened her mouth to speak but he swiped his hand in the air with a slash. “Shut up. You’re only talking to me because you have to.” He stood up and he stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

He was mad at her. He pulled his jacket up the base of his neck. He was mad at her for being angry, for caring, for everything. For making him fucking cocoa in August. Who even did that? Why did she even do that? So what if he liked it.

His skin was crawling and he couldn’t be near anyone. When night fell, the idea of sleeping with Neil was too much.

“Sleep in your own bed, Neil, tonight,” he spat.

“Oh Kay Andrew.”

A boiling feeling of anger and turmoil scalded his body and if he had any tears left he might have cried.

He knew Bee wasn’t using him, he knew he wasn’t just a job to her, but it was difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to believe. He’d force her away, he’d ruin their relationship just like he ruined everything else. Just like he had with Cass and with Aaron and with the other foxes.
He was doing it with Bee, and he was going to do with Neil.

*You’re the common denominator*

***

He didn’t say he was sorry, but he brought her some cocoa. It wasn’t exactly an apology but Bee understood it all the same.

“I’ll heat up the kettle,” she said with a tentative, but genuine smile and let him in.

And he was thankful that she let him stay, even if it would only be for a little bit longer.

***

Neil was pouring over the list of information, and his eyebrows pinched into a frown. Andrew glanced at him from over the pot of spaghetti he was cooking. It was part of a useful-skills program Marbury offered. It wasn’t a popular program.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Andrew said dryly as he dropped his plate down at the table across from Neil. Neil looked up at him and then at the food and then got up to make himself a plate. Neil brought his plate over and went back to the list. After a few minutes he rolled his eyes and pushed the packet to the side.

“It’s so stupid. I don’t see why everybody cares so much about this.”

“Allison wants to play matchmaker.”

“I don’t want to be matched. Why would I want to be?”

“Dating, kissing, sex.”

“Not everyone dates in high school.”

“True.” Andrew conceded tilting his glass to Neil before drinking from it. “But it’s usually how people get sex, so-”

“That’s a stupid reason. People can live without sex.”

“But people don’t want to.”

“So, what? You want sex?”

“Sure. Most people do.”

“I don’t. I don’t get what the big deal is,” he muttered poking at his spaghetti on the plate, tuning out the din of the other Marbury occupants. He dropped his fork down. “Wait. If you want sex so bad, why aren’t you dating Renee? Didn’t you say dating is how you get sex?”

“Neil.” Andrew put down his glass. “I don’t want to have sex with Renee.”

“But you just said-”

“Ask Renee if you want to know,” he gave a pointed look at Neil’s spaghetti.

Neil grumbled and ate it.
It was delicious.

***

It was a coincidence that he ran into her at Boyd’s Gym, workout bag slung over her shoulder. He ran up to her.

“Hey, Renee.”

She smiled at him. “Hey, Neil.”

“Could I take you up on your offer? To talk,” he clarified.

“Of course. I was planning on boxing, but we could spar if you want.”

It was a strange offer, but not the strangest one he had ever received. “Sure.”

He followed her into he gym and followed her example, and began wrapping his knuckles and wrists.

“I used to be part of a gang.”

Neil’s hand slipped. “Where?”

“Detroit. Mom wasn’t very involved, was always doing her own thing of questionable legality. I spent too much time on the streets.” She finished her left hand and moved onto her right. “At first I just was a messenger. Then one of the higher-ups took an… interest in me. He liked to mess with knives. I didn’t like it when he did. So I learned to handle them.” she turned to face him, both of their hands perfectly wrapped from too much practice. “I killed him.”

There wasn’t really a universally-accepted reply for people revealing that they had murdered someone. So he nodded. There was a dark acceptance in her smile.

“Then I got thrown in juvie and then into the foster system, which is where I met Andrew. Then I got adopted by Stephanie and I found God.”

“But you still fight?”

“Why waste skills when you have them?” She looked at the confusion on his face and expanded. “Look, I found religion, I found God and that changed my life. But that doesn’t change everything. I still get angry. With my ex-mother, with that man, and what he did to me. I’m just channeling it.”

She led the way over to the mat. “After you.”

“Oh.” he stopped and Renee stopped too, waiting patiently. “Andrew said I had to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Well, he didn’t say I had to ask you something, only that if I wanted to know, you would be the only one to tell me.”

She looked amused. “And what is it?”

“Andrew said that you could tell me why you two aren’t dating.”

“Oh! Well, that’s because we’re both gay.”
He supposed that made sense. Oh, wait. He was probably supposed to say something about it.


She laughed a fluttery little laugh.

“Well, I don’t know what I’m supposed to say!” he exclaimed, exasperated. Social interaction was hard. He ran his hands through his hair. “Why couldn’t he just tell me he was gay?”

“Andrew has a flare for the dramatics.”

Neil huffed.

“I don’t know why you’re complaining, Neil. You’re dramatic too.”

“No.”

“You literally hitch-hiked back from miles away with strangers.”

“After he drugged me,” he pointed out.

“Instead of asking you whatever he wanted to ask you from the get-go. Exactly.” She turned back to the mats. “Shall we?”

Neil relaxed at the shift in topic from social interaction to violence. Much more his speed. “It’s been a while.”

“Since what? You’ve fought?”

“Yeah.”

“But I want to know how to fight. Or at least I don’t want to forget.” He would have thought he would have done anything to move on from that point of his past, but he couldn’t justify to himself losing that important skill set, even if it had been given to him by a psychopath. But when he looked at Renee, he saw understanding in her eyes. She had her own demons she wanted to fight off.

“This helps,” she said, “with the past. Fighting for a different reason, in a different context. All of that.”

“Yeah,” he said tightening the wrappings on his hands. “I didn’t really do traditional boxing.”

She gave him a dark smile. “Neither did I.”

She led him over to a table stocked with supplies and Neil spotted Matt and Andrew taking a break by the weights. He waved. Matt waved back. Andrew just blinked.

“We don’t use real knives, just these,” she showed him an array of fake knives. His fingers itched to take them. They stepped into the circle and he could feel Andrew’s eyes on him but after Renee ran at him, he promptly forgot. Renee was more skilled in hand to hand, his father having taught him about the importance of weapons and brute force, while Renee had learned the importance of nimble moves and quick reflexes. But he had more training with the knives. He was able to get the feeling of their dimensions in a moment and was able to throw them with ease and precision. When it came to knife work he was able to edge out ahead, just barely, but when it came down to hand to hand, she beat him with an ease that was almost comical.
“You did pretty well,” She told him, offering her hand to help him get back to his feet. “I’d be willing to fight with you again.”

“I’d like that.” He stretched his shoulders. He was surprised to find that it wasn’t a lie. “I’m too rusty.”

She nodded and walked away. He felt rather than saw Andrew come up beside him. He said nothing as Neil undid the wrappings from his hands and brushed his hair out of his face. They walked out of the gym and made their way back to Marbury. He could really use a shower.

In light of the revelation that both Renee and Andrew already had their sexuality figured out, Neil decided to give the whole “sexuality” thing one last go-around.

And, yet again, the list didn’t help.

The packet described what it was like to be gay or bisexual or pansexual, but none of those descriptions matched. They just didn’t apply at all. He was sitting in the library during lunch and it was starting to irritate him. He didn’t want to have sex with anyone. He typed it into the google search bar almost as joke.

What is the word for not being sexually attracted to anyone?

It was kind of a joke, until things started popping up, the same word over and over.

Asexual.

He typed the word and read the definition and the description. Then he read the other information, eyes skimming over the descriptions, before printing it out. It was a whole spectrum, and he wasn’t sure exactly where he fell, but he felt his irritation ebbing away.

Neil was making dinner that night. They tried to change switch off nights most of the time, since no one else was interested in cooking. Neil was still learning to cook, but he felt he was getting better the more he did it. He finished the scrambled eggs and bacon and served it up. Andrew came up beside him and dished up his own food.

They sat across from each other eating their food in silence, before Neil spoke up.

“You have any money on the bet Allison has on me?” Neil stirred his eggs.

Andrew put a bite of food in his mouth. “Which one.”

Neil probably should have been surprised that there was more than one bet about him, but he wasn’t. “The sexuality one.”

“No.”

“You might want to put your money in.”

Andrew looked over at him, brow raised.

Neil rolled his eyes, and pulled out a sheet of paper and slid it across the table.
“Asexual.” Andrew read thoughtfully.

Neil nodded. “Somewhere around there.”

Andrew slip it back across the table. “This isn’t even in the pool.”

“I figured. It wasn’t on the list Allison gave me.”

“Almost everyone put their money down on gay.”

“So put some down on asexual.”

“Wow, Mr. White knight, breaking the rules.”

“We both know my morals are greyer than anything. Besides, Renee told me that she and Allison tag team a lot of the bets if they have info.”

“You talked to Renee?”

“At the gym, yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Does no one else know?” he asked and Andrew sensed the change of topic.

“Only her. And Roland.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t have an issue with it?”

“Why would I?” he looked puzzled

“We sleep together,” Andrew deadpanned. “Some guys would have a problem with that.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “You hate me. And even if you didn’t, you wouldn’t make a move unless someone gave you the go-ahead. You don’t even touch anyone without asking.”

***

Needless to say, the group wasn’t that happy when Neil came to Wymack’s Wednesday dinner and all of them lost the bet.

“But Neil, who do you imagine when you want to have sex?

“No one. Why is everyone so obsessed with sex?”

Andrew couldn’t help but find it amusing.

***

“Alright, as you all know, last year the coin drive did not work out very well.”

Adam chuckled.

“That’s enough Mr. Wright.” Mr. Howard gave him a pointed look before continuing. “So this year we need to do something better to get the administration off my back. And if I have to hear Mr.
Hughes gloat one more time about his homeroom making more money I’m going to kill him” he shook his head. “Okay, let’s figure out what to do to raise money this year.”

“Oh, we could do a talent show.”

“Or a silent auction.”

“No, those are too overdone.”

“We could do a play.”

“Now that’s an idea.” Mr. Howard stroked his chin “We could. We have enough people to pull it off.” He nodded to himself and double underlined it on the board. “Okay we just need to find some sort of play to do.”

“The Wizard of Oz,” Marissa called out.

“I don’t think we have any singers.”

She shrugged and put her hand down.

“Greece!”

“Again with the singers.”

“Romeo and Juliet!” Adam shouted.

Mr. Howard’s face morphed as he pondered it. He tapped the dry erase marker on the desk and pointed it at him. “Now were talking.” He went forward and wrote the name on the board. “Any others?”

“Cats!”

“I admire your enthusiasm but, and I’ve said this already, no musicals.”

“Didn’t they make Shrek into a musical?”

Mr. Howard pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know what? Let’s just go with Romeo and Juliet.” He circled it on the board for emphasis. “We all know some of the stuff so we can just do auditions after class on Friday or something.” he glanced at the clock. “Okay, class dismissed.”

There was the squeal of desks across the floor as everyone gathered their belongings to go to first period “Neil, I need to speak with you before you go to your next class.” Neil instinctively felt on edge, but he nodded with fake ease. The class plowed on, but he felt worried. He could feel Andrew’s eyes on him as he left the room, before Neil was alone.

“Neil, we still haven’t met your parents.”

“They’ve been really busy,” he shrugged. “They’re studying and promotions and all that. They don’t even work in town, they chose this town because it was halfway between-”

“I don’t need to know where your parents work, Neil. I just think that if they are able to go to your other events they should be able to show up to a parent teacher conference once and a while.”

Neil was confused. “They don’t go to any of my events.”
“What? What about your meets?”

“No.” He stopped, confused. “Why would they?”

“Neil, you’re one of the best runners in the state!”

Neil shrugged. “We all have our own lives.”

“And that’s another thing! You should be living it up, Neil. You aren’t in any clubs. Luckily it looks like you have pretty popular friends. You should go out, have a girlfriend. These are the best years of your life!”

Neil bit back a grimace. He sure hoped not.

Mr. Howard looked at him. “It is obvious that you need a role model in your life. I think that’s a good thing I called you after class. I will take upon the task of being it for you.”

“I don’t need one.”

Mr. Howard tsked condescendingly. He moved as if to pat him on the shoulder but Neil managed to dodge the hand subtly.

“Look, I know you probably think that, but you need someone who is there for you. Your parents don’t really sound like they are. Look, I heard about the Minyard twins. No father figure and then their mother died in a car crash last year, and now look at them. Andrew especially.”

Neil decided right then and there that Mr. Howard had no idea what the fuck he was talking about. He wanted to tell Mr. Howard that he couldn’t even begin to understand the complexities of Andrew or even Aaron and that he needed to shut up when it came to things he knew nothing about.

Instead he found himself saying “I already have a role model. I really have to get to class. Thanks for the concern, but I’m fine.” He turned before Mr. Howard could object and sped for the door. It wasn’t until he was halfway to his first period class that he realized that he hadn’t been lying. He did have someone he could trust. The memories of a father figure had changed from harsh blows to Wymack’s unending support. The memories of Wymack standing by him, being there for him, showing him a future he had never thought would be possible for someone like him. Wymack was like the father he didn’t have. The one he chose. He was beginning to learn, with Andrew and Wymack and Matt and all the other foxes, that they were becoming his new family, they had been becoming his new family the moment he had met them a year ago. He just hadn’t realized how firm their grip on his heart was until now.

He was shocked out of his revelry by someone sidling up beside him.

“Neil. You should audition for Romeo.” Alicia said to him as they left the room. He wasn’t really in the mood for talking. Not after the discussion he just had with Mr. Howard.

“I wasn’t thinking of auditioning. I was just thinking about helping out backstage.”

“But you have such a nice face. It would be a waste to hide it behind the curtain.”

“Uh, thanks. I’ll think about it,” he lied.

***

On Friday they all took their place in the seats of the auditorium and waited as Mr. Howard made his
way to the front of the stage. It was obvious he wanted to try and pull himself up on the stage dramatically, but he couldn’t quite manage it and instead opted for sitting on the edge of the stage. He looked at his clipboard.

“Okay,” he shouted, silencing them with a few short perfunctory claps. “I’m going to call each of you and you are going to run lines for one of the characters.”

He then moved to the front of the seats and began to call student forward to perform. Most of them were downright awkward, stumbling through their lines, while some had a false bravado and were all too over the top. Aaron looked like he just wanted it to be over, though he read his part with few mistakes. Katelyn was comfortable up on the stage and did about as well as Aaron. When Mr. Howard called Andrew up, Andrew pulled out his most monotone voice he could and ran through the lines quickly before going to sit down. He just wanted to sleep.

Neil was something else. He went up to the stage, rubbing his arm, feigning nervousness.

“Romeo, Romeo where are you art?” He shouted, his voice pitching up and down at random intervals. He threw his hands to the air

“Hark, though.”

He looked down at his hand indiscreetly, to the words Andrew knew were crawled out across his palm.

“What light through yander-”

“Yonder.” Howard coughed into his fist.

“Gesundheit. Yander window breaks. It is to the east and Juliet is too- Wait are we supposed to do an accent?”

Mr. Howard pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can.”

Neil nodded. “Okay. Like a jewel,” he intoned, inflections ranging from English to Cockney to Australian to Southern. “In an Ethiopians ear. You outshine like a diamond in the night.”

“That’s enough Neil. I think we’ve seen enough.”


Mr. Howard looked relieved. “I’ll make a note of that. Next.”

Andrew didn’t miss the subtle smirk on Neil’s face as he walked off the stage.

***

The play was, decidedly, a disaster. Though if Nicky were there, Neil was sure he’d call it as a hot mess. He was trying to get Neil to be more in touch with the slang of the area. He might as well do so in his head.

The schools drama department had been cut in the past years, so they didn’t have any help as far as the drama department was concerned. There were still a few old props and costumes stored in the closet behind the stage that they could use but not much else.

Neil had, thankfully, been relegated to backstage to work on the props and other supplies. Andrew
would have probably been put there as well, but Mr. Howard had been their teacher long enough to be well acquainted with their longstanding rivalry. Andrew had been put in charge of the lights as he wasn’t expected to actually get along with any of the other students during the play. Aaron and Katelyn had both been assigned to rolls in the play- Katelyn as The Nurse and Aaron as Benvolio. Needless to say, he was less than pleased. Katelyn wasn’t on stage very much so she often would come to the back and help Neil with some of the costume problems.

Once the main set was finished, and the students began working on particular scenes each day. Once he wasn’t needed to move the stage props around anymore and he often found himself sneaking into the lighting booth with Andrew as he flipped the lights. He would have felt bad about leaving Katelyn but she had taken to talking with Aaron during the breaks in between their scenes. It was strange to watch them, and how relaxed they seemed.

Other than them, however, the play was quickly devolving into a sort of disaster that would have been hilarious if he wasn’t grouped in with it.

No one knew their lines. At all.

Neil had acted badly on purpose but really, some of them were up with him. He almost regretted throwing his audition, except he didn’t have the time to devote so much of his energy to the play. With his late nights and after-school internship with Wymack, he didn’t have the time or the energy to keep up. He knew that Andrew was beginning to struggle with it too, between the late hours both of them were snatching and the afternoon long music practices and their homework, there was less and less time for sleep. He could see Andrew nodding off in the booth most days and only half of the times he flicked on the wrong lights was to be annoying. The other times it was because he missed his cue. Even though both of them were used to less sleep, this was ridiculous.

***

Andrew would have liked to spend most of his time in the light booth, but, unfortunately, Mr. Howard wasn’t keen on letting his students wander. So they had to hear the other people recite their lines over and over.

“Look, Mr. Howard, are we doing a modern adaptation of all of this, or are we sticking to the original?” Charlie whined and Andrew was going to bang his head against the seat if he head Charlie complain one more time.

Howard looked up from where he was starting to nod off. “’s fine. Whatever you guys want. You’ll need to rewrite your parts if you want it to be more modern.”

“But that’s so much work,” Jones complained slumping back to lay in the stage.

“I know!” Adam shouted and Howard almost jerked out of his seat at the sudden noise. “We could make it a fusion of modern and classical. Like, keep the original lines, but change the costumes.”

“But this doesn’t make any sense.” Marissa exclaimed. “It would look horrible.”

“Mr. Howard!”

“We’re doing what Adam says” Howard said with a start.

“Did you even hear-”

“Suck it, Melissa.”
She flipped him off.

Adam smirked. He climbed back onto the stage. “The end of act 5, scene. Go!” He pointed at Charles to begin.

Charles and the other players walked out to the center of the stage and began to read his lines. Charles read lines painfully, gesturing at the wrong moments.

“As I remember, this should be the house.”

“Being holiday, the beggar’s shop is shut.”

“What a hoe, Apocathary!”

“Its ‘what ho,’” Howard pinched the bridge of his nose. “Not what a hoe.”

“What’s the difference?”

He groaned and stretched out until he was gripping the seat in front of him. “Well in the actual text he’s saying hello and in your version, you’re calling them a slut.”

“Oh. Gotcha.”

Andrew tossed his head back against the seat and stared up at the lights above. Every meeting was like this. No one was learning their lines. He had already read it so every misplaced word was jarring and unpleasant to his eidetic memory. He pulled out his radio and listened to that instead, tuning out the crappy practice. He heard the door creak open and saw Neil enter. His fingers were stained with paint and it looked like the Montegues and the Capulets had had their battle on his fingers.

“You done?”

“Yeah and I didn’t want to stay out there with that hot mess.”

“It is.” He muted his music and could hear the arguing echoing throughout the auditorium. He didn’t even have to ask before Neil was settling in beside him and taking the earbud he had offered to him without even knowing it. “Charlie call Marissa a hoe again.”

“Howard already explained that shit.”

“I think he likes to get a rise out of her.”

“They probably like each other,” Andrew mused.

Neil turned to him, unamused look in his eye. “Straight people.”

“Straight people,” he agreed.

“I don’t get why you would piss off someone you want to hook up with. Seems counterproductive to me.”

“Preaching to the choir.” Andrew muttered and he heard Neil snort.

Neil leaned his head back against the counter and Andrew took that as his signal to switch on the music. Neil wasn’t picky about the music so long as it wasn’t loud and Andrew didn’t care much about the volume as long as he got to choose the station. He flipped it to a random station.
“You’re listening here for the top hits. Hits hits hits.”

*Walk in the streets with you in your worn-out jeans*

*I can’t help thinking this is how it ought to be*

*Laughing on a park bench thinking to myself*

*“Hey isn’t this easy?”*

*And you’ve got a smile*

*That could light up this whole town*

He almost flipped the song when he heard the familiar notes of the song. It had been a hit years ago. He was going to change it when he saw the way Neil’s face relaxed when he was listening to music that didn’t hurt him.

*You say you’re fine I know you better than that*

The song, that catchy, irritating song, was still in his head as he made his way to work. He went through the motions of cleaning the tables and stools and making out with Roland in the back room. Or kind-of making out, considering it was not nearly as enthusiastic as usual.

“Dude you don’t really seem that into this,” Roland muttered between kisses. Andrew leaned in more as though he were trying to prove him wrong.

“We don’t have to keep doing this, Andrew you know that, right?” Roland asked, breaking apart the kiss.

“Whatever,” he replied, taking a step back. If he couldn’t offer Roland kisses, what was he going to be able to offer to keep him from leaving?

“You have a crush don’t you? That kid with the fake-brown hair?”

Andrew leaned back against the wall and slid down to the floor. “I don’t have a crush,” he muttered, but they both knew it was a lie.

“Come on, dude. It’s cute. I mean I thought you’d go for someone who wouldn’t dye his hair the most boring color in the world. What’s up with that anyway?”

Andrew rubbed his temple. “The day that shit does anything that makes sense, I’ll let you know.”

Roland laughed and settled down beside him. “He does have a nice face.”

Andrew nodded dumbly. It was appropriate, because he had to be stupid to have a crush on Neil. Like he was fucking five years old.

“Dude, you’re my friend first. As much as I like making out with you, I want you to be happy too.” He nudged him in the shoulder. “You deserve to have a good future.”

He sounded like Neil. It made him angry when Neil talked about his future. As far as he was concerned, Neil would leave. Everybody else did. Which just made his crush on him even more idiotic.

The storage door opened and Grif poked his blue head through. “Everything good in here? PG?”
Roland rolled his eyes and got to his feet. “What did you need?”

“I need ice.”

Roland smiled and helped him take it down, watching him fondly as he went. Andrew felt the smallest version of a smirk form on his face. He waited for the blue-haired boy to leave before he started gathering his things. “Seems like I’m not the only one with a crush.”

Roland sputtered. “That’s- that’s false. Andrew- Andrew get back here-.”

“I’m clocking out. See you tomorrow.”

“You two are made for each other.”

***

“I don’t know why you are complaining. You should feel happy that you get to kiss me. A ton of girls would love to be in your position.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe that you even said that, Jones. You are so full of yourself.”

Neil wanted to slam his head on the table. He could barely keep track of all the drama and, frankly, he was beginning to grow tired of it. On the road they only needed to know two things; whether they were alive and where they were going next.

He knew that most people worried about other things. He had seen soap operas on the road, after all. They were on in many of the places that the visited and had enough murder plots for him and his mother to learn words relevant to their personal, unique lives.

The world was darker. At least it seemed that way. He knew, logically, that it wasn’t always but he knew he would always remember it that way.

Now though, the play was fucking eating up his world and it was driving him nuts.

But, despite the prevalence the play had taken in his life, the rest of his world kept moving, too.

Dan and him and Matt hung out at the gym most afternoons, Dan practicing, Matt hanging on the poles like it was a jungle gym. Some afternoons they changed it up and went to the park with Marcie. Neil would watch Marcie and give her pets while Dan and Matt challenged each other to pull-up contests or push up contests. Turns out Dan was better at pull-ups while Matt was better at push-ups.

It was some weird sort of flirting thing or courtship ritual, but Neil couldn’t really be bothered by it. If it meant he got to hang out with his friends more, it was fine by him.

Other afternoons he would spend time at Wymack’s after his tattooing lessons and work on music with Kevin. They had had similar training and Kevin was adamant about Neil “practicing properly.” They’d go over reading music until Neil could read the notes from a single glance.

Andrew would lay in the couch “babysitting” and write in a spiral-bound notebook in his lap. He alternated between staring at the ceiling and flipping his pen through his fingers, to writing rapidly, crossing out every other word. Neil’d often find himself wondering what Andrew was writing, if the words were as beautiful and wonderful and mysterious as the rest of him. More nights than he’d care to admit, when he’d be on his mandatory break a work, he’d find himself drawing that concentrating look on Andrews face, capturing the way his hair fell into his face, and the way Andrews glasses sat
on his nose. It was a good break from the filing.

It was ironic, if he thought about it, that he was working for the police. He couldn’t stand the idea of it, but it was practical. He was within a few yards from every crime in the area, every sign of danger, and a database that could be used to track the criminal history of anyone. And he was good at getting in places. He knew how to bypass passwords and key codes in order to get the information he needed. He had had to when he was on the run. And he knew how to pull off a good lift. And the cops couldn’t lie for shit.

It might have been because he was a naturally distrusting person by nature, but he didn’t believe a single word that came out of any cop’s mouth and he worked quickly to identify their tells. Higgins crossed his arms when he was lying because he thought he could distract the perps with his intimidation tactic. He also kept tabs on the office drama. Currently it was “The Mystery of the Disappearing Lunches.”

“Alright who did it?”

“Did what?”

“You know fucking what, Bernard. This has been the third time this week that someone has gone into the fridge and eaten my leftovers.”

“Who wants your nasty-ass leftovers, Greg?”

Neil mentally sighed in relief. It was Dave who had eaten the spaghetti, but the fact that no one else knew anything about it made himself feel better about and chances he might have at pulling off a crime. If he needed to. And their ability to track him down.

It wasn’t perfect, his life. Not by a long shot. Most days he was so tired he wanted to fall asleep. But this was better than anything he had ever experienced, and he loved every second of it. He didn’t want to give it up.

***

The craziness ramped up in the weeks leading up to the play. Howard decided to have the play two months after they made the decision to actually do the play, which might have been fine if they were a professional theater troupe, but alas, they were not.

Actually, they were far from it. They were awful.

Neil like to regale him with tales of it when he hid out in the sound booth with him and the stories made Andrew glad he didn’t actually have to listen to it himself. It was amusing, hearing Neil tell about what happened. He was sure that if he had been there himself he wouldn’t have found those stories nearly as interesting. But Neil had a way of weaving together the elements of a story, keeping in the important parts and discarding the rest. Andrew supposed it was only natural to develop this skill after years of lying, but this time he didn’t really mind.

If he was a different person he might have laughed at the stories, but instead he focused on the expressions of Neil’s face, the gestures of his hands, and the glint of the low light off of his dark brown hair. Those moments in the booth felt strange. Not intimate, per-say, but it felt like – a lot. The knowledge that Neil didn’t have to be there but still chose to come this way made him feel heady in a way he hadn’t really felt before. A part of him knew that Neil only came up to take to him because he happened to be one of the foxes, but he would take what he could.

Other days, when Howard forgot the keys to the sound/light booth, Andrew was forced to sit behind
the stage and watch everyone try to get in position. Most of them were trying to read over their lines between the scenes, pretending like they already had them memorized. Others laughed and horsed around until Howard’s yelled that he could hear them from the audience and they quieted down, just a bit.

Katelyn and Aaron would spend the time between scenes sitting on the crates, going over their lines. It didn’t escape his notice the smiles that passed between Katelyn and even Aaron, or the way Katelyn would tuck her hair behind her ear and look away ever so slightly, a light flush on her cheeks. Something was going on there, he knew it, but he knew better than to say anything. Not now, at least. Gather intelligence and all that.

He felt the heavy slump of a body sitting next to him behind the crate. He turned, half expecting it to be Neil, only to be surprised when he saw his twin sitting there. He had on a baggy sweatshirt and he had the hood pulled half over his face and he looked tired as fuck.

“I can’t stand being over there anymore,” he explained, gesturing vaguely off to the other side of the stage. “If I have to see Alicia trying to flirt with Josten one more time I’m going to lose it. It’s fucking disgusting.”

Yeah. Disgusting,” Andrew muttered and turned to look past the crate to over where Neil was working. He was trying to fix a prop Alyssa was offering him while she babbled incessantly to him. He nodded absently, not paying any notice to her obvious attempts at flirting.

“I don’t know if he’s stupid or just ignorant, but I wish Alicia would just get the hint he’s not going to realize it or care or whatever and drop it. It’s so fucking annoying!” he groaned, pulling his hood over his face in exasperation.

“Not like you and Katelyn?” And there went his plan at stealth.

“What are you talking about?”

He simply gave him a look, because life was too short to explain things that people already knew. Aaron’s face flushed.

“That’s- that’s not the same. She’s my friend Andrew. I’m allowed to have friends.”

He knew that but he didn’t know what to say. So he went with stoic silence.

“I like her a lot Andrew. I don’t want to fuck it up.”

“Then don’t.”

“Andrew I really don’t get your cryptic bullshit right now and I slept like shit. So-” he gestured emptily and dropped his head down to his knees.

“Why.”

“Cravings,” he said, his words muffled by his jeans. “It was out of the blue but, yeah. I called Katelyn. She talked with me. She’s not bad Andrew. She’s not Tilda.” He curled up on the floor.

“Now cover for me, I’m going to sleep.”

“And why should I?”

“Because you’re my brother. I thought we had each other’s back.”
Andrew shoved his leg with his shoe. “Shut up.” He scanned out around them. “You have thirty minutes.”

“Great,” Aaron muttered and he was out like a light.

Andrew scanned around the area until his eyes landed back on Katelyn. She was talking with Neil. She didn’t appear tired at first, but Andrew could see the tired sag of her eyes, even if the bags had been covered up with concealer.

Katelyn was an interesting issue. If he was being honest with himself, he hadn’t picked up the negative vibe from her he was used to feeling with most people. She seemed to be genuinely nice. It also helped that Neil seemed to have formed some sort of understanding with her, though maybe it was only natural since they intersected across two friend groups. But he had to trust Neil’s intuition. It seemed to be correct, most of the time. Despite how much Neil wanted to hide it, he wasn’t really interested in making extra friends. He was markedly more distant with the kids he sat with than he was with the foxes. He didn’t get close if he didn’t have to. It was how he kept himself safe, it was the way Andrew had learned, after being torn apart in so many ways, to be.

It was hard to think that a few years ago, he was able to dedicate himself so fully and emotionally to someone that he had almost killed himself trying to keep it. It scared him. That vulnerability that led him to slicing up his veins so he could bleed. What had caused him so much pain that he still kept the razor, in the case that he ever needed to cut himself free again.

So the fact that Neil made an effort with Katelyn. That was nothing to ignore.

***

Neil went up on the roof and bundled his coat closer around his body as he sat up on the gravel. Down below him some people were trying to do something- barbecue or whatever. They weren’t very good. The left their meat on the grill so long it began to burn.

The smell was sharp, different than the cigarettes his inhaled with Andrew. They were a facsimile of the smell of his mother’s burning flesh. Similar enough to be reminded of her, but different enough that he could break away from it. This smoke, whatever it was, was different. Even though it was far away, the air was thick with it and he could almost see the dark grey where it stood out against the night sky.

And suddenly he was transported hundreds of miles away, to the beach his mother would haunt him until he died and that his mother had haunted since her own demise.

His body fell still and he blinked his way back into the world. The smoke had dissipated, mostly, and only the ghost of it lingered in his nostrils.

His mother’s death still seemed all to fresh at times, and sometimes he could almost smell the flames that consumed her body on that California beach, oh so long ago. Only it wasn’t. It was getting harder to tell how much time had passed, even though the day was etched into his mind. Sometimes it was all too much.

He was standing on the beach, the upholstery curling and melting under the intense heat of the flames. The smoke was burning his eyes, but he wasn’t crying. His mother was in that car becoming nothing with the vinyl she died bound to. She was disappearing becoming indistinguishable from the interior of the car. She had always been a woman of dignity; she shouldn’t have gone like. The flames were crackling louder and louder, knocking through him. Then the noise faded but the smoke was still there and it was just so hard to breathe- he couldn’t- couldn’t-
“Breathe. Come on, you need to breathe. Slow down. That’s good. Breathe.”

Slowly the beach disappeared and Neil could see he wasn’t even near the beach at all. That he was on the roof. Andrew was kneeling beside him, hand pressed on his neck, a reassuring force, grounding him. So strong and firm.

“What?”

“Andrew looked away and removed his hand from Neil’s neck. Neil missed the pressure and the warmth almost immediately. “Your breathing was erratic.”

“Thanks.”

Andrew grunted in response and went back to smoking his cigarette.

Neil blinked and looked over at Andrew who had moved away a bit and he was sure his eyes were bloodshot from the smoke. He was thankful for the darkness and the meager protection it gave his ego.

It troubled him that he had just become so vulnerable, that the fact he was having trouble with his trauma was rearing its ugly head. He was troubled that even here, hundreds of miles away, his mother’s ghost still haunted him.

It troubled him that he took comfort in someone else, and it troubled him the extent to which he relied on Andrew.

It was troubling and unsettling and it shook him to his core.

He inhaled some more smoke.

He’d deal with that tomorrow.

***

He shouldn’t have been surprised when Allison came by Marbury before the play, but he still was when he opened the door to find her standing there with a makeup case in her hands. She brushed past him and walked into the room.

“Come right in,” he said, drily. “Make yourself at home.”

She did just that as she opened up the case to reveal an assortment of makeup and set it on the desk.

“Take a seat Neil, I’m doing your make up. It’s time you look nice for a change.”

Okay, first of all, rude. He had put on a nice shirt and clean pants (sure the shirt was plain black and neither item was his, but still. He had made an effort.)

“I dressed up.”

“Yes, and I noticed that, Neil. You look very nice. Now sit your butt down.”

He made his way over to the desk chair and sat. “I don’t know why you’re bothering. I’m not even going to be on stage.” He turned to face her, but her fingers held his face in place as she began to apply foundation. “I thought you wanted us sophomores to go down.”

“Oh, it’s not a want Neil, it’s a fact. Us upperclassmen are going to crush you.” She powdered the bridge of his nose. “However, that doesn’t mean I want to send you out there looking less than the
best. We are friends after all.”

He rolled his eyes. “Um, thanks, I guess.”

He sat still in the chair as Allison applied his stage makeup. “Allison?”

“Allison?”

“How do you get makeup that can cover things up?”

“Like what?” She dipped her brush into some powder. “Like a scar or something?”

He swallowed heavily. “Yes.”

Allison stared at him steadily before setting down the brush. “They have special makeup that can cover scars. It’s just a matter of getting your hands on it. Some of it is even waterproof.” She pulled away from him and lifted up the hem of her shirt showing off her hip bone. “I had my appendix removed when I was a kid. Before they had that new method of doing it that barely left a mark. However, I still wanted to wear bikinis so I found a way to cover it up.” He stared at her relatively unmarred skin.

“I don’t ever know why you felt you needed to cover it up; you can’t really notice it.”

“I don’t. Anymore that is.” She dropped her shirt and went back to the makeup. “I used to be a lot more concerned with how I looked. Perfectionist sort of thing. I wanted everything to be perfect, but that wasn’t always something I could easily do. But makeup? I could do that. It gave me control over my life. I could cover my dance bruises. I also used have these nightmare-worthy bags under my eyes, Neil. I looked like death.” She waved it off with a flutter of her fingers. “But with makeup I didn’t have to look like that. I used to get away with so much shit because I was good at covering it up.” She chuckled darkly. “I’m fucking amazing at covering things up, Neil. If you look pretty enough people don’t ask questions.”

Neil laughed along with her. “Speaking of pretty,” she continued, taking out an eyeliner pencil, “you should really let me do something with your hair or wardrobe or something. Bring you into this century.”

“I look fine.”

“Have you noticed that every time you use the word ‘fine’ you use it wrong?”

“Ha-ha.”

“I’m serious, though.”

“I just don’t want to stand out much.”

Allison looked at him in the eye before she doubled over laughing. “Neil. You have to be kidding me. You are so not invisible. You are friends of like, half of the popular kids and even if you aren’t friends with someone, they know you.” She pulled out the blush brush and began dusting his cheeks. “Besides, your clothes only draw attention. They make you look like your homeless. I think people are probably starting to wonder how you parents let you leave the house like that,” she said gesturing to his whole entity. She held out her hands and wriggled her fingers at him until he put his hands in hers. “Join me Neil. Be pretty with me.”

“People will assume things.”
“Neil, have you ever heard of the halo effect.”

“Uh, no.”

“It’s basically when people see a positive thing in someone and then they assume all sorts of other good things about them. Beauty can be one of those good things people notice. So if you’re beautiful, people may be more inclined to assume good things about you.”

“I don’t want them to assume anything about me. If I dress nice that makes it seem like I’m put together and then people might want to date me.”

“Neil, honey, people already want to date you.”

“But I don’t.”

She raise a perfect brow. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t want to date.” He looked at her confused face and sighed. He was tempered to run his hand over his face but stopped himself just in time, remembering the makeup Allison had painstakingly applied, and let his hand fall to his side. “I still don’t swing.”

“At all? Even for dating?”

“I just don’t swing,” he shrugged.

She sighed. “You’re a strange one, little man. But I respect that.”

The door burst open and Andrew walked in, stopping abruptly when he realized Neil wasn’t alone. He studied their positions and his eyes strayed on Neil’s face for a moment, a strange look passing over his face. “The play’s starting in an hour. We better head over there.” and he turned on his heel and left.

“No appreciation for my art. I don’t know what I expected. Come on Neil.”

Neil was hesitant to leave. Andrew stared at him like he had something on his face. What if Allison made him look like a clown or something? (She probably hadn’t, but she was also really fucking competitive, so there was that.) He edged a glance at the mirror in Allison’s case and breathed a sigh of relief. Turned out Andrew was just being weird. He double checked that his shirt covered his scars and then followed Allison out of the room.

***

The night of the first performance was opening to a large crowd. The fact that many of the kids were on sports teams helped to bring in a large group of their friends and admirers. Nicky and the other foxes had made point of coming too. Nicky claimed it was to be supportive, but Andrew thought it was more that he wanted to see what a disaster it would be. Aaron hadn’t held back from saying what a mess the whole thing had been so far and Nicky hadn’t been shy about telling the others. Now they were here and they were doing nothing to stop themselves from expressing their every opinion.

Allison wrinkled her nose. “Who was in charge of the costumes?”

“No one,” Neil replied, answering the millionth question the foxes had thrown the sophomore’s way.

“That much was obvious.” She glanced around, unimpressed. “It looks like everyone just draped
bedsheets over their shoulders.” When they didn’t say anything her eyes widened. “Fuck, I was joking. Did they really?”

“Yes.”

Allison threw back her head, laughing. “You sophomores are so going down. We’re going to wipe the floor with you.”

Andrew shrugged. “Probably.”

That only caused her to laugh harder.

Renee came up to him and Neil and smiled. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Neil said, giving her an almost smile. They had been getting along better since they had tried to beat the shit out of each other.

“You’re going to need it.”

“Hey.”

She smiled sweetly and walked away.


Andrew could only shrug. “Don’t look at me.”

Neil rolled his eyes and went back behind the stage.

They only had thirty minutes left until the performance began.

This was going to be a disaster.

***

Neil made his way backstage and was unsurprised to find it in state of complete and utter chaos. He was the before-the-play stage manager, since everyone was supposed to be able to handle themselves once the play began. Neil didn’t have as much faith in his peers as Mr. Howard did, but he found he didn’t care since that meant he could go sit in the light booth with Andrew once the play began.

Neil would barely admit it and he would face the pain of death before saying it out loud, but he would have rather hang out in the secluded corner with Katelyn and Aaron in the moments leading up to the play, then stay out in the middle hearing Jones prattle on and on about the kiss. But, unfortunately, he couldn’t.

He found the fake swords and place them in the proper location (they didn’t even look real, not in the slightest) and made sure everyone had their costumes ready.

“Neil!”

He turned to see who was calling him.

Alicia. Great.

“Yeah?”
“Could you help me? With my costume?”

He fought back the urge to roll his eyes. “Sure.”

He walked over to her.

“I need you to tie the knot for the shoulder strap.

“Sure, whatever.”

“Thanks. I would have used a safety pin, but I thought that this would be more authentic.”

“They didn’t wear togas in the 1600s, so I think any attempt at authenticity is shot.”

She shrugged and pulled her hair out of the way and he got to work tying it. Bed sheets weren’t really classy items of clothing, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t make the knot look like anything more than a sloppy mess.

“Here you go.”

“It’s wonderful.” She said, fluttering her eyelashes at him. That was the biggest fucking lie- oh.

Oh, no.

“Bye, Alicia. Got to keep moving, you know?” he said, gesturing around him vaguely.

She looked confused. “Uh yeah. Okay.

Shit. What was he going to do? He couldn’t change schools. Not this far into the year. That would be too suspicious. If only he were still on the run. Then he could have changed his identity and run.

Stupid high school and stupid crushes. Fuck. Okay. Neil, it’ll be fine. Two and three-fourth years to go. Eleven-fourths, if you will.

“Hey, Neil could play this song when it gets to the kiss-”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” he grabbed the drive from Jones’ hands.

He couldn’t wait for this play to be over.

***

Renee somehow managed to wave at Andrew from where leaned outside the booth. He nodded to her. Nicky followed her gaze and out and up and waved excitedly.

They slid into their seats and Mr. Howard waved at him to start and he walked into the box and slid into the control seat and dimmed the lights.

Wright made it to the front of the stage to give the introduction. The curtains jerkily parted to display the town center. The starting players walked out, bedsheets tied like togas over their jeans and t-shirts. They had opted for partially contemporary and adapted the script accordingly. Their lines were an awkward combination between Shakespearean dialogue and modern lingo.

Aaron walked out to the stage, hands in his pockets, as he said his lines unenthusiastically.

The curtains flung closed much too quickly to provide a smooth transition from scene to scene.
He heard the door open behind him and he flicked his eyes behind him to see Neil sneak in and close the door.

“They don’t need any more of your help on this very special night?”

“Nah, Adam is getting all controlling about it and Jones is freaking out about making the kiss perfect.”

“Going to have to try pretty hard for that.”

Neil laughed. “He actually sent me back because he wanted you to play some music while it happened.”

“What song?”

“Don’t know. He said he wanted it to be a surprise. He said he set it to play.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and plugged it in the player. “I’m not taking the blame when this ultimately fails.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Neither am I. I don’t like to associate with horrible ideas.”

“Other than your own.”

Neil flipped him off

When the scene finally came, he was curious. When the kiss was about to happen he hit play. Suddenly jarring sound burst from the speakers.

-Apple bottom jeans (JEANS)

-Boots with the fur (WITH the FUR)

Jones’s eyes widened as the song began to play and waved his hand saying to change the song.

-The whole club was looking at her

Neil rushed to the circuit board and flipped to the next song.

-Romeo, Take me somewhere we can be alone

-I’ll be waiting, all that’s left to do is run

The words that streamed out of the speakers were much different and Jones looked much more relieved.

Neil wrinkled his face. “Is this Nickelback?”

“I see you’re finally joining this century.”

Neil shot him a look.

“But no, it’s not.”

Neil shrugged.

“How long do you think that were supposed to let this play?”
He shrugged. After the scene was done he flipped off the song. The play stumbled forward awkwardly and Neil wasn’t even hiding his cringe anymore.

Then Juliet was fake-dying in a very over-the-top, dramatic way, ingesting her sleeping drought.

Romeo came upon her in the catacombs, or as they had, an archway made of PBC pipe and draped with a brown packing paper. He leaned forward to kiss her and Andrew turned the song back on. Jones whirled around and Andrew flipped the song back off. Jones frowned, turning back to the stage and leaned forward and kissed her again.

**Romeo, Take me somewhere**

“What are you doing?”

“He said he wanted the song to play when he kissed her. I’m trying to be a team player.”

Neil fell back and cracked up, his face was glowing in the dim light of the light booth and he was radiant. Andrew pulled his eyes away and flicked the music off when the kiss ended.

He did it one more time as Juliet woke back up to find Romeo dead and she pressed his lips to her own to get the poison.

**You never have to be alone**

*I love you and that’s all I really know*

“There all a bunch of dumbasses,” he couldn’t help but say

“The characters in the play or the actors playing them?”

“The characters.”

Neil hummed. “He could have run.”

“And you’re familiar with running, right?”

Neil shot him a dirty look. “The first rule of running was not to go back, and that you needed to make a plan. I knew that.”

“Not everyone has been raised like you.”

“And they just couldn’t resist each other? Really. That doesn’t make sense. Just don’t have sex.”

“Neil, you’re ace.”

“Wait,” and Neil’s eyes widened, “so people really do that? They really want to just have sex with people because they are good looking?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. Okay.” They sat in silence a moment, Neil fiddling with his shoelaces, before he piped back up.
“Does that mean you do that, too? But you don’t have sex with anyone.”

“I made out with Roland.”


The play finished and the curtains shut in a rush.

They left the light booth after most of the audience had left and made their way backstage to where the students had stored their stuff before the play.

“Minyard!”

He turned around and stared at Jones and Howard with a cool eye as they approached, Jones fuming.

“What the hell was that?”

“Josten said you wanted to have that song play during the kiss.”

“But you played it during every one of them.”

“You never clarified which kiss you were talking about.”

“And that was the wrong song.”

“Dude, that was your fault,” Neil butt in. “I started the first song. It was set on that.”

“I’m surprised you were even paying attention, Minyard,” Jones bit out, “considering what we saw in practice.”

“I’m surprised,” Andrew replied cooly, “you even know your lines based on what we saw in practice.”

He knew saying that probably wasn’t worth almost getting punched in the face by a douchebag. But hearing Neil crack up the entire way back to Marbury maybe was.

***

They were alone at Wymack’s. It was unusual, needless to say, but here they were. The other foxes were off who-knows-where and Wymack had taken Kevin out to the grocery store so they could do some father-son bonding. Aka, spending thirty minutes in the vegetable aisle while Kevin discussed the merits of kale vs spinach. Not exactly Andrew’s idea of a good time, but it seemed to bring Wymack and Kevin closer, so he supposed things didn’t always have to make sense.

He was sitting on the couch, body nestled next to the cushions to preserve his body heat, while Neil was sitting at the kitchen table drawing with a blanket wrapped around his body.

Andrew was currently in the middle of an internal debate, his fingers tap-tap-tapping on the notebook in his hands. There was a part of him that wanted to show the words to someone, the part of him that had wanted to tell Bee about Drake, the part of him that wanted to hope, the part of him that wanted to live. But this part of himself was warring with the side that wanted to hide the words away, and hide them under his bed where no one could see them.

Fuck it.

“Neil,” he drawled, and he flapped his notebook in the air obnoxiously, knowing Neil knew what he
was offering. He threw out the offer like it meant nothing, as if he wouldn’t be crushed if Neil didn’t care about his music, even though Andrew was, essentially, baring his soul like this.

Neil was over with him almost before he could blink. Andrew was a little startled at the speed, but took the seat by the piano anyway. Neil settled next to him and draped the other edge of the blanket over his shoulders, as if he knew Andrew was cold.

He swallowed and played the introduction, the notes hastily scribbled on the paper in front of him.

\[
\begin{align*}
I've \text{ always been afraid of heights, } \\
Of \text{ falling backwards, of falling backwards} \\
I've \text{ been worried all my life} \\
'Til one day I had enough \\
Of this exercise of trust \\
I leaned in and let it hurt. \\
Let my body feel the dirt. \\
When I break pattern, I break ground \\
I rebuild when I break down \\
I wake more awake than I've ever been before \\
Still I'm pinned under the weight \\
Of what I believed would keep me safe \\
So show me where my armor ends. \\
Show me where my skin begins \\
Like a final puzzle piece, \\
It all makes perfect sense to me... \\
The heaviness that I hold in my heart belongs to gravity \\
The heaviness that I hold in my heart's been crushing me
\end{align*}
\]

His fingertip touched the last key and he breathed in. And out. And he turned to look at Neil.

Neil’s eyes were wide with wonder and amazement, his face one if the most beautiful things Andrew had ever seen. And, for a split second, Andrew was tempted to look behind him to see what could possibly deserve that look.

But he knew there was no one behind him. That Neil could only be looking at him.

And, for a split second, he couldn’t help but think Neil must be the stupidest idiot in the world if he was going to waste that look on him.

And, for a split second, Andrew wanted to kiss him.
And, in that split second, Andrew knew he was well and truly fucked.

***

For all of the light that I’ve shut out

For all of the innocent things that I doubt

For all of these bruises I’ve caused and the tears

For all of the things that I’ve done all these years

Yeah, for all of the sparks that I’ve stomped out

For all of the perfect things that I doubt

I’ll be good, I’ll be good

Chapter End Notes

Hope y'all like it! Thanks for reading.
Andrew was the one who ended up finding the apartment listed in an online ad.

He found it while he sat in the library at the second half of lunch, mind too distracted to do homework. The day of their hearing for their emancipation was drawing closer and closer, meaning his days at Marbury were numbered. They had filled out the paperwork and Bee had looked over everything with him, meaning it was quite likely that they would find themselves no longer welcome at Marbury.

His mind was going too fast, thinking too much, and he needed to focus it. So he researched the places online. It was easy to rule a lot of the places out. Too gaudy, too expensive, too far away.

He finally came across one in a shady looking neighborhood with cheap rent. It was listed as a studio, but Andrew knew from the superfluous description that it likely wasn’t that nice. He printed out the paper and shoved it in his backpack to take it back to Marbury to show Neil.

He couldn’t show him then, as Neil was busy keeping up appearances and sitting with his table-mates subtly doodling on his notebook paper instead of doing homework. He had been around Neil long enough to know what Neil looked like when he was trying to avoid his homework. It looked quite similar to his resting face, actually.

He impatiently waited for the day to end before he walked to Marbury with Neil.

They tossed their backpacks in the corner of their room and he reached inside his to pull out the slightly crumpled ad.

Neil smoothed it out and glanced it over before giving Andrew a curt nod. He folded it in half and
put it in his pocket. “When did you want to check it out?”

Andrew shrugged. “Now.”

Neil nodded. “Okay, let’s go.”

They pulled on their jackets and made their way to the bus stop. Andrew looked at the stop list and figured out the route they needed to take. They climbed on and sat in the middle, close to the sliding doors.

The complex was relatively close to their stop and they made their way to the head office. The door was unlocked so they let themselves in.

The landlord was leaning back in his chair, feet propped up on the desk. His leather shoes were scuffed, his striped shirt was covered in stains, and what little hair he had left was styled in a streaky comb-over. He about fell out of his chair when he saw them enter, but quickly regained his composure.

“Hello! The name is Scott. How can I help you lads today?”

Neil wordlessly pulled the ad out of his pocket and handed it to the man

He took one glance at the flyer in Neil’s hands and then led them out of the office to the apartment complex. The complex looked more like a shitty motel than a set of apartment buildings, but again, Andrew wasn’t really picky. And he wouldn’t have been surprised if that was the original intention of the building.

Scott led them up the stairs to a room on the second floor landing. The landlord just gave then a quick sidelong glance before showing them up to the apartment.

It was barely one, Andrew found. The kitchen that had enough of everything they needed and had just enough room for a table. It was divided from the living area by a mid-height counter. The living space was big enough to fit a bed and maybe a bookcase. There was a shallow bathroom next to a closet and that was all.

It was a bit run down, but it was still in relatively good condition. The linoleum floor was worn but there were no strange stains and there were no dead bodies hidden anywhere, which was always a good thing, he supposed. It would more than suffice. It wasn’t the nicest place he had lived, but it would be his. He would get to choose who came and left. Well, him and Neil.

He found himself looking at Neil once he finished his evaluation of the place, taking in the look in Neil’s eyes. It was a strange mix of wonder and contemplation, and Andrew knew Neil was going through a detailed deliberation process himself.

When Neil finally broke out of whatever daze he was in, he made eye contact with Andrew, eyes imploring. He wanted to know what Andrew thought and Andrew knew that they could read each other’s opinions the moment they met each other’s eyes. In that instant Andrew knew that that was where they were going to live. They had both decided on it. Together.

He had to look away. He shouldn’t be thinking so much about this, but he couldn’t stop. The last time he was going to move in with someone, the last time he really tried to commit, it hadn’t turned out well.

He should have known better then. Hell, he should know better now. Should have been smarter than to tie himself to this loose cannon. A part of himself reminded him that this was all just a temporary
arrangement, that they were just roommates, sharing rent for the time being. But as he looked at Neil, who was studying and checking the appliances and cracks on the walls, it didn’t feel that way. He tore his eyes away.

It didn’t do to fixate on impossible things.

He just had to ignore these stupid feelings, this stupid pipedream. But it was hard ignore when he saw their names signed together on the lease to the apartment and it was hard to ignore when the landlord gave them that thick envelope that held their keys. The envelope weighed more than he thought it should. It wasn’t heavy, but it still felt substantial.

The weight of something.

***

The weight of the hearing was constantly on Neil’s mind and he constantly rehearsed what he was going to say over and over in his mind. Apparently his responses were so abysmal, Wymack had to be recruited to help him. Apparently, Neil was “too blunt” and “a bit of an ass.” And apparently, nobody trusted him enough to figure out what he was going to say without supervision, hence Wymack teaching him how to use dumb, adult language.

“Listen kid,” Wymack pulled up a chair and sat down in front of him, “you have to speak in a way they’re going to want to hear.”

Neil groaned and flopped back. “But it’s stupid.”

“I know.”

“How are you so good at this?”

Wymack barely spared him a glance. “They have a night class when you turn eighteen.”

Neil groaned again. “Okay, fine. How about this- let me out so I can stop costing the state thousands of dollars a year.”

“Neil. You have to make it seem like you’re going to be a contributing member of society.”

“But society sucks.”

“Don’t I know it, kid.’ Wymack rubbed his forehead and then leaned forward, as if he were about to impart some precious knowledge. “Look, lie if you have to. Make it convincing.”

Oh.

Didn’t that make things more interesting? He sat back up and leaned closer to the table, pen poised, ready to write.

He was going to lie the shit out of this.

***

“Game night.” Allison dropped her binder on the table. “Everyone’s going.”

“I don’t know,” Neil muttered, barely looking up from his sketch. “I don’t know how they work.”

Allison looked like she aged ten years in one second before she shook her head and continued. “Ah,
I see you mistook me Neil. I said everyone going. A statement. Not a question. Do you have plans before that?

“What?”

“Game night, as the name indicates, is at night. There is more than night in a day. Everybody is going to be busy. Even the monster will be doing stuff- he’s hanging out with Renee.” A small look of distaste flashed across all of the upperclassmen’s faces aside from Renee, who was either serenely ignoring it or just not seeing it.

“I guess not…”

“Great.” She clapped her hands together, pleased. “I was hoping you’d say that. I’m going to take you out to get a suit for your hearing.”

“I don’t need.”

“Honey, you do. You’ve grown three inches since spring fling. You need to make a good impression.”

He sighed in resignation. “Fine. But I have-”

“Yes, yes, I know you have work.” A wicked smile spread across her lips. “I’ll get you in the afternoon.”

***

Shopping was awful. It was absolutely terrible. No good. 0/10. Would not recommend.

The clothes all started to look the same after a while, even though Allison insisted No, Neil. They aren’t the same every time he brought it up.

Despite participating in the soul-sucking activity otherwise known as shopping, he didn’t have a horrible time, overall. Allison was a machine, flipping through the racks of clothes with a single-minded focus that Neil had only previously seen on his father or Lola when they were trying to extract information from a particularly non-forthcoming witness. This in comparison, was much more welcome.

She refused to have the wool pulled over her eyes and she was merciless when evaluating the quality of the suits. It was ruthless and he couldn’t help but like it.

***

Neil stared at his reflection distastefully, messing with his tie. Andrew was tempted to get up and tie it for him before Neil knotted up so much he wouldn’t be able to get it off.

“I don’t like it. Why would someone purposely wear a suit?” He fumbled awkwardly with his tie one more time before taking it off and folding it up. He had just come back from his excursion with Allison and was showing Andrew the discount suit he had bought for the hearing. They had finished up faster than expected, probably because it was Neil, so they still had a few hours before they went over to Wymack’s for game night. “I mean you wore a suit. You wore it for spring fling! When you took Renee, and you don’t even like her like that.”

“I still tolerate her.”
Neil’s hands fell and a smirk spread across his lips. “Wow. If you only tolerate Renee, I wonder what you’d look like in love.”

“You make it sound like I look like I’m in love with her.”

Neil waved him off. “I know, I know. Renee told me you’re both gay. But everybody that looks at the two of you together thinks you like each other.”

“Heteronormativity.”

Neil shrugged. “Maybe. But just because you don’t love someone sexually or romantically doesn’t mean you don’t love them. And it doesn’t mean they don’t love you.”

Andrew frowned. “94%”

***

They got to Wymack’s and the apartment looked vastly different. The furniture was moved to the side and there were boxes of games to play out on the tables. Allison, Dan, Matt, Nicky, and Kevin looked like they were about to engage in a particularly ruthless game of Life.

“Hey, Neil!” Matt called out. “Andrew,” he added as an afterthought.

“Hey,” Neil replied and he set down his bag.

Allison glanced over at him. “You want to play with us?” she asked, offering up a tiny plastic car.

He shook his head. “No thanks.” Andrew walked over to Aaron, who was on his phone, and pulled out a box from the stack on the table. Aaron glanced at him then back at his phone before his eyes shot back over to Andrew. He typed a quick message into his phone and then turned it off, tossing it to the side. “You’re so on.”

Andrew nodded before turning the box over onto the table, taking out the board and a set of plastic pieces that all came with of the game and they quickly got to setting it up.

Andrew raised a brow but Neil shook his head.

He felt someone come up beside him, a gentle nudge to his elbow. “Hey, Neil.”

“Hey, Renee.” He glanced over to where the other upperclassmen and Kevin were setting up Life. “You aren’t playing.”

She laughed. “Not right now. Do you want to play with me?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Twister,” she gestured to the box under her arm. “It sort of needs three people, but we could play it with the two of us and take turns spinning the spinner.”

And because he was an idiot and had never played twister before, he said yes.

Twenty moves later they were twisted around each other like pretzels and were having a harder time spinning the spinner than actually playing the game. The twins were deadlocked in their game and The Game of Life was getting particularly vicious.

“Kevin I swear I will sign your little plastic man up for a vasectomy if you keep having kids and
taking all of the life tiles.”

“Leave me, my wife, and our eight kids alone, Dan!”

Neil didn’t know what was going on but he wasn’t really sure he wanted to know.

He looked at Renee, her rainbow hair almost touching the plastic sheet, and a question bubbled up inside him.

“Renee?” he pitched voice low, so that none other than her could hear him.

“How did you know you were gay?”

She looked at him. “Is this a real question, or are you trying to throw me off?”

“Real question.”

“Okay.” She contemplated it and blew her hair of her eyes. “It was a lot of things. But it was kind of impossible to ignore when I got a crush.”

“You liked someone?”

“I like-like someone” she said absently, and Neil didn’t miss the way her eyes involuntarily looked over to the side a little, and Neil found the words before she did.

“Allison.”

She smiled shyly, but bittersweet. “Yeah.”

“How did you know? That you liked her.”

Renee flicked the spinner.

“Left hand green,” she read, before turning back to him. “I don’t know. I guess I thought she was pretty.”


“He looks like Andrew,” Renee deadpanned.

“Not really.”

Renee mercifully let it go. “I don’t know. I mean I want to kiss her, I guess. Hold her hand, do her hair.”

“Do you see her and want to date her? Right foot blue.”

“I mean, I guess.” She moved her foot to blue. “But dating is just one of those things. It’s always out there.”

Neil made a face. “Really?”

Renee paused. “Do you not?”

“Not what?”
“Thinking about dating.”

“I mean, I thought it was this mandatory thing. A means to an end sort of thing. Or something in movies. But people actually like them?”

“Yeah.” She paused. “Do you think it’s one of those asexual things?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Nicky you son of a bitch!!”

“Should have held firmer to that salary card Allison.”

He flicked the spinner. “Left hand green.”

And he shot his hand out and took the spot she was going to go for. He looked her dead in the eyes. She was only able to meet his eyes for a few seconds before her lips began to twitch and a small laugh came out. It startled him so much that his hand slipped and sent them both toppling to the ground. The fall just sent the both of them laughing until it was hard to breathe, Renee curled up and clutching her stomach until tears were forming in her eyes.

He was drawing attention to himself and he knew that if his mother was still alive, she would have hit him for being so loud, but he found he didn’t care.

***

It had been over a year since Andrew had last been to the courthouse, but he was unsurprised to find that nothing had really changed. Sure, there were new faces at the reception desk, but the chambers were all the same.

Neil’s leg was shaking up and down as they waited to be called in and give their testimony. It wouldn’t be the end if they didn’t get their emancipation, but it would make things ten times more difficult if they didn’t. The thought of being put into another foster house, the thought of Neil getting thrown in one, were all unwelcome.

The actual interview portion was overall underwhelming. The questions were standard, not varying much from the ones Bee had trained him with. He was sent back out into the hallway with Neil as the deliberation took place. He scratched his nails along the rough material of the waiting chairs and Neil twisted his fingers and nails into the bumpy plastic of the armrests.

A woman with a beehive hairdo and pearl jewelry came out to them and ushered them back inside. There was a twisting nervousness inside his stomach as he waited for the verdict.

The judge spoke for a long time, words as interesting as drying paint. But the droning voice did not stop Neil or him from latching on to the decision.

“Your emancipation request has been approved. It will take two to three business weeks to get you your paper work”

They left the courthouse and there was a part of him that couldn’t believe it. Neil was grinning from ear to ear in way Andrew could only imagine would be painful. He couldn’t smile, it had been so long he was no longer sure he knew how. So he placed his hand firmly on the back of Neil’s neck and if anything, Neil’s grin grew wider, and Andrew knew that that would be enough.

***
They filled up their apartment as they waited for their emancipation to become official. They didn’t have much money to cover everything, but they had enough for an air mattress, sheets, a fold-out table, a couple of folding chairs, and a low bookcase. They got most of their things at garage sales, but they splurged on the air mattress and sheets. They both didn’t say anything as Andrew pulled the single air mattress of the shelf at the store, though he lingered long enough for Neil to grab another one if he wanted to. But, for some reason, Neil couldn’t bring himself to do so.

It remarkably easy to get everything set up. And simple. The other foxes still couldn’t believe that they had opted to share an apartment, and they would no doubt be shocked to find out how close they would be living. Same room, same bed.

They borrowed an air pump from Abby of all people, who apparently went camping a lot, and used the pump to blow up the bed. The put it in the living room up against the wall underneath a window.

But one of Neil’s favorite places was the kitchen counter. He found himself sitting there at night and realized it was the perfect height to work on his art. He was still relatively private about what he drew, though he knew that Andrew had seen it before when he had looked through his binder almost two years ago. But, despite that, Neil knew Andrew didn’t look at it anymore, not without Neil’s permission.

Along with Neil’s art supplies and their mutual kitchen equipment, the counter was also home to Andrew’s radio. Andrew wasn’t picky about the station, but he would play it while he cooked or did his homework. He also let Neil have his go at it.

Neil often found himself listening to it in the late hours of the night when Andrew was gone, or the times when neither of them could sleep. The music an easy rhythm between their discordant sleep schedules.

Some nights, he would sit there at the counter and just listen to the music, remembering that one moment in the past. That memory of his parents, some sort of romanticized version of basic human decency that he was half-convinced his brain had made up to give him sort of relief from all his other traumatic memories. But all the same, he savored it. The time he had.

He replayed that memory of his parents dancing together, the one time they had almost seemed normal, almost seemed loving. But it was tainted by the abuse that followed.

The memory was growing bitter.

***

The nights were quiet between them, but there were times when Neil’s eyes grew distant and would fill with special sort of wistfulness that somehow made him look both older and younger at the same time.

“You’re thinking about it again, aren’t you?” Andrew found himself saying.

Neil looked over, eyes distant. They became clearer as he snapped out of his reverie. He blinked until he formed some sort of comprehension of what Andrew said. He swallowed, but he didn’t look away.

“Yeah.”

The word hung between them. Andrew knew Neil’s feelings and memories of his parents were convoluted, just as much as Neil knew of Andrew’s distaste for Mr. and Mrs. Josten. But as much as he wanted to tell him, to show him what they were, show him their abuse, he stopped himself.
He couldn’t, not rightfully. Not when he still clung to those memories of Cass, purposely trying to ignore how they had been tainted by her son. But that was a rabbit hole he wouldn’t go down. He turned his attention back to Neil. To the dream-like state of his being, the far-off look in his eyes.

Andrew swallowed and felt like he was swallowing ash. “Do you want to?”

“What?” Neil asked.

He didn’t have the words to say what he wanted to say. He never really had. He had tried for years, to be heard. When he had told his abusers to stop, when he had told Luther the truth. The only ones who listened were so few. He couldn’t risk misinterpretation and he couldn’t risk losing his nerve.

He walked over the table and folded the legs and the chairs, setting them to the side. He held out a hand.

Neil looked over at him before nodding. The music was light in the background so he turned it up a little, until he wasn’t sure if the thrumming in his veins was due to the music or the own heart.

“Just one.”

Neil nodded.

Andrew hesitated just a moment and hovered one hand over Neil’s waist.

“Yes or no.”

“Yes.” Neil held his hand until it was up by Andrew’s shoulder, eyebrows forming the question.

“Yes. Just there.”

And Neil put his hand on his shoulder and his other in Andrew’s own.

Neil swayed with him, they were close, closer than they usually were. Their bodies almost touching but not quite.

My dark heart lit up the skies.

Now that I’ve worn out.

I’ve worn out the world

A part of him wanted them to be closer, another part wanted him to be farther, but he almost couldn’t hear the battle between his mind and his heart over the vibrations in his chest, beating in time with the music.

They were so close.

It was too much, it had to be be too much for Neil, too. Neil was always thrown off by intimacy, by people flirting with him.

Surely Neil could feel his pulse racing from where their hands met. He was used to being as impassive as stone, but this close Neil could start to see the cracks in his façade. Stone didn’t breathe, it didn’t live, and it didn’t have blood pulsing through it. But the hand in Neil’s own was made of flesh. And he was utterly, undeniably human.

But Andrew couldn’t ignore the way Neil’s breath hitched as they drew closer or the way he
shuttered when they inched impossibly closer, as close as they could get without touching. Their faces were near the others shoulder and he could feel the tickle of Neil’s breath against his neck, could feel the way it made him shiver, nearly shake. He wanted to pull him closer. He wanted to lean forward, to press his lips against Neil’s own. He wanted Neil to want him. He wanted, he wanted, oh he wanted. Want only made him hungry for something he could never have. But for now, just for now this could be enough

*But I’m reflecting light*

***

When they had moved in, they had found the complex to be pretty quiet. It was strange contrast to the shouting and running that he had heard from the hallway for the past year and a half at Marbury.

Neil had lived in apartments like this before when he was on the run with his mother. The people tended to be quiet, minding their own business, keeping out of everyone else’s. You could usually count on them to keep their mouths shut if the cops came by. It was basically like the security of a small town, only smaller. But much more private. He and Andrew managed to bring all their stuff up to their apartment without running into one of their neighbors.

But running into one of them eventually was inevitable.

It happened on a Tuesday, when Neil ran down to the office to check their mailbox and also ran into an older lady walking past.

She blinked at him.

“Oh. You’re new.”

Neil nodded. She was short, shorter than him, and had a thick Russian accent.

“You must have been the one that moved in next door. I’m 207.”

“208.” He held up his key, displaying the number.

“Well, you must come to dinner. Or lunch. I hear you leaving at the same time as my Anna.”

“Oh,” he was confused. Was this normal? Having dinner with strangers. “I’ll run it by my roommate.”

“Saturday,” she said, poking him in the chest with her mail. “Noon. Do not be late.”

***

Neil walked into the apartment, confused. It wasn’t the first time this had happened, but it always threw Andrew for a loop because Neil wasn’t someone who became easily confused. It only seemed to happen when he was put in a social situation.

“So, uh, I just got asked to dinner.”

“Leave for five minutes and you already have date. What a ladies man,” he replied sarcastically.

“She actually invited both of us.”

“Kinky.” He flipped the page of his book.
Neil scoffed and walked over to the fridge. “Threesomes aren’t really my thing.”

“And women aren’t mine.” Andrew added dryly.

“It was the older woman who lives next door. And it was lunch actually.”

“And why would we go?”

“Free food?”

He weighed the option and acquiesced. He nodded.

“Okay.”

***

They stood outside the door awkwardly as they waited for someone to answer their knock.

Dear God, what if she hadn’t said Saturday?

Neil was busy contemplating how fast he could leave before anyone could realize his mistake when he heard the turning of a key in the door’s lock. The door opened to reveal a very tired looking woman who couldn’t have been older than twenty-five.

“Oh, you must be the neighbors. I’m Anna.” She opened the door wider and let them pass through. They easily found the table. This apartment was slightly bigger than their own, as it wasn’t on the corner, but it was still easy to find the table. The older woman was sitting there as well as a young girl about six.

“This is my mother Vanya, and my daughter, Sasha.”

Vanya stood up, the girl clinging to her leg. Andrew eyed Sasha warily.

“Oh yes, I met this young man at the office on rent day. I never caught your name.”

“Neil. And this is Andrew.”

Vanya studied them before nodding. “We were about to eat. Join us.”

Neil exchanged a look with Andrew and he shrugged at their silent conversation. Andrew pealed himself away from the doorway and walked into the apartment. They settled around the table and began dishing up their food.

“You two are very young to be out here on your own. Your parents must be worried,” Vanya said, filling their plates.

“Don’t have any,” Andrew said bluntly.

She quirked her eyebrow at that.

“We emancipated and moved out,” Andrew clarified.

“Ah. Well, I admire your dedication. My late husband, Victor, and I moved here years ago with not much else than the clothes off our backs. I admire your dedication to each other. I imagine it can’t be easy, even in this day in age, to be so open about it all.”
“We just moved out.” Neil replied, not really getting why she was making a big deal of it.

“We don’t judge. I hope you two are happy.”

Before Neil could ask what she meant, Andrew cut in.

“We’re not together.”

_Oh._

“Oh. I’m sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“It’s no big deal.” Neil shrugged. A look passed over Andrews face but he didn’t ask about it because they were surrounded by strangers.

The meal went rather smoothly after that and the food was delicious. About halfway through it became clear that Sasha seemed to have taken a liking to Neil. Her eyes flicked over to her grandmother and she asked something rapidly in Russian. The grandmother nodded, just as Anna let out an exhausted sound.

“They don’t need to meet-” she started to say, but it was pointless as Sasha was soon out of the room.

The girl came back with a little ball of fluff in her arms. She sat it down in front of Neil expectantly, smiling. Neil hesitantly put his hand out and pet it. Its tiny head poked up, blinking sleepily. Its fur was so soft under his fingers and he looked over at Andrew, wide-eyed.

Sasha looked between them, smiling happily.

“This is my cat Luna. Luna is Spanish for moon.”

“She learned that in school. She was very proud,” Anna said, and underneath the exhaustion Neil could detect the pride in her voice.

“I bet.” Andrew said seriously as he subtly inched forward and held his hand out to Luna. She sniffed his hand before leaning forward into his outstretched palm, nuzzling it softly. Neil smiled at the sight and turned back to Anna.

“How long have you lived here?”

“A few years. Sasha’s father wasn’t-” she paused before shaking her head as if she were trying in vain to shake away the memory of him. “It wasn’t good. So we left and came here. This place has cheap rent, but it’s hard still.”

“Where do you two work?”

“Andrews a busboy at Eden’s and I’m a file clerk.”

They nodded and said nothing about their career choices, which was a relief. He wasn’t really in the mood for a lot of questions.

“It’s hard to get money with school. We can’t drop out and everything.”

Vanya nodded.

The afternoon passed quickly, with idle chatter, until Anna had to go to work. They thanked them
for the food and waved goodbye.

They settled in their apartment, Andrew closing the door behind them.


“You talk about Luna like she’s new to you. Have you never seen a cat before?”

“I have, I’ve just never gotten to pet one.”

Andrew looked incredulous. “How have you never pet a cat?”

“Didn’t really have a chance. Did you pet it? It was so soft.”

Andrew grunted in affirmation and went to make some coffee.

He poured himself a cup and Neil followed behind him and settled next to where Andrew sat in silence. They sat there comfortably for a while, Neil easily sipping the coffee as it cooled.

“Do you want to learn Russian?”

Neil looked over at Andrew, eyebrow shooting up.

“What brought this up?”

Andrew shrugged as if pretending to be casual. Neil could tell it wasn’t.

“It would just be us who knew it. We could get pointers from the neighbors. They aren’t a threat.”

Neil hummed into the rim of his coffee mug. He knew he had been assessing them, but it was nice to see Andrew confirm his own opinion. There was no way they would be able to meet new people without assessing their risk. Neil knew it wasn’t considered normal for most people, but he honestly couldn’t imagine what it was like to assume the best about people. He supposed it must be nice, comforting even, to live in that sort of blissful ignorance. He and Andrew had been shocked and dragged from that world before their first memories were etched into their brains. He knew he could never become someone like that. The scars and blood that had stained and tinted his world made it impossible.

Being around Andrew, though he was beginning to see things differently. Neil could only assume the horrible things that Andrew had seen to make his eyes faded and dull, masked and shuttered. What things had made him so distrustful. But Neil didn’t have to explain why he hesitated, why he didn’t trust. Andrew understood. Andrew was closed off, not trusting anyone to stand by him and protect him. Neil was the same.

And yet, it was so easy to let Andrew fill the space beside him. He wasn’t accepting, but he understood, and that was more than he was ever able to get from anyone in his life. Wymack was there for him, but Neil was always hesitant to tell him the horrible things he had done, the dead bodies he had left in his wake. But he knew Andrew wouldn’t care, wouldn’t judge him. Not for surviving. Not for doing what he had to in order to survive.

They both were survivors, fighters in different ways.

Even his own mother, who had risked and ultimately given up her life for him and getting him to safety, hadn’t understood everything. She didn’t get his curiosity. He had felt the force of her hands as she taught him lesson after lesson, each to guarantee his safety. And he understood, but it didn’t
help them around each other.

And what good had those rules done? He was on his own, without her, and she was nothing more than burnt bones, an imprint on a scorched car, a memory of smoke fading into the California skyline.

But Neil wasn’t there. He was farther from the coast. He was in a town, in his apartment, sitting on the bed he shared with the one person he trusted with his life after his mother.

It scared him, the suddenness of that realization. But as he looked over and studied Andrews still face over his steaming mug, he saw the strength in his features and knew that, even as the urge to run surged through him like adrenaline, he was anchored to Andrew. He wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. He trusted Andrew and he didn’t regret it. He wouldn’t take it back.

“Yes or no?”

And although he knew they were just talking about a language, about words to use with each other, a secret that wasn’t really one, he knew he would say yes to him. Always.

“Yes.”

***

They didn’t really mean to, but they ended up splitting their time between school, work, Wymack’s, and now their neighbors. Anna was usually gone, working several jobs in order to pay for her family. Vanya stayed behind and took care of Sasha most days. She was always willing to let Andrew and Neil come over and even more eager to teach them Russian.

But today they were going someplace else. Andrew had unceremoniously thrown Neil’s jacket in his face and told him they were going out.

Andrew led him off the bus and Neil followed carefully, not asking any questions- yet. Though, if Andrew didn’t make it clear what was going on, he was going to.

Andrew made his way up to the large library. Neil hadn’t stepped foot in it yet, and he hadn’t thought Andrew went there much either. Andrew breezed past several of the shelves of books until he made it to the back. His eyes scanned over the books and pulled two off the shelves. Neil caught the words “English to Russian” on the cover of the first and it clicked. Andrew made his way to the checkout desk and sild the books to the woman sitting there.

“Oh! Hello, Andrew! You doing well?”

Andrew nodded. The woman seemed to be satisfied with his response and scanned his books.

“Here you go. They’re due back on the twenty-fourth.” She looked at Neil and smiled at him and waved as they left.

“I didn’t know you even had a library card.”

Andrew stopped and looked at him. There was a moment of pause before he turned back to the librarian.

“Janice, my friend doesn’t have a library card.”

“Oh, you don’t? Would you like one?”
Neil shot a glare at Andrew and Andrew just returned his glare with a leveled look. Neil huffed. He wasn’t one to back down from a challenge. He turned back to the woman—Janice—and gave her what he hoped was a pleasant grin.

“Sure, thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll be right back.”

Neil turned to him. “Really?”

“You need to work on your smile. You looked pained.”

“Why did you tell her I needed a card?”

“You shouldn’t rely on me to check out books for you.”

Neil held up his hands in mock surrender. “Oh you caught me. I’ve just been using you for your library card.”

Janice came back and Neil filled out the forms quickly and she handed him his card.

“Great! I hope to see more from you—” she glanced at the forms, “—Neil.” She turned to Andrew and gave him a big smile. “I hope we see you more, Andrew.”

Andrew nodded before leading the way out the door.

“When did you get your card?”

“They took us in elementary school. It was some type of field trip or something.”

“Did you come there often?”

Andrew looked at him.

“You know that’s almost a pick up line.”

“Deflecting.”

Andrew turned away and walked back to the bus stop. Neil took that as the end of the conversation and followed him.

They studied the language in the minutes they had to spare, despite how scarce they were. Some days Neil would lean with his head in Andrew’s lap as Andrew ran his fingers through the brunette’s hair as they flipped through the books.

Even though it was more work and should have felt like a burden, something they should have abandoned, it didn’t feel that way. It was liberating as, to Neil, learning new languages reminded him of the feeling of wind through his hair as he poured over the language books with his mother, the tapes on repeat in the background.

Only now it wasn’t like his life was on the line. He was sitting on the bed with Andrew or with Vanya in her kitchen. They were both picking it up fairly quickly, with Vanya happy to switch over to mostly Russian. Neil noticed that Andrew was particularly good with vocabulary. He noticed Andrew could read a page and then remember the words afterwards, even the most innocuous ones. Neil knew that his strength was in pronunciation. He had practiced mimicking accents with his mother, the different inflections of particular regions and dialects, and he could tell Vanya was
impressed with how quickly they were picking it up. Sasha was thrilled. She tended to use simpler Russian which helped quite a bit as well.

It was all new and different, but Neil couldn’t help but welcome the change.

***

One of Andrew’s favorite purchases he had made as an emancipated minor was the bookcase. It was only two shelves high, one for each of them. Neil’s was filled with his “art binder,” sketchbooks, notebooks, and paper, and Andrews’s was filled with cheap paperbacks he got at library and garage sales.

His paperbacks rested on the lower shelves, while all of Neil’s things were on the top ones. He had some cheap water colors and pencils, a package of printer paper and several pens, markers, and crayons. There was space along the linoleum floor in the corner of the room where Neil had laid down some newspaper and would put his art to dry.

There were days, during the long weekends between their respective shifts, where Neil would spend the whole afternoon doing art, letting Andrew watch him work. He filled in space after space on the pages before him. Andrew didn’t know if the places he drew were just burned in his memory or if he was making things up as he went along. Either way they was mesmerizing.

He never drew whimsical places, as he had likely been grounded in the real world long ago, but there was something enchanting about them all the same.

Nevertheless, the art had a sort of magical feel, like these places were real, but they were now Neil’s. Sometimes he was tempted to ask about the cobblestone streets or the expansive bridges woven with locks and promises of love, but the look of pain on Neil’s face when he thought of those things was obvious. Neil wasn’t very expressive, but Andrew knew him well enough for him to notice when those emotions slipped through.

Sometimes, though, Neil would tell stories about a place that he drew, though he never really said where these places were. He told about how young lovers that would go to these bridges, scouring the sides until they found an open space and locked a lock onto it, with their initials on it. They would throw the key into the water and they would say that their love would last as long as their lock stayed attached to the bridge, or forever. Lifetime after lifetime.

Such thoughts were unreal for him to think about. That sort of love. It seemed almost naïve.

Sentimentality was for other people. For dreamers. Part of Andrew almost wished he wasn’t so bitter, that maybe he could have believed in something like that, if things were different.

But if he had lived in this other world where he didn’t know the things he knew about the world, he would be living in ignorance. Bliss, but ignorance.

“Neil.”

“Hmm?”

“Do you ever wish your past hadn’t happened? That your childhood was happy?”

Neil paused, hand frozen. He put his paintbrush back in the water and leaned back.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t want to live through what I’ve been through again, but I can’t imagine living in a world where I hadn’t seen the worst in people, to already know the worst people were
capable of. I don’t think I could even imagine what it would be like to grow up like that. Fuck. How fucked up is that? I can’t even imagine what it would be like to grow up with parents who didn’t hit me.” He grimaced. “You?”

“I can’t really imagine it. What it would be like to happy at all?” He let out a biting, mocking laugh. “Part of me wonders if anything would really be different.”

Neil thought about it before nodding. “But I’m glad there are people out there. Who can put their locks on these bridges. It kind of makes it seem okay, that not everybody has to go through this horrible life. Some people actually live it. And love it. And are happy.”

“There’s that word again. What is happiness, really?

“I don’t know if I know yet. I’m still trying to figure it out.” Neil stared off at the wall, tapping his paintbrush on the water glass. “I don’t think it’s always a big thing. I think it can be small things. Like warm water in the shower or a soft cat.”

“Or music?”

Neil laughed. “Or music.”

Andrew thought about it as the night went on. He thought he could understand what Neil was trying to say.

He thought happiness might be in the stained palms of Neil’s hands, his multicolored fingertips. Or the smile on Neil’s face when he pet the neighbor’s cat, the twisted grin he had when he came up with a particularly witty comeback, Neil’s flushed face after a run.

It might be the soft look in Renee’s eyes as she played with Allison’s hair, or the way Nicky’s face lit up when he talked about Erik. It might even be the determined pinch in Kevin’s brows when he picked up his violin or the lightness in his eyes as though he was finally starting to come alive when he played after everything Riko had put him through.

They were just flashes, glimpses into what other people thought and felt. Often these positive things would be buried away, under the darkened fog of his depression. But those moments were enough, from time to time. More than he had had before. And he stored them up, hording them until the day when he would no longer have any happy moments. He was glad for his eidetic memory that held those memories in perfect retention.

***

Neil had a plan.

Was it much of a plan?

No.

Was it particularly amazing?

Also no.

But it was a good one, in his opinion, so there was that. It took a bit of planning to get off work, go to the grocery store, and come back before Andrew, but he managed it. He just managed to toss the pint of ice cream in the freezer just a minute before Andrew walked through the door. Andrew came back into the house and shed his coat and walked over the counter where Neil was leaning.
“Is there a reason I saw you running like a bat out of hell up to the apartment?” he asked. He looked up and Neil and blinked. “You look like you're up to something.”

“Maybe I am,” Neil replied evasively.

He raised his eyebrow and Neil, reached into the freezer and pushed the carton in front of Andrew.

“What is this?”

“Ice cream.”

“Why.”

“It's your birthday.”

He frowned.

“I mean, I could eat it,” Neil said shit eating grin on his face.

“No, fuck off.” And he reached for it.

Neil handed him as spoon and rested his head on his hand as he watched Andrew eat it. Andrew looked over at him and offered him a spoonful and Neil gratefully accepted it. It was sugary, but it wasn't too much if he let it linger on his tongue. Andrew pulled the spoon away clean. He blinked a moment before he went back to eating, an almost smile on his lips.

When he saw him smile, he felt something stutter inside of him. He knew, logically, that he must have seen it before. But as he wracked his brain, the only thing he could find were echoes, weakened versions of what he saw now. This was barely anything, but to Neil it was the same as seeing bliss on another person’s face. And it was everything.

Andrew was radiant.

***

Neil and Dan rode the bus every night on their way back from work, watching through the windows at the neon lights that flashed on the buildings they passed. Some nights they would sit side by side and write lyrics for their songs under the dim glow of the scattered ceiling lights. The words came flowing from his fingers as he poured out his heart. There was never a way to say the words with his mouth, never a way to form them perfectly with his lips. They only sounded harsh and jagged. He could feel where they ripped through his flesh and spiraled forward towards the people around him.

It was so much easier to lay damage than to build other people up. To express himself openly and honestly. Dan made it easier for him to see how to do that. She didn’t talk a lot about what she wanted or what was going on, but she did nothing to hide it. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was or what she did. Her first instinct wasn’t to fight or try to cause damage. She knew what needed to be said and how to say it. She just was who she was, and Neil thought he might love her for that.

Other nights, when they came back from their shift and the spotty overhead lights weren’t enough to see their notebooks, they’d talk about their training with Wymack and what they wanted to do.

“**When we both get our certification, it’ll be so awesome**” she’d say. “**I want you to do some flowers on my wrists,**” and she’d outline where they’d go on her forearms, “**a sort of hibiscus thing with other flowers, too.**”
He’d see it in his mind- the swirling ink against her dark skin. “That’d be awesome.”

“That’s the idea, dude,” she’d laugh, pulling her sleeves back down.

“And if I get one,” he promised her, “I’ll have you do it.”

“Nice,” she’d whisper, because she had felt the weight behind his words.

But some nights, when the weight of the present and the weight of the future was too heavy to think about, they’d pass the time by playing a fun game called “what's in the bag.” It was a relatively simple game where they would guess what the other passengers had picked up at two in the morning. Some days that actually found out when the paper bags fell off the seats and contents spilled out all over the floor. One day there was a guy only had one package of diapers and a two liter bottle of orange soda. Another day a lady spilled twelve cans of tuna out onto the floor and she had to strategically catch each can as they rolled back within reach as the bus drove on.

Dan had found the tuna incident especially hilarious, and now neither of them could say the word tuna around each other without making immediate eye contact and then bursting into peels of laughter.

***

The thumping lights and music at Eden’s were so much, too much. He walked over to the keypad and clocked out and went into the backroom. He covered his ears with his hands and closed his eyes until the ringing in his ears subsided and he didn't feel as overwhelmed.

This hadn’t been the first time that something like this had happened, when everything got to be too much. When his ears would burn and his thoughts would overtake him. The memories pounded against him mind in time with the base of the music and it overwhelmed him.

His shift was over, but his mind was still firing too much. He dove into a side store, a thrift store that was open even then, at those late hours of the night and he browsed the aisles until he found what he was looking for.

It was decidedly uncomfortable to carry the long and somewhat heavy cardboard box onto the bus. He somehow managed to maneuver it sideways into the space beside him, but it wasn’t easy. Every time someone passed by he didn't even look at them, staring forward and not inviting their conversation. It was very strange and he didn't like how vulnerable it made him. It was stupid, but he heard teenagers were allowed to do stupid things from time to time. This was his.

As he adjusted the box for the umpteenth time, he decided that if he ever lived until adulthood he was going to buy a car. A very nice car. A shiny Maserati. That would be nice. And, he tried to convince himself, it was okay to imagine things from time to time because it wasn't like they was ever going to happen.

He reached around the box with more effort than he should have had to exert and pulled the stop cord and then shuffled the box off the bus.

He tucked it under his arm and then walked with it back to the apartment. He unlocked the door and Neil looked up for where he was doing his homework. His eyebrow shot up when he saw what was under Andrew's arm.

He set the box on the floor and walked across the room to the bookcase. He didn't say anything. He took down all the stacks of crap that they had piled up on top of the low bookcase they were using. Somehow they always used it as a place to stack old assignments that never made their way to the
garbage. He dumped them all into a pile in the corner of the room and then went to the box and slipped a knife out from one of his armbands then used it to slit the tape around the edges before sliding the knife back into its place. He lifted the lid and pulled off the thin sheets of Styrofoam-packing material that encased the box's contents.

“No fucking way,” he heard over his shoulder. He lifted the piano out of the box and set it on the bookcase.

“Holy shit, Andrew. You got this?”

Neil's eyes were fucking glowing, the bastard, as he inspected everybody inch of it, running his fingers reverently along the edges of the electric keyboard.

Fuck, he wasn't going to be jealous of a fucking piano. That was a level of low he didn't want to ever sink to.

“Now you can play. Anytime.”

And that was what he did.

He used it to work out his melodies he had for one fox song or another. He wasn't skilled, by any means, but he was competent enough to write the piano portion of the music. There would be days at a time where Nicky would leave his laptop and recording equipment so Andrew could record several songs at once. Neil had already written them, so it wasn’t much work on his part.

Sometimes he played his own stuff, but only when Neil wasn't there. He didn't want to give him the satisfaction. But sometimes, just sometimes, when Neil was hard at work with one of his latest pieces or whatever, he would play. It was almost pleasant the calming notes he could coerce out of the contraption of wires and plastic. He fiddled with the notes, seeing how they would sound to him in his head. And he just played. It was like, just for a moment, he was somewhere else.

Sometimes certain combinations of notes could bring back old, even tarnished memories from the past.

But he had the power to not do that. To rearrange them into new patterns.

The song was weaving and twisting and turning in his mind and he was steering it where he wanted it to go.

But unlike Tilda's car, he steered away from danger. It was harrowing, in a way, to do that. Dodging the blows of his memories and at times he took the melodies and fought with them, layering them, changing them. Like he was doing in his life now.

With Aaron he was reshaping the image he had of brothers. With Renee he was learning that he weapons used against him didn’t have to be anymore. With Bee and Wymack he was learning to trust someone other than himself. With Neil, he was relearning everything.

What it was like to live with another.

What it was like to have someone in his bed, though by choice this time.

What it was like to have consent.

What it was like to say yes.
What it was like to want to say yes

He knew he wanted to say yes.

He tore himself away from his music abruptly, wrenching himself away from that train of thought. He ripped his head up and saw Neil staring at him, eyes wide.

He quirked a brow, not wanting to let on how unsettling he was.

“Andrew. That was beautiful. What song was that?”

“I don’t know.” He put the box cover back over the keyboard. “Just threw shit together.”

“Andrew.”

He fixed him with a look and Neil fell silent. He turned and walked out the door, not bothering to look back.

He didn’t want to hear that shit.

***

Matt was nervous. Neil hadn’t really been prepared for something like this. In all the lessons his mother had taught him, he had never learned how to be a support system for someone in emotional distress. It really wasn’t a surprise, considering his mother wasn’t exactly a pillar of emotional support. Actually, if thought about it, she wasn’t really conducive of feelings in general.

That would actually explain a lot.

But now that lack of training was really biting him in the butt.

Matt was having a difficult time. He was planning on asking Dan out and he wasn’t sure she would say yes. She had made it clear she wasn’t really wanting to date; she was so busy that she wasn’t sure she would have had the time even if she wanted to. But it had been over a year since she said that and Matt was now willing to take the chance.

“You’ll do fine, Matt.” It was an attempt at being reassuring, but Neil had a feeling he was failing miserably at sounding convincing.

Matt huffed shakily getting up from where he was leaning on the wall. “Considering what ‘fine’ means to you, that doesn’t really come across as a reassurance.”

Damn it.

“She likes you. Anyone can see it.” It was true. Neil knew he tended to be more aware of what was going on around him than most people, but even someone completely oblivious could see it. They had basically been staring at each other pseudo-subtly the entirety of game night, and he knew for a fact that Allison was already taking up bets on when they would get together. “Look, if she says no—which I highly, highly doubt- then she says no. But at least you tried. You won’t spend the rest of your life wondering what would have happened if you actually did something.”

Matt ran his fingers through his hair. “You’re right dude. Looks like those ‘talk like an adult classes’ imparted some wisdom on you.”

“We don’t talk about that.”
Matt threw back his head and laughed. His worries weren’t completely alleviated, but the air felt lighter.

***

They had been living in the apartment for a couple of months, and Andrew was surprised at how easily they had fallen into a routine, how disgustingly domestic they were. Like, shit. They knew each other’s schedules and had assigned chores and who would make dinner on which days. They had a routine and it was both comforting and off-putting.

Then the doorbell rang.

It was unsettling for more reason than one. One- no one came by without telling them first. The only one who did was Vanya, but she always knocked. Two- Andrew didn’t even know they had a doorbell.

Andrew opened the door to find two familiar men. They flashed their FBI badges at him. He should have been surprised but he wasn’t. He let them in and gestured to the two foldout chairs in the kitchen while he pulled himself up onto the counter. Height advantage.

They started to ask him questions, but he kept his face blank and refused to even open his mouth. After a couple of minutes, they gave up and stared at their phones. They all waited in silence for Neil to come back.

After what felt like three hours, Neil finally came back.

“Hey Andrew,” he said, blatantly ignoring the agents.


“Neil.” The second officer barked.

“Yes,” Neil snapped, voice dripping with irritation. “I heard you the first time.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t know what to say,” Neil shrugged, annoyance coming off him in waves.

Andrew knew that was a blatant lie. He didn’t think Neil could ever be at a loss for words.

He continued. “I’m not familiar with the etiquette for people who invade your home without asking.” He tsked at them. “No call. If I had known you were coming I would have put on a roast.”

“I see you are no better than you were years ago.”

Neil shrugged and set his stuff on the counter and leaned against it, taking in the officers coolly. “I think that’s a matter of perspective. Now I’d like to know why you’re here.”

“We just wanted to check in. We heard that you moved out of Marbury.”

“I became emancipated, but your point?”

“We wanted to make sure you weren’t in any trouble.”

“Well, you could have called.”
“You refused a phone,” Officer 1 said, as if Neil was stupid.

“Oh! So your memory is working. I guess you are just choosing to ignore the fact that I told you I never wanted to see you two for the rest of my life. I have to say, I’m a little hurt at your blatant disregard for my feelings.”

“Whatever,” Officer 2 huffed and he flicked a piece of cardstock in Neil’s direction. “You have our number if you need us.”

Andrew could see the strain in Neil’s face as he struggled to refrain from rolling his eyes. “Yes. Thank you for your concern.” He walked over to the door and held it open. “Now if you’ll be on your way…”

“You’re just like your father,” Officer 2 hissed on his way out.

“We both know my father wouldn’t have been this nice. Have a nice day. Don’t let the door hit you on your way out!” he called as he swung the door closed not even a full second after they crossed the threshold between the interior of their apartment and the walkway.

“And stay gone,” he muttered. He turned back to Andrew. “Were they asking a lot of questions?”

“They were asking,” he said, but he didn’t have to fill in the rest. Neil smirked.

“Nice. Were they twitching?”

“Like cockroaches.”

“Great.”

“They were the same ones that brought you to Marbury.”

Neil pulled himself up onto the counter beside him and opened up some yogurt. “Yep,” he said licking the foil lid.

“FBI.”

“Yes.”

He nodded and pulled himself up beside Neil.

“Why were the FBI involved?”

“Traveling across state lines.”

He nodded and reached ate some of his ice cream.

“You know, I was thinking of making a song for them.”

“Really.” Skepticism was thick in his voice

“Yeah. I was thinking it could be something like fuck off or go fuck yourselves.”

“I don’t know. Seems too subtle. I don’t know if they pick up on the subtext.”

Neil nodded sagely. “That’s true.” He shook his head and stabbed at his yogurt. “I don’t like them. They’re assholes. They didn’t care about me. They only cared about the case. As far as they’re
concerned I should have been locked up with my father. They think I’ll turn out the same way. I won’t though. If only for revenge. I’d love to rub it in their smug faces.”

“Revenge is stupid.”

“But satisfying at times” he said pointing his spoon at Andrew before licking it “and I’m nothing if not petty when I can be.” He held his yogurt container to Andrew as if it were a fine goblet of wine and they were in a palace, and not two broke teens sitting on a rundown laminate countertop. “To not giving a fuck about what everybody else thinks about us.”

Andrew hesitated a moment before raised his own ice-cream cup and clinked it.

“Fuck them.”

And Neil smiled savagely. A smile that could tear a man limb from limb, with lips that could whisper words that could eviscerate a man and leave him bleeding out before he even noticed he was cut.

Andrew loved it.

***

Neil was looking nervous.

It wasn’t an unusual look, but it had been a while since he had been the cause of it. There was a plastic square in Neil’s hand and he was turning it over and over in his hands as he stared absently off into the distance.

“Neil.”

Neil blinked. “Hey Andrew.” He tapped the square on the counter one, two, three more times, before he opened it and pulled out its contents.

“Andrew, how do you feel about this song?” Neil asked, holding out a disk.

“I don’t know. Am I just supposed to know what something sounds like based on looks now?”

Neil rolled his eyes. He walked over to the CD player and put it in. A complicated song flowed out of the speakers and he found himself almost entranced by it.

“Do you like it?”

He shrugged.

“Well, you wrote it. Played it actually.” Neil’s fingers played with the plastic CD case. “That day you stormed out, this was what you were playing. You were still recording.”

And that, that was impossible. Neil was a liar. Nothing Andrew did was ever like that. Nothing he did was ever good.

But-

The notes, now that he was listening to it, were familiar and his fingers twitched at the muscle memory.

Neil switched off the song.
“That. That is why Kevin wants you to play,” he said simply, leaving Andrew alone with his thoughts.

***

“She said yes!” Matt announced to all of them, the final day of winter break. Neil looked up at them and he could see the smile dancing on both Dan and Matt’s faces. It was a welcome announcement and only moment passed before Allison and Nicky were tackling them both in a hug, asking for details.

Neil sat back, listening to how Matt asked her out and he smiled to himself. They were happy. They deserved to be happy. He didn’t know how long it had been since he had last seen such a pure and unadulterated thing.

And he felt something flicker, something deep inside his chest.

Hope.

Hope for his friends, for himself, for the future.

It was terrifying, exhilarating, but he didn’t want to let it go.

***

I didn’t call for you,

I didn’t ask for this

I didn’t need you to pull me apart

I’ve been falling out of control

I think of you wherever I go

Oh, what did you do?

Oh, what did you do to me?

I’ve never felt so lonely alone

I didn’t care ‘til you came along

Oh, what did you do?

Oh, what did you do to me?

Oh, what did you do?

Chapter End Notes

Hi, so this is finally posted, and now it’s throwing me into shame, considering I’ve had
the whole “Reflecting Light” dance moment in my head since the Gilmore Girls special… so yeah. Oh well. Also, I'm writing Neil as demiromantic as well as demisexual. I know that's not groundbreaking or original or anything, but that's how I've always interpreted him.

Anyway, thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it!
So, hey guys. As you might have noticed, I added some tags to this story, tags that will apply to this chapter in particular. In particular, rape. Drake is featured in this chapter and the story will be covering up to and the immediate aftermath of Drake’s assault similar to how it was covered in the book. There are no graphic descriptions of the actual act, but I understand that the whole situation can be triggering. I have placed these scenes near the end, and any plot relevant details will be addressed in later chapters. If you want any further warnings or a description/summary of any plot relevant points addressed during the final part of the chapter, please feel free to contact me.

Chapter Warnings: intrusive thoughts, negative thoughts in regards to trauma, discussions of self-harm, perversion of religion, rape (see above), and rape aftermath.

If there are any warnings I have missed or that need to be added or expanded upon, please let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Should’ve kissed you there
I should’ve held your face
I should’ve watched those eyes
Instead of run in place
I should’ve called you out
I should’ve said your name
I should’ve turned around
I should’ve looked again.

Matt was nervous.

That, in itself, wasn’t surprising. He had been nervous the past week. Ever since he and Dan had agreed to go out, his nervous energy seemed to increase exponentially with each passing day.

“I’m so worried that am going to mess this up,” Matt muttered as he ran his hands through his hair for possibly the five-thousandth time in the past hour. “What if,” he continued, turning when he reached the other side of the room and doubled back around, “we go out and I like chew with my mouth open or something?”

Andrew watched Matt pace back and forth across the room and internally groaned. Matt had been going over hypotheticals like this for the three past hours. Andrew wasn’t usually here for this, but
today just happened to be one of Kevin’s practice days and he hadn’t bothered to drag himself out of the chair since.

So now he was sitting in the middle of sea of teen angst with no one to distract him from it except Aaron (who was on his phone), Nicky (who was also on his phone), and Kevin (who was also, surprise, surprise on his phone (though Andrew knew Kevin was just using it to read music theory like a nerd, which was somehow worse)).

But, for real, if he wanted to deal with all of this romantic drama, he’d just hang out at Eden’s bathroom at 2 a.m. - aka the time of heightened emotions, distorted reality, and being wasted beyond belief.

Honestly, the fact that he had seen more than one person sobbing on the floor of Eden’s bathroom just showed him he worked the late shift too much.

“You’ve eaten with her before,” Neil offered from where he sat at the kitchen table. It wasn’t much of a reassurance, but after the first thirty minutes, Neil realized that all of his attempts at reassurance were shit, so he decided to go with blunt honesty. It still wasn’t his best skill, but he had been getting better at it.

“I know, I know, but still. We weren’t on a date.”

“Matt, buddy,” Nicky looked up from where he was sprawled out on the couch. “If it’s meant to be, it will be.”

“Just because you found your soulmate Nicky doesn’t mean that this will end up perfect,” Matt muttered.

“You’ve got to be positive- Wait, You really think he’s my soulmate?”

Matt blinked. “Uh, yeah I guess. You two are perfect for each other.”

Nicky’s smile brightened up his face. “We are, aren’t we?” he pondered that.

What a sap.

“Do you know how I knew he was the one?”

Andrew didn’t look up, but if he was paying closer attention, no one would notice.

Matt stopped in his tracks, curiosity outweighing his anxiety.

“How?”

“Well, we were writing back and forth, like we did.”

Matt nodded.

“And I wasn’t feeling so well so I told him I had a cold. He wanted to make me feel better, but I was still learning German and he was still learning English so he didn’t know exactly what to say, so he ran what he wanted to say through google translate. And it- it just came out so bad, I just started cracking up. Eventually he looked up what he had sent with one of those language dictionaries and then he started laughing too. I think that we probably laughed for like an hour straight.” A faint smile lingered on Nicky’s face.

“And then, whenever one of us would feel sad or whatever, we’d just run sentences through like a
dozen languages in google translate and then laugh until we felt better. I think it was when he did that when we were actually around each other in person and he started playing it for me out loud on his phone that I realized he was my best friend, you know? And I knew that I didn’t want to give up what we had. I think I knew, right then that I loved him.

“And I know it’s not exactly the same with you and Dan, but what I’m trying to say is that if we could make it work from across the world, you and Dan can make it here in the same town.”

Matt stared at him and nodded, a will of steel forming in the back of spine.

Andrew had to look away.

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Neil had read a lot of romance novels- like a lot, a lot- thanks to Allison. And he enjoyed them, in some really bizarre way. But an unexpected side effect was that now he was considered an expert on love by Matt.

Which is how he found himself Friday evening helping Matt to spiff up his truck.

Which basically translated to Matt was washing the outside of the truck while Neil crawled around on the floor vacuuming up crumbs and tiny bits of trash off with the hand-vac they had snuck out of the Boyd’s house when Randy wasn’t looking

“So, if we go and see a movie should I put my arm around her, or is that more of a second date thing?”

“I don’t know.” He pushed the vacuum further under the front seat. “Shouldn’t you know how to do this? You’re the straight one. Well, straight-ish.”

“I don’t know anything, man! I wasn’t born with this innate ability to ask girls out.”

“You asked Dan out.”

“Oh, yeah, after like three years and after practicing in the mirror like a hundred times.” He flopped down into the driver’s seat and dropped his head on the steering wheel. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Neil flipped off the vacuum and sat down in the passenger’s seat. “You could ask Allison. She’s dated a lot.”

“She’s basically only dated Seth and their relationship was a hot mess, so it doesn’t really count.”

“Nicky?”

“Okay, Nicky had the whole, oh look we’ve been pen-pals for years, talking to each other about our deepest hopes and dreams and insecurities and then we met in real life and wow we’re both attractive and attracted to each other thing. Like, what is this, a rom-com?” He ran his hands through his hair. “And Dan and I can’t do that because we already know each other and I don’t even have any stamps! How am I supposed to get her to fall in love with me if I don’t have any stamps?”

Neil stared at him and had absolutely no idea what to say.

“Uh. Writing a letter probably isn’t necessary. Dan would actually probably be pretty confused if you did that, considering the fact that you see each other every day. Also, I think Nicky and Erik
emailed?”
Matt let out a sound like a dying whale.
“I’m so screwed.”
Neil hesitated before awkwardly patting Matt on the back. “There, there.”
Matt stilled before slowly turning his eyes towards Neil. “Dude, what are you doing?
Neil snatched his hand away. “I’m trying to be comforting.”
And that made Matt crack up.
“Sorry, sorry I’m not laughing at you. I really appreciate the gesture, but you looked like you were so
uncomfortable you were going to throw up.”
“It’s the same with the date,” Neil blurted out.
Matt wiped tears from his eyes. “I’m sorry, what?”
“Look,” he turned to face him in the seat, “you could plan the perfect date, you could do everything
right, but if you’re not comfortable, or whatever or having fun, it’s going to suck. But if you mess up
and laugh it off it will be fine. Dan’s not going to hold it against you. She doesn’t care about perfect.
She just wants to spend time with you.”
“You really think so?”
“Uh, yeah. People who date usually want to spend time with each other.”
“Thanks bud. Can I hug you?”
“Uh, sure. Yeah.”
And Matt engulfed him in a big warm hug. He was so much larger than him that it probably should
have been uncomfortable, but Neil was surprised to find he liked it.
When was the last time he had been that close to another person?
Sure, he slept with Andrew, but they were careful not to touch. Andrew still reacted strongly to
being woken up- which happened without fail each time he was touched in his sleep.
All too soon the hug was over and Matt was driving Neil back to his and Andrew’s apartment.
They pulled up outside the complex and Neil turned back to Matt and laid his hands on Matt’s
shoulders. “Everything’s going to be fine. You can’t know how it’ll go until it happens.”
Matt nodded and Neil took that as his signal to leave so he climbed out of the car and walked over to
his apartment.
He turned the key in the lock and walked into the apartment.
“How did the pep talk go?” Andrew asked from where he sat on the bed, back pressed the wall,
book in hand.
Neil tossed his keys on the counter and threw his jacket over the back of one of the folding chairs
and began pulling off his shoes.

“As well as could be expected. He was freaking out. I told him everything was going to be fine.”

Andrew coughed and Neil could swear he almost saw the ghost of a smile on Andrew’s face. Andrew covered it by taking a sip of water, but not before Neil could absently wish he could look at it a little more.

“Can you believe them? They’re freaking out so much.” He climbed over and sat next to Andrew. Andrew moved his arm out so Neil could climb into the space between his legs. Andrew draped his arm around Neil’s shoulder and Neil leaned his head back against Andrew’s chest.

“It’s ridiculous. They’re so far gone and they don’t even know it.”

Andrew hummed in response and the rumble of his voice was calming against Neil’s ear.

He was warm and it reminded him faintly of the hug he just had with Matt just a few minutes ago. And this embrace, it felt good, if different. Matt’s felt embracing, accepting, welcoming.

This one didn’t feel like that. There was a sense of normalcy about it, even though they never really did this before. Something familiar.

It felt like coming home.

And neither of them made a move to leave.

***

Neil was sitting outside of Wymack’s on Saturday morning when Matt came walking up with Macey.

“Hey,” Matt said as he stopped beside him. Macey ran around Neil’s legs and he pet her soft head. She wagged her tail happily.

“Hey.” He stood and joined them as Matt decided to keep walking.

“How was it?”

“It went pretty well. Neil we laughed so much. I was scared it was going to be awkward or something but it wasn’t. We went to a fast-food joint and we ate on one of those cheap plastic benches. She paid for all her own stuff and she split gas with me. And we just drove around for like an hour and we just talked about all sorts of things.” He smiled and fiddled with the handle of the leash. “And everything’s going great, right? But it was getting late and everything and there’s curfew and everything so we had to get back. So I drove her back home and then I walked her up to the door and I—” Matt groaned. “Neil I’m an idiot.”

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‘-And then we at the front door—” Dan continued, stretching her arm out beside where Allison, Renee and Andrew were stretching and preparing for their workout. “And I was like ‘Good night’ and he said ‘Good night.’ And then we stood there a second and I was thinking oh, he probably wants to kiss me goodnight or something so I leaned forward a little and he just held out his hand for a high five. So, I just, high-fived him and then he just had this panicked look on his face and was like ‘I hope we can do this again sometime’ and just- ran off the porch.”
Allison tilted her head back and laughed. “Oh my- that’s cute.”

Dan couldn’t hide the small smile on her face even as she tried to cover it up with her fingers.

“Yeah, it was sweet.”

Renee walked over from where she stood beside Andrew as she was tightening the wrappings on her hands. “It sounds like you two are heading in a good direction. Do you know when your next date will be?”

“Not yet.”

“Congrats,” he said flippantly. Dan smiled like she knew that he meant it. He ignored it. He couldn’t have people thinking things like that. “It was about time you two got your act together.”

“You could have something similar if you ever made a move, you know,” she said with a pointed look at Renee. He picked up his bag.

“Goodbye, Dan.”

She laughed behind him.

Renee walked up and he saw her smiling and silently laughing to herself at her friends assumptions.

“Ready to spar?”

“I don’t know.” He yanked the tape with his teeth. “My undying romantic love for you might get in the way,” he remarked drily.

And apparently that was all Renee needed before she was cracking up, laughing until she was snorting.

He figured if he opened his mouth, he would have probably started laughing too.

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“We’re doing a music video. You know, to go with the music that we’ve been making,” Allison explained to Neil as they sat around Wymack’s kitchen table.

He rolled his eyes. “I know what a music video is.”

Allison shrugged. “I figured.” She put a pin in her mouth and realigned the fabric in front of her. “You’ve been getting a lot better with pop culture.” She stuck the pin in the cloth. “But we were thinking that this could be the final tipping point, you know? It’s one thing to hear a song, another to see a music video. Did you know that there are some music videos out there with, like, a billion views?”

If he had been drinking anything, he would have spit it out. “What?”

“‘Despacito,’ ‘New Rules,’ ‘Work from Home.’ All of those have over a billion views. If we have one good video, we could make it big. So now I’ve got to do,” she gestured to the yards of fabric in front of her, “all of this.”

“When are we going to do this?”

“This weekend, I think.” She slipped the cloth into the sewing machine and she raised her voice so it
could be heard over the whirring of the machine. “Nicky is going to be in charge of the camera angles and all that. He says he has an ‘artistic vision,’ but I think he just wants more digital media experience under his belt so that he can work for the same company Erik’s working for.”

“Isn’t he already working for them? On the sly.”

“Yeah. But he told me that they were telling him that his duties, pay, everything will probably increase once he graduates and has a degree. And if he moves there.”

“Nicky’s moving?” Neil was always used to everything changing, but this was strange.

“Not for a couple years, at least. But I don’t blame him. He’s head over heels for Erik and as far as I can tell, Erik feels the same about Nicky. Also,” she stopped the machine and flipped the dress right-side-out, “Erik is hot. I mean, I always knew Nicky had good taste. I mean, when he was pretending to be straight he dated me, because I’m a catch.”

“Yep.”

She ruffled his hair. “Smart mouth, Josten, smart words. So will you do it with us?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

It wasn’t like his father would be watching teenage music videos, anyway.

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They decided that they were going to film their video on the outskirts of town. It was a relatively unremarkable stretch of land and Andrew found himself watching Neil out of the corner of his eye more than he would care to admit.

It wasn’t like anyone could really blame him, though. There wasn’t much to look at, really. Allison had Neil dressed up in some nice blue shirt and nice pants and *damn* did he look nice when he didn’t look like he had been wearing the same thing for the past three years. Besides, there wasn’t much besides them but long fields filled with long grasses. The only one who seemed interested in it was Nicky, who was shooting short video segments capturing the whimsical essence of the wind running through the blades of grass.

They were all wearing costumes, all of them seemed to match their each individual aesthetic, while also forming a cohesive look. The other foxes were running around and playing tag, yelling that it was unfair when Neil was it because he was too fast.

“You like them?”

He barely turned to look at Allison as she took a seat beside him.

He shrugged.

“It was hard, especially trying to fit in you all-black emo look.”

“Fuck off Allison.”

“And don’t even get me started on that whole armband thing. This is fucking spring. And yet I knew you wouldn’t take them off.”

“I don’t need to.
She huffed at that. “True. You’ve never been one to give up control over yourself if you didn’t have to. I respect that.”

He scoffed.

“Please. I know all about control Andrew. When everything’s spiraling out of control it feels good to be able to control yourself even if it ends up hurting you.”

“You’re talking about your anorexia.”

“I am.” She stared off at the grassy fields. “And I’m also talking about what you do. Or did. The others might think that whole armband thing is for aesthetic purposes but it’s not, is it?”

There was a sickening lurch in his stomach.

“What was your weapon?”

“Razor,” he humored her, because fuck why not.

She nodded. Her eyes didn’t stray from the field where the others were running around.

“If you’re going to tell me to embrace it I don’t want to hear it.”

“I wasn’t going to. I don’t think you really care. And,” she pulled her knees to her chest, “it would be a bit hypocritical of me and I’m really not into that.”

“You too.” It wasn’t a question.

“Hot iron,” she explained. “It was hard to find a spot, with the whole pageant thing, but I did. My mother didn’t care whenever I bought makeup. Found some nice shit online. Covered up burns. It also didn’t hurt that it cost a fuck ton.” Her fingers ran absentmindedly over her hips. “Used to punish myself if I didn’t meet my goal for the day. If I ate too much or whatever. I wasn’t even thinking clearly at the time. I punished myself a lot.”

“Betsy helps a lot,” he offered, because he didn’t care. Really, he didn’t. He was just stating a fact.

Allison nodded. “I’m glad we have her.”

And, well, it turned out Allison could sometimes be right about things.

“Are you guys coming or what?”

Allison tore her eyes away from Andrew.

“Yeah, just a minute!” she shouted. She turned back to him. “I won’t tell.”

“Neither will I.”

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The music video, like all other fox projects, was quickly turning into a big, all-consuming thing.

And Neil couldn’t help but fucking love it. Ever afternoon when they had the time they would congregate in Wymack’s living room, watching the footage they had gathered so Nicky could piece it together into their final project.
They usually all were there, but at the very least Nicky and Kevin would be there.

But, three weeks later on a Wednesday, Nicky was running late.

And Kevin was not happy.

After about half an hour Nicky burst through the door with all of his equipment.

“Where were you?” Kevin demanded.

“Me? Oh, nowhere.”

“Let’s get started.”

“Yeah sure.” He flipped open his laptop and waited for it to boot up. He tapped on his knees anxiously. He kept glancing up to look at all of them and then down and then back up again.

“Nicky, what the fu-“

“Okay,” Nicky dropped his hands down onto his knees, giving them a smile so fake it looked borderline painful. “So, hey guys-“

“What do you want Nicky?” Kevin snapped. He wasn’t good with prolonged niceties, and after meeting Riko, Neil couldn’t really blame him.

“Okay, so my parents are working at Marbury to help set up the Easter egg hunt for the kids, and they want all of us to go. Well, they want Andrew to come. Aaron and I don’t really have a choice.

Aaron gestured an unenthusiastic whoopdy-doo.

“But I was hoping all of you-“

“No fucking way,” Dan butt in. “Your parents are horrible.”

“Matt, Matty-Matt-“

“Don’t do that dude. I’m not going.”

He sighed. “Fine.” He turned to Neil, a hopeful look in his eyes. “Neil could you ask Andrew to do it. My parents really want him to come.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know! Family bonding or some shit. No clue.”

Neil sighed and turned to look at Andrew who was sitting next to him. “Nicky wants you to go.”

“Nicky wants a lot of things he can’t have,” Andrew said, flipping the page in his book.

“I’ll go,” Neil offered, even though he felt like it was probably a stupid thing to do.

Andrew raised his eyebrows.

“Candy.”

“What?”
“Candy. There will be candy.”

Andrew mulled it over before turning to look at Nicky.

“What kind of candy?”

“Any kind you want.”

“Fine.”

In the end, Nicky also managed to rope Kevin and Wymack into coming. Nicky felt safer when Wymack was there. Because, although Nicky was technically and adult, there was a part of him that would bow to the whims of his parents. Kevin only agreed to go because they all promised to work on the music video at Wymack’s apartment afterwards.

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Being sixteen came with a lot of weird side effects, in Andrew’s opinion. And most of them weren’t good. Like the birds and the bees? No thank you. He already knew about sex, thankfully. Roland wasn’t bothered with telling him about safe sex and Bee was more than willing to teach him about boundaries and consent.

Which helped because sex-ed was, how he could put this, straight as fuck. There was something distancing about watching the guys his own age freak out when they heard the word vagina.

He had no interest in putting his man-sword anywhere near a lady’s special, delicate flower which should only be given after being married for at least five years.

But to be fair, turning sixteen did come with some other perks. Some big perks.

Driving.

“I’ll teach you.” Nicky offered, excited.

“Fuck, no Nicky. I’ve seen you drive and frankly I’m surprised you’re still alive,” Neil snarked back.

This had been an ongoing debate ever since they received the flyer for driver’s ed at school.

Nicky sank back onto the couch, arms crossed, and huffed. “Rude.”

“But true,” Aaron muttered, not even bothering to look up from his textbook.

“I already know how to drive,” Neil threw out.

They looked at him.

“So do I,” Andrew threw in flippan tally.

“Well that’s all great,” Wymack added tensely, aging before their very eyes, “but you can’t drive unless you have a license. You have to take the lessons and practice and all of that.”

“Oh kay,” Neil sighed.

Wymack looked over the flyer. “I thought they don’t they teach drivers ed. in school anymore?”

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As it turned out, they didn’t teach driver’s ed anymore. At least not formally. They didn’t take the kids out driving because of a variety of reasons, namely fear for their life and, naturally, budget-cuts.

But they were willing to teach them the written portion. A woman named Ms. Ventura started coming to homeroom every morning to teach them how to drive, which basically consisted of long periods of her just read passages of the driver’s ed. book aloud. Their only reprieve from the monotony were poorly acted videos on driver’s safety.

Neil had thought he would never feel true happiness in his life, but he had obviously underestimated the ecstasy he would feel after Ms. Ventura concluded her lifeless rendition of *Drivers Education: The Complete Student Guide to Driving in the State of California*.

She closed the book, looking particularly pleased with herself for making it through the whole thing. “Okay class, soon you all will be taking the written test and then you will finally get to begin the actual driving part of the class.”

Neil could have sworn he heard someone mutter “fucking finally” under their breath. Ms. Ventura opted to pretend like she hadn’t heard and moved on, telling them about the other steps they would need to take in order to get their license.

The actual driving portion of the instruction had to be done by their parents. Since Andrew and Neil didn’t have parents and Aaron refused to be taught to drive by the same people who taught Nicky, Wymack somehow ended up with the unenviable task of having to teach them, as well as Kevin, how to drive.

Wymack picked them all up and, somehow, all five of them managed to squeeze into Wymack’s sedan as he drove them to an empty parking lot to practice.

They decided to go by age order, or when it came to the twins, the order of their names as Tilda hadn’t happened to write which of them was born first in Aaron’s baby book.

Being the youngest kind of sucked and Neil was anxious to get behind the wheel. After what felt like forever, Andrew swerved back into the parking and Neil ran over to the driver’s side door. He climbed into the vehicle and Wymack looked like he had just seen his life flash before his eyes. He closed his eyes slowly and took a deep breath.

“Oh Neil, I need you to show me that you know where everything is in the car. Starting with the brake and your blinkers.”

He pulled up behind the wheel, pointing out which thing did what. After he did that successfully, Wymack nodded at him and pointed to the steering wheel.

“Oh, now drive.”

It was a simple instruction, but as he reached for the gearshift he realized he wasn’t in the same car. It was getting harder to breathe and the car seemed simultaneously closer and further away. Well it wasn’t the same car that was close. It was a different car. But it looked so familiar that he could have been staring at it. To the right he knew Wymack was no longer sitting there, replaced instead with his mother.

Had he ever really left? Had everything else just been a dream?

He could hear her rattling, gasping breaths as she desperately tried to cling onto life. He could hear the rush of the waves as they brushed over the shore.
It was dim in the car as the sun had already set, the dusk providing their light. He could see the glow of the timepiece on the dashboard but he couldn’t read it. The car smelled like metal and iron and blood. In the next moment he was standing outside of the vehicle and the sharp smell of gasoline pieced through his nose, suffocating him from what seemed like every angle. The smell was almost potent enough to block out the smell of burning flesh, but not quite.

Not quite enough.

He didn’t quite manage to look away before he could see the flames licking up her skin, devouring her body. There’s just so much smoke and it was all so hard to breathe.


He felt a pressure on the back of his neck as he was pushed down to his knees.

“Breathe with me.”

He felt a hand take his own and he felt it brush against his skin, pulling it forward until Neil felt the familiar feeling of cotton beneath his fingertips, the steady rise and fall beneath that. It was grounding.

The memories began to recede like the waves on the beach, washing away the car and the smoke and his mother’s bones. He dragged his eyes open and looked around. They were sitting on the curb and there was no one else around them. Wymack must have taken Aaron out while Andrew tried to stop him from having a panic attack.

“How long was I out long?”

“Not too long.” Andrew brought his arms up to rest on his knees. “Are you going to be okay with driving?”

“Not today. But I think- yeah. Later.” He tried to brush away the lingering thoughts of his mother’s death. “Bad memories.”

“I’d say,” Andrew said dryly before lighting a cigarette for himself and passing one over to Neil. The smoke was different from the kind on the beach. Even though the smells were seemingly dissimilar to the unfamiliar, they were unmistakably different to him. “Did Wymack take out Aaron?”

“And Kevin.”

“He didn’t think you’d kill me?”

“He knows that if I wanted to he wouldn’t be able to stop me even if he was here.”

Neil chuckled.

It was still hard to breathe.

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So driving was taking a little bit of a break. He was easing into it. Exposure therapy or something. Andrew said that the avoidance of triggers was a sign of PTSD, which he- okay, he probably had that.

So they were easing into it, sitting in the car more often, even just to do homework. But that didn’t take up all of his time. He hated it, he hated feeling weak and useless. He wanted to feel like he was
doing something. Being a grownup, not some baby who was afraid of sedans.

So he took more hours at work.

Which, like all of Neil’s decisions, was both good and bad.

Pros: more money.

Cons: being around his co-workers more often.

“Kid why do you work here so much? Are you saving up for a car?” Dave asked, like the nosy fucker he was.

“I’m paying for my apartment.”

“You’re what? Sixteen? Why are you living out on your own?”

“I’m emancipated.”

Dave sighed. “Look, kid. I know you probably had a fight with your parents but when you get older you’ll get along.”

“My parents are dead.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry.”

Neil watched him squirm a moment before replying. “Don’t be. It was a while ago.”

“Wait a second,” shit Higgins had that concerned-adult look on his face, “are you living on your own? That can be expensive.”

“I have a roommate.”

And, as if he sensed Neil’s need for drama, Andrew walked right into the police station.

Andrew looked intimidating in his all-black attire and chains on his pants. He looked like he should have been escorted in there with handcuffs on his wrists and an officer on either side. Instead, he strolled past the cops over to where Neil and propped his legs up on the chair in front of him like he owned the place.

“What are you doing here?” Dave asked, shock on his face at the audacity of the teen in front of him.

“He’s much roommate,” Neil explained, bored.

“Wait, you two were emancipated together?”

“Yes Higgins,” Andrew drawled

“Hey,” he held his hand up in surrender. “I’d much rather have you in here under these terms than in cuffs.”

Neil turned to Andrew, ignoring Higgins. “You don’t take the back entrance.”

“Not all of us like to risk getting shanked by walking through a back alley in the middle of the night.”

“Wow. Look it’s little Minyard!” Greg shouted across the precinct.
Andrew slowly dragged his eyes over to him. “It doesn’t get any less old the more you say it.”

“We saw this guy when he was a little squirt.” He came up to Andrew’s side, and Andrew swiveled out of the way effortlessly before Greg had the chance to clap his hands down on his shoulders. “Well even more than he is now.”

“We were doing the steered straight sort of program, but not really. He was one of the only kids. He was always getting into trouble.”

“The way he was going he was a few wrong moves from juvie,” Dave butt in.

“Wouldn’t that have made your dreams,” Andrew replied tonelessly

“It was always strange. He was with the Spears then. Great family, you know. Their son Drake, he was just a few years younger than Greg over here. Went to the same school, actually. Real stand up kid. Joined the military. But turns out you moved out of their care.”

Andrew’s fingers stilled and his eyes were blank as Dave went on and on about the Spears, but Neil’s eyes were only focused on Andrew. He shoved the rest of his things into a shelf beside his desk and grabbed his jacket. “I’m ready to go. You ready Andrew?”

Andrew snapped out of his daze and dropped his feet off the table and made for the door.

“Also,” Andrew tossed out over his shoulder, “you have another dick painted on your building.”

“Ah, shit.”

***

Andrew couldn’t get that trip to the police station out his head. He knew he shouldn’t have gone there, but he had been stupid.

And then they had started talking about Drake.

He should have been used to it. Hell, he had to listen to Cass talking about him all the time, he had to see his picture on almost every wall, he had to pass by his bedroom every day.

But it had been so long and he must have been growing weaker. Neil had seen something was wrong. Neil had been the one to get him out of there.

Neil.

Fuck.

Neil the bane of his existence and the source of, like, half of his problems.

Neil was getting all up in his business, and Andrew needed an objective point of view to help him through this. The foxes were too enamored with Neil and the fox guardians, aka Bee, Wymack, and Abby, knew him. So he went to Roland. The one person who could give him perspective on this matter.

“Look, you’ve got to make a move.”

Roland turned to on the storage bucket to face him. They still stuck to taking their break at the same time, even though now they weren’t making out. It was getting sort of cozy, like they were friends, but Andrew figured that they could talk about that later.
Except now any chances of friendship were dashed by Roland’s traitorous suggestion.

“No.”

“Well how do you expect to deal with this issue? You obviously—” he lowered his voice “like-like him. How do you plan to deal with this if you don’t grow some balls and get with him?”

“I don’t. He’s ace.”

“But what about, you know, romantically?”

“I don’t know, doesn’t really seem interested.” He narrowed his eyes at Roland. “And how can you sit around trying to give me romantic advice you still haven’t made a move on the person you ‘like-like?’”

“Well, I’ve almost made a move, first off. And second of all, fuck you—”

“Neil and I sleep together.”

Roland almost fell off his bucket. “You’re having sex!”

“No. Literally sleeping.”

“Still, that’s like 12th base.”

“No it’s not.”

“No, no, think about it.” He repositioned himself on the bucket. “Like, nowadays people have sex. People have sex all the time. But sleeping with someone? That’s like married shit.”

Andrew didn’t say anything to that, so Roland just rolled his eyes. “Well, what does he like?”


“Like dancing-dancing, white people dancing, or like swaying-close middle-school-dance dancing.”

“Swaying I guess. I’ve never seen him do the other two.”

Roland pondered it. “So maybe he likes physical contact sometimes.”

Andrew thought back on it. It was quite possible. Neil was more inclined to give the other foxes hugs if they asked and he even appeared to enjoy them.

“Maybe.”

“Okay, so like, hug him.”

“What,” he scoffed, “like we’re five?”

“Yes, Andrew. Like you’re five.”

***

“We have to hide all of the eggs.”

There’s only so many places we can hide them,” Andrew remarked, staring out at the rather unimpressive yard in front of them.
The lawn outside the building was basically just that - a lawn. There were a few trees and a lawn gnome, but not much else. And they had already hidden an egg underneath the gnome.

“Oh! We can hide it in the tree!”

“How the hell are we supposed to get it in the tree?”

Neil looked at the ground and then back at the tree and then back to Andrew. “Lift me up.”

“Like hell.”

“Come on Andrew. We’d win.”

“We’re not even competing.”

Neil gave him a look and Andrew sighed and held out his hands to give him a boost.

“You’re going to break your neck.

“No, I’m not,” Neil shot back, pulling himself up higher into the tree. Damn, climbing trees was harder than he’d thought it’d be.

“I call dibs on your shelf of the bookcase.

“Nope. I will come back as a ghost and haunt that shelf.”

He wiggled up the tree, finally managing to hoist himself up.

He held out his hand and Andrew tossed an egg up to him. He set the bright blue egg at a fork in the branches, visible, but not too obvious.

“Young man, what are you doing up in that tree?”

Neil almost fell out of the tree. He grabbed onto the branch he was on and scrambled down.

“Nothing Mrs. Madera.”

She narrowed her eyes like she didn’t quite believe them, but walked away, probably after deciding that they were no longer her trouble now that they had moved out.

It seemed that the more things changed, the more things stayed the same.

***

Andrew had never seen Marbury like this. In all the years he had lived there, they had never even made an attempt at being festive. The closest they ever got was canned turkey on Thanksgiving. So, to see the pale colored streamers laced through the trees and the decorated picnic tables threw him a bit off kilter.

It was no doubt the Hemmick’s doing.

All kids had left the house, leaving it a silent shell what it usually was. He never wanted to go back in there, but the thought of seeing it empty was off-putting.

Besides the kids, there was also Madera, Wymack, Kevin, Aaron, Neil and the Hemmicks. Nicky was dressed nicely, standing beside his parents. Their relationship at the moment was very strained.
and they barely talked to each other. Nicky wasn’t much of a buffer. Andrew just wanted Nicky to finally see the truth about them and stop putting up with their shit.

But a part of Andrew knew that Nicky might have already left Luther and Maria if it hadn’t been for him and Aaron.

He didn’t like thinking about that.

The celebration was fairly tame, though the Easter egg hunt was vicious, like it always was.

No one found the egg in the tree.

Neil shot him a satisfied smirk for that.

Midway through the dinner Luther came up alongside him and looked down at him. “Andrew.”

He took a sip of his flat soda. “Luther.”

“I think it’s time we make amends.”

“There is nothing that needs to be amended.”

“We left each other in the wrong the last time we spoke,” Luther felt the need to clarify, as if Andrew couldn’t remember exactly how that encounter had gone down.

“You misunderstand me Luther. There is nothing to be amended because there is nothing between us. I want nothing to do with you. This house, my brother, and my cousin are the only ties I have to you.”

Luther sighed his put-upon sigh and Andrew wanted to punch him in the face. But he didn’t. He had fantastically good restraint, he always had.

Hm. Bee would be proud of him. She had been trying to get himself to think positively for weeks.

Though he supposed, around Luther, he couldn’t help but appear in a favorable light.

“Well I was hoping things would get better between us, but I suppose it wasn’t meant to be.” He straightened the cuffs of his sweater. “I got you something. I left it in the house up in your old room. The rest of the house is cluttered but your room is still vacant so Madera said I could put it in there. Was going to go get it for you but I didn’t think you want to see me anymore.” Andrew didn’t say anything. “It’s whiskey.”

“Alcohol? What will your congregation think?”

“As far as I know it’s for medical purposes.”

He nodded and headed towards the house. And through the door.

Figured Luther would be willing to bend the rules when it came to himself but not when it came to his son.

He climbed the stairs.

Something was off. Something was definitely off. It was too quiet, it was too cold.

He opened the door to his old room.
And a bottle of whiskey smashed into the side of his head.

***

Neil didn’t know what was going on, but he knew in his gut that something was wrong.

Very, very wrong.

He had seen Luther make his way over to Andrew. There was no reason for Luther to be there. He and Andrew had never gotten along. Ever. Andrew had said as much.

When he turned back around, Luther was still there, but Andrew was gone.

He tried to look around all the other kids, but Andrew wasn’t small enough to hide behind them. He walked over to where Luther and Wymack were talking.

Wymack acted friendly, but Neil knew Wymack’s fake good nature wouldn’t last much longer. Nicky, Aaron, and Kevin were standing beside them trying not to look as bored as they felt.

Neil stepped in. “Where’s Andrew? He was just with you and now I can’t find him.”

Luther, gave him a cold smile. “Today is a day remembering the grace of the Lord. We spend it thinking about the sins we were forgiven for. Today, Andrew has the chance to get over some of the cruel feelings he had and for forgiveness to be spread.”

With every additional word he spoke, the sinking feeling in Neil’s gut got worse. He could feel the others looking at him curiously. He ignored them.

“Where is he?” he repeated.

“He’s up in one of the rooms. I would wait until they are done talking.”

“Who is he talking to?”

“Drake Spear.”

He had heard that name before. Andrew had said that the Spears had lost custody of him because of some neglect charge. Andrew had always been very vague when it came to the Spears, but he didn’t shy away from talking about them.

But he had never mentioned the Drake Spear.

An alarm bell screamed like a siren in the back of Neil’s chest. He turned back to the house. He could hear Wymack and the others calling after him. Aaron came up close to him keeping up with him easily, the others still further behind him.

He went into the house and it was eerily quiet with all the kids outside. He followed his instincts and went up the stairs. Wymack had joined them and was trailing behind them. His body took him on autopilot to the room that they had shared, the one that had remained empty since they had left. None of the doors had locks so he found himself flinging the door open.

The sight in front of him was horrifying but he had no time to process what was going on. Before he knew what was happening, Aaron was hurling the old brick Neil used to use to keep the door open at the Marine’s chest. The man doubled over, stumbling to the floor. Before he could get up off the ground Aaron ran forward and punched the guy in the face. Wymack came in and grabbed the man’s arms before he could get up, holding him in place.
Neil barely registered them at all, hurrying over to Andrew. The room was empty as no one had been living in there. Andrew was watching it all blankly, his eyes distant and empty. The darkness in Andrew’s eyes was making Neil upsettingly aware of what had been going on. There was blood everywhere on Andrew- his face, his body, his legs, on the bed. He looked at the perfectly made bed and ripped the sheets off the bed and pulled them around Andrew.

“Andrew.”

Andrew looked over at him, taking in the scene in front of him, uninterestedly. He heard Kevin stumbling up the stairs.

Kevin’s determined pace stuttered to a stop. He looked uneasy on his feet. “Dad. Oh my, God. Dad.”

“Kevin call 911.”

He nodded and had his phone out. Neil couldn’t understand what he was saying.

Andrew was reaching for his underwear trying to pull it up from where he was laying on the bed. He managed to do it with shaking hands, ignoring the hands Neil was offering him. He laid still a moment before his body started shaking and retching. Neil helped lean him so he was throwing up on the floor. Neil’s whole body was shaking as if the world had suddenly gone cold. Blood was seeping through Andrew’s clothes and he wanted to make it stop.

***

There were flashes of what had happened, what was happening, and they kept replaying over and over and over in Andrew’s head.

There was a part of him that wanted to scream, to scream until his voice cut out, his throat stopped up, and his lungs collapsed.

But there was a larger part of him that couldn't say anything, the silence oppressive on his lips, smothering him alive. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, the only thing her could hear was the static and high-pitched ringing of the world around him. His hands didn't look like his own and he watched them clench and unclench but he couldn't feel anything. He wasn't a monster anymore- he was a victim. He hadn't worked so hard to move on only to be torn apart and thrown right back where he started.

He had been so foolish, so incredibly stupid to think it wouldn’t happen again.

He had been an idiot. A stupid, stupid, fucking idiot.

His fingers yanked at his hair until he could feel the painful pull on his roots.

His senses were beginning to come back. He could feel his blunt nails digging into his scalp. Feel someone holding a sheet around his shoulders. Feel the metal frame of the bed against his spine, feel the hard, roughly carpeted floor underneath his feet. Feel the arm around him, shaking.

He could hear the buzzing of the air conditioner that sounded more like a roaring dragon than an easy drone. He could hear labored breathing and shouting. Were they yelling at him?

He wasn't going to tell. It was all his fault. All his fault. He wouldn't have told. He would have kept the secret.
Please believe me,
please
please
please.

He could taste acid on his mouth. He could smell vomit and sex in the room and it was enough to
make him feel sick all over again.

He needed to stand but his legs buckled underneath him.

He forgot about how long it took for his legs before his legs started working again.

“Andrew.”

He had to get up. He had to get up.

***

The room was getting crowded, same with the hallway. Kevin was shaking and Nicky and Aaron
were, too. Neil could hear sirens approaching.

The officers walked into the place and their eyes fell on Neil.

“Neil? What are you-” and then Higgins eyes strayed to the side and caught on Andrew. “Andrew.”

Luther walked forward. “I think that this has been enough excitement for one day. Let’s go back
home. Nicky, Aaron.”

“You fucking piece of shit.”

Luther turned to where Neil stood, unable to take in Neil’s fuming rage.

“Excuse you young man, that isn’t appropriate language-”

Neil cut him off harshly “You knew. Andrew told you. But you did nothing.” He spat. Each word
felt violent and he could feel their serrated edges as they cut his mouth and his tongue as they hurled
them towards Luther and Maria. But even if the words he spoke could have drawn blood, his own
and the Hemmicks wouldn’t have been enough to match the amount Andrew had spilt.

Nicky whirled around at his father, his shaken stature turning into something angry, something Neil
had never thought he would see on Nicky. Neil was fiercely proud of that anger.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

Luther looked like he wanted to say something but he couldn’t. The truth was already out.

Wymack looked furious and his grip tightened, but Neil barely registered it.

“It was bad enough what you did to me, I mean you sent me to a fucking conversion camp! But what
you did to him? How could you ignore that?”

“Nicholas, this isn’t the time or place-”

“You’re right, the time for talking is over. You-” he shook, “I thought I deserved it. I thought that
you were right. I believed you. I trusted you! But have you ever cared about me or anyone else? Or do you only care about yourself.”

“Nicholas you were sick. Sinning. We were saving you.”

“Shut up. Just shut up. God isn’t like that. Stop using God as an excuse for your own prejudice! Just stop.” He turned to Wymack.

Neil was drowning, everything was happening at once.

-Andrew was trying to throw up again, retching over and over even when nothing more came up, dry heaving until Neil was scared Andrew lungs were going to come up. Andrew was trying to stand again. The blanket was still draped over his shoulder. He could hear the clinking of Andrew belt as he roughly tried to yank his pants back up.

“Andrew.” He wanted to stop him before he hurt himself even more.

“No.” And Neil's hands stopped midair just out of reach.

“Okay. Okay.”-

-The police whipped around at Nicky's accusations and their cuffs were on Luther in an instant.

“You're charged with endangerment and neglect.”

“What?” Luther voice was outraged and indignant "that's ridiculous.”

“If I were you I’d shut up,” Greg retorted. “Conversion camps are illegal in the state of California.”

“I didn't send him to one in California.”

“No, you went around it. It's still illegal. You're also an accessory to rape.”-

-The EMTs were coming in, they were talking Andrew away.

“Bee'll pick you up at the hospital,” Wymack was telling Andrew was he was nodding.-

-“Can we stay with you tonight?” Nicky was asking.

Wymack nodded. “We’re going to go pick up Andrew’s stuff. We’ll see you, later.”-

-And then they were both in Wymack’s car, heading to the apartment.

It wasn’t long before they pulled up in front of the apartment complex. Neil led them up the stairs flipping through his keys until he came across the correct one and unlocked the door. Wymack followed him into the apartment and leaned against the counter as he watched Neil pull out some of Andrew’s clothes and toss it in a bag. When the bag was full, Neil walked back over to where
Wymack was standing. Wymack eyed the bed pressed up against the wall.

Neil walked over to Andrew’s side and picked up his cigarettes. Wymack raised an eyebrow. “When did this happen?”

“What?” Neil asked digging behind the mattress, finally reaching the box and the lighter before dropping it into the bag.

Wymack just looked at him incredulously for a minute before he shook his head and made his way out of the door, Neil following behind him.

-They were at the hospital, and Bee was in the waiting room. Andrew was there too, his eyes on the bag in Wymack’s hands.

“Andrew you should probably stay with Bee and Abby for a few days, until you are more fully healed.” Andrew just stared apathetically.

Neil walked up to Andrew before he left, catching him by the shoulder, without touching. “Are you sure this will help?”

Andrew stared at him. “Are you just trying to relieve your guilt? Since it was partially your fault. Do you feel guilty because you remember it was your idea to go in the first place?” he shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned closer. “There’s a thing about accountability. Embrace it. Guilt is pointless. But accountability and blame, those have some power.”

“Stop- stop talking about this so impersonally, like this didn’t just happen, like this is all just some hypothetical situation.”

Andrew merely blinked. “Justice can’t be found. Not for people like us. You need to move on Neil.”

“Andrew.”

Neil’s chest hurt and it burned in a way that was unfamiliar. He thought he might have cried if his tears hadn’t dried up beside the bonfire that made his mother’s grave. He felt guilt pounding in his heart more than anything else. And more than that he was angry. Angry that this had happened, angry that Andrew didn’t care.

He watched as Andrew walked out the door, duffle slung over his shoulder.

Andrew didn’t look back.

-And then he was at Wymack’s and the other foxes were waiting around in the living room, concern on their faces.

Dan was up and next to him in an instant. “What happened? Neil you’re covered in blood. Are you okay?”

“It’s Andrew’s.”

“Wymack said he had been attacked,” Matt said and his voice had a panicked lilt.

“Is he okay?” Renee asked him and he looked only at her, at the genuine concern in her eyes. She
cared about him. He knew that.

He tried to speak but it felt like his words were stopped off at his throat. He swallowed and tried again. He wanted to say he was fine, that Andrew would be okay.

But that was a lie.

And he wanted to tell the truth.

He wanted to say no, you’ve been calling the wrong person a monster for years. He wanted to say that the real monster was still alive and Neil wanted to wring his neck, wanted to cut him apart in the slowest and most painful way possible. He wanted to scream: how can anything be okay?

How could anything be okay?

How could anything fucking be okay?

He knew horrible things like that happened, he wasn’t naïve. But seeing it happening in front of his face, watching Andrew’s body slump to the floor. Knowing Andrew had kept that secret for years and that no one had believed him.

“I don’t know?” He backed up and grasping for the door handle.

“Neil?”

“I have to- I have to go.”

“Neil wait-”

But he was bounding down the stairs two at a time and it was a miracle he didn’t trip.

“Wymack, someone needs to stop him.”

“Neil needs his space.

“Coach, what’s going on?”

“I’m going to need you all to sit down-”

The door slammed closed behind him and he was running. Running and running and running until his lungs were going to collapse. Running until he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. He tried to run until he couldn’t see him, but he didn’t know if he could ever run far enough.

For once running would not save him.

***

Should’ve held my ground

Could’ve been redeemed

For every second chance

That changed its mind on me

I should’ve spoken up
I should’ve proudly claimed
That oh my head’s to blame
For all my heart’s mistakes
But oh, I’m staring at the mess I made
I’m staring at the mess I made
I’m staring at the mess I made
As you turn, you take your heart and walk away

***

Fight with yourself and your thoughts in the night

Chapter End Notes

Here is the update. Sorry about its contents. Unfortunately the bad stuff was needed for plot reasons. Hope you enjoyed the happy stuff though.
Hello, for those of you who skipped the last part of the previous chapter, here is a quick rundown of what happened. Drake happened, Luther helped orchestrate everything. Drake is still alive, the foxes know about what happened, and Luther was also arrested for his role in Andrew’s assault and for what he did to Nicky.

Chapter Warnings: Mentions and non-graphic discussions of past sexual assault. One instance of self-harm and references to past self-harm, discussions of physical assault. Watered –down Evermore and mentions of Proust.

If you must die

***

In heavy air I feel it creep
And our eyes can’t meet
A poison word that you chose
And the distance grows
And I don’t want to cry no more
And I don’t want to die a little more every day

***

When Neil got back to the apartment, the sun had long since set and the night had darkened the doorway with shadows. He didn’t dwell on that, nor did he dwell on the state of disarray he was in.

He fumbled through his pockets until he felt his key ring. He extracted the metal and slotted it in the door. The sound of the key unlocking the door seem too loud, like a gunshot echoing throughout the room.

Like the sound of Andrew’s body hitting the floor.

He pushed the door open the rest of the way and pressing into the room.

It was dark, no surprise there, but even turning on the light didn’t help much.

How had he never noticed that?

He wasn’t hungry, and even if he was, he couldn’t bring himself to cook any of the food in the fridge. Andrew might have wanted to eat it later.

He walked over to the bed and kicked off his shoes before flopping face-first onto the bed.
He wanted to sleep.

He tossed and turned and yanked at the covers, but he still couldn’t get comfortable. The space around him felt too large, the bed entirely too empty.

All he could think about was the space to his side that was usually filled but now was not.

All he could think about was why that was.

He jostled himself to his feet and grabbed his pillow and a blanket and made his way to the bathroom. The room was much smaller than the rest of the apartment, yet still strangely reminiscent of the places he had stayed at with his mom.

This was the only place he had. He couldn’t see the foxes, not right now. And he couldn’t got to work. He knew he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from killing Drake if he saw him sitting there in a holding cell. And he knew his mother would personally rise from the grave and kill him herself if he ever did something as stupid as killing someone in a police station.

So he stayed.

He stared at the grout of the shower tile until his eyes began to feel heavy.

He wouldn’t have admitted it, would have been too afraid of jinxing it, but he had been starting to think of this place as his home. He had thought it was because he didn’t have to run, but that was still true now and yet he didn’t feel at home anymore.

He was starting to wonder if it was a person making this a home, not the building.

It sounded cliché, but it was the only explanation he could come up with.

The explanation as to why he felt so cold in late spring.

Why he felt like a trespasser in his own apartment.

Why he felt so alone.

***

Days at Bee’s were hard, but they were nothing compared to the nights.

It wasn’t even late, only six, maybe seven, but his thoughts were overwhelming him and he couldn’t stop thinking.

His fingers shook, wanting to hold onto the one thing that gave him respite from the trauma.

It had been easier to stop when he had left the Spear’s. It probably had something to do with being removed from his triggering situation, or some other bullshit like that. But now as he laid in bed of Bee’s guest room, he found it harder and harder to stay present, memories of the distant past and the recent past overlapping and merging until they were all he could think about.

_He kept imagining himself back there. It was like he was back in that room, and Drake could come in at any moment, or Cass, who would pretend nothing was wrong. Who would ask him if he was going to school._

_He wouldn’t say anything but he would go._
It was hard to remember he was in Bee’s house. He was with Bee, not Cass. Bee said what had happened to him wasn’t okay. She said he didn’t deserve it.

She had to be a liar.

She had to be.

He remembered his feet would carry him to the bathroom, like they would every morning after and he would just stare in the mirror. He would walk to the sink and roll up his sleeve, bringing the blade against his skin. He remembered the sharp pain in the first seconds followed by the flood of relief.

He dropped the blade and blinked.

Blood was trickling down his arm. The razor blade clattered on the counter and he slapped his hand over the cut. He yanked at the toilet paper and ripped off long strips of it, blotting at the weak stream of blood. As he held the toilet paper to his bleeding arm, his eyes were drawn to the other white lines that covered his forearms.

He pulled away the paper and stared at the red line that now stood in stark contrast with the older scars, the older memories. He cleaned it up and bandaged it. Then he gathered all the blades and razors and scissors and everything in that bathroom and dropped them into a towel.

He gathered the towel by its edges and brought it down the stairs. Bee was there drinking tea with Abby and Wymack. Though Wymack was probably drinking coffee. He never did care for tea.

Bee’s eyes widened when she saw him.

“Andrew! You’re feeling well?”

He opted for not saying anything. Instead he walked forward and set the washcloth on the counter.

“I took these out of the bathroom. I washed the one I used.” He turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

“Andrew. Andrew wait.”

He didn’t wait. He had always been self-destructive, but seeing Bee’s disappointment was too much for him to bear.

Knowing Bee, she’d probably thing it was her fault. It wasn’t, though, not really. She had thought she had covered everything by temporarily taking away his knives. He never really told her that it wasn’t the knives he had used all those years ago. Just the razor blades that were in the cabinet. He was so violent to everybody, that everybody probably assumed he would use nothing smaller than a kitchen knife.

They didn’t imagine a tiny razor blade was his bane.

He felt so angry. It had been two years. Two years. And he had relapsed. Two years without an incident. Two years of therapy. Two years. And he had thrown it all away in two minutes.

He laid on the bed when he heard a knocking on the door.

“Andrew, can I come in.”

He pulled himself up and walked over to the door. He couldn’t really look at her. It had been one
thing to drop off the blades downstairs before they saw what they were. Now they knew. Now they knew what it meant.

He sat back down on the bed.

She pulled out a chair and sat across from him.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He didn’t say anything.

“Andrew, it’s okay. Relapses happen.”

“But I did relapse. What you say doesn’t erase that.”

“But you made steps to stop it from happening again. Back then, would you have given up the blades?”

He hesitated before shaking his head.

“What happened with him, if you’ll pardon my language, was shitty. It was really fucked up. There is no erasing that. But you’re still standing and he is in jail. And he’ll stay there. That doesn’t undo what he did, but it will keep him away from you.” She paused, taking in his face before continuing. “You didn’t deserve anything he did to you Andrew. I know I’ve told you this before, but I’ll keep saying it until you believe it.”

Silence fell with the last of her words. Andrew wanted to say something, so he grasped at the words from where they hid in his throat until he could finally speak them.

He twisted his fingers into the knees of his jeans. “I want to go back to the apartment. I don’t like sitting here with all of you watching me like I’m going to break. I’ve been through this before.”

“Just because you have doesn’t mean you should have to deal with it alone.”

“I want to be able to do things Bee. He’s already taken from me. I didn’t want him to take that from me too.” He looked up at her and found her thinking.

“Okay, I trust your judgement, Andrew. All I ask is that you let one of us take you back to the doctor when you need to go back.”

“Okay.”

“You’re free to leave whenever you want. But Andrew,” she said, “remember that you’re always welcome here. Always.”

He picked up his bag, looking at her one last time before leaving.

“I know,” he said, his voice probably not much louder than a whisper.

But he knew she heard it all the same.

***

He made a detour before making his way back to his apartment, but the stop seemed only natural.

It had been months since he had last walked the fields half a mile past Marbury and a part of him felt
like that had been too long.

It became a sort of tradition for the two of them, Renee and him. They’d sneak out of Marbury together, and run to the old field where old trucks and cars were dumped when they weren’t going to be used anymore. It was sort of an impound lot for old cars. The police dumped old cars from accidents or crimes there after they no longer needed to store them. Sometimes people just dumped cars there and never came back for them.

Sometimes he and Renee liked to break into the cars and search around inside the vehicle, discovering their contents. Renee had a tool from back when she lived in Detroit that she used to pop open the doors of the old cars.

It was weird and morbid, if he was going to be completely honest, to look inside some of them. It was as if time had frozen still like a time capsule. Crayons were all over the floor, a faded old coloring book was stuffed in the back of the driver’s seat. They’d sit in these cars in the twilight. Sometimes he liked to sit, head back against the headrest and pretend like they were driving somewhere. Maybe the mountains or a forest. Or maybe, they could go to the Winchester house and explore every room they could. They could talk theories about the rooms, about the house made by the woman who couldn’t stop building until she died.

They talked about that place sometimes. Renee always claimed that the house would be the perfect place for an apocalyptic event.

“Every room Andrew,” she said, voice forever earnest, “could be designated to a different purpose. Everything could be self-contained.”

“But the walls are still breakable,” he insisted.

She shrugged. “Depends on the apocalypse.”

And sometimes they made plans. Places that they wanted to go, things they wanted to see. Renee wanted to see Hearst castle and an aquarium with seals and dolphins and sharks.

They both wanted to see Alcatraz and walk the streets of San Francisco during Pride.

Other times they made up scenarios of what and happened to the owners of the cars they sat in.

“See the crayons?” she would say, pointing to the crushed wax on the floor. “The owners of this car were taken.”

“By who?”

“Witness protection. They witnessed the robbery of a fine diamond.” She pressed her fingertips together, a conspiratorial gleam in her eyes. “They saw the jewel fall out of thief’s bag when he was picking up RedBull at the 7-11.”

“Careless thief.”

“The heiress- the one who owned the diamond in the first place- offered a big reward for it. Now they’re just waiting to be able to claim it.”

They did this for years, even after Renee was adopted by Stephanie, after she converted.

And Renee was different, but at the same time, not all that different. The only real change was that now she had faith, hope in something greater than herself. She would tell anyone that she wasn’t a
good person, but Andrew had met a lot of bad people in his life and he knew Renee wasn’t one. She was just a person.

He thought that he might be jealous, though jealousy wasn’t quite the right word. He wasn’t envious of her. Maybe he admired her. She was not all that different than him. They were both working towards the same goal and she was reaching it. He couldn’t begrudge her for that. They were both trying to heal from their pasts. She told him about the things she had seen, the things she had done and what had driven her to do them. And he hated the man she killed with the anger she directed towards his own abusers. They weren’t that different. They both knew how it felt to be exploited, and they both knew how it felt to be powerless.

She was the only other person besides Bee who he had told about Drake. And Luther (though he didn’t really think that counted because he didn’t believe him. How was it really telling when the other person refused to listen?).

He took off his black armbands and bared his wrists to her one of those nights. He remembered how his heart had raced doing it, but how he didn’t regret it. Especially not Renee didn’t look at him with pity or disgust.

“You’ve seen my scars,” he told her. “I don’t think I’m really one to judge yours.”

“Thank you for showing them to me.” Because of course she would thank him.

“Yeah. No problem,” he grunted, shoving his sleeves down.

“Some things don’t leave physical scars,” Renee began slowly, carefully, “but they leave scars inside of you. The man. The man I killed he gave me this.” She lifted the edge of her shirt to show him a thin scar that ran across her abdomen.

“He gave me this,” she repeated. “But the other things he did, those were somehow worse. I still remember what it was like when he would grab me by my throat. He would throw me on the ground, like I was just a little ragdoll. I remember how it felt like my back had exploded when I hit the floor. I remember the things he did after that. I remember them. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget them.”

He nodded. “Some of my foster parents weren’t very good. I’ve been to a lot of houses. The last one-”

“Cass?”

“Yeah, Cass. I thought she might be the one. That sounds like some cheesy movie bullshit, but I think I actually believed it. Like I’m some stray dog that finally found a home. It’s just her son was of those people that like to kick dogs while they were down, you know.” He tapped on the steering wheel at an erratic pace. “But she was nice so I thought that I could deal with it. He wasn’t there that often. Richard wasn’t bad. He was boring. But harmless. Cass though,” he fingers drummed faster against the steering wheel, “she was a mother. She seemed like one. She was kind and supportive. I would have done anything for her. I knew that if I reported Drake, if anyone believed me in the first place, she would still choose Drake. He was her son. She would always choose him.

“It was getting to be too much. What he did. I needed some relief. Something I could control. I didn’t want drugs because I didn’t want to be in a weaker state of mind. So I found it in other ways. Well, you know. You’ve seen.”

And she had seen. She had understood what he was talking about. Bee offered him understanding,
but it wasn’t like the kind he got from someone who had been through the same thing he had been through.

And now more than anything he wished she was here with him, sitting beside him in the passenger seat of the crayon-carpeted car. But he was a fool to want anyone, to want help to escape the horrible memories that were hammering at the forefront of his mind.

_He remembered his social worker. He barely bothered to learn her name, as her presence more scare than most of his foster parents. She came by every few months and would give him the standard questions but she never seemed to care very much. She said she wanted to make sure he was okay. He knew it was because she was worried that she had already had to find him thirteen homes in as many years._

Home. What bullshit.

“Hello Andrew.” Her smile was so fake. He just stared at her.

“I know you don’t like talking to me, but I’m doing this to make sure you are safe.”

He shifted in his seat.

“How are doing. Are they hurting you?”

“No. We’ve been over this Helen.” He replied in a tired voice. “Nothing ever happens.”

She tapped her pen against the top of her clipboard. “Andrew, why are you wearing long sleeves?”

He gave her a look. “Because I’m cold.”

“Andrew, roll up your sleeves.”

“No.”

“Andrew.”

“No.”

“Andrew, are they abusing you?”

Memories of Drake’s weight, his heavy breaths in his ear, and the full-body pain flashed through his mind.

“No.”

He shifted his hand over his clothed arms.

“Show me, Andrew.” When he did nothing she let out an exasperated sigh. “Andrew I’m not leaving until you show me.”

When she had enough of his silence she lunged across the space between them and yanked up his sleeve to reveal his bandaged arm.

“Did they do this to you?”

“No. They didn’t.”
She wasn’t listening though and stormed over to the kitchen.

“Mrs. Spear. Come with me.”

Her heels clacked on the floor as she led Cass into the room. “Andrew show her your arm.”

When he did nothing she wrenched his bared his forearm forward. Cass gasped at the bandages.

“Andrew what happened?”

“He’s going to be leaving you.”

He started. “Cass didn’t do this. I did she knew anything about it.”

“Then this is a case of neglect, not abuse.”

He still remembered the look in Cass’ eyes that day. The betrayal, and the impossible sadness. Like she had lost her own son.

His eyes were closed when he heard the door beside him open.

“I thought you might be here.”

He didn’t open his eyes.

He heard shifting and the sound of the passenger door closing.

“How do you feel?” she asked softly. “Physically.”

“Like shit,” his voice sounded strangled.

She laughed darkly. “Yeah, I suppose that’s true.”

“You aren’t going to say anything?” he pushed, though why, he didn’t know.

“What would I say Andrew? There’s nothing to say. I’ve been where you are. I know. I know I can’t make it better. I just want you to know, I would if I could.” He heard her shift. “I can’t make it better-” her voice cracked- “I know everything you’ve done to move on, Andrew. You’re so much healthier than you were when we first met. Happier, too.”

He tightened his eyes and laid his forehead against to cool leather of the steering wheel, fingers gripping the wheel until they ached. “It feels like I keep falling,” he whispered. “I don’t know if I’m ever going stop.”

“I don’t know either. But you have us. You’re not alone anymore. We’re right here.”

He released his hold on the wheel and breathed, his breath shaky, and he leaned back against the seat.

He stayed still and she touched the edge of her finger against his own. She didn’t say anything but he knew what she meant, what she was saying without speaking.

I’m here. And I’m not leaving.

Their fingers edged closer to one another’s until their pinkies linked over the center console and they sat there in silence.
Then he opened his eyes.

***

He unlocked the door easily and it swung open.

The first thing he noticed was how clean the room was. Neil had always been a disaster, both in life and organization, so the fact that things had stayed relatively clean was a shock.

But, the more he looked around, the more he realized that clean wasn’t the right word.

The room was unlived in.

He only change was the bed. It was missing one of the blankets and Neil’s pillow. He dropped the bag—which he now realized was the same one Neil had carried when he first came to Marbury- and looked around.

He found it in the bathroom. The sheets were twisted like whoever had slept there hadn’t really been able to sleep at all.

He heard the front door unlock and he slowly made his way to the doorway where he could see Neil. Neil’s eyes were trained on the bag, before they slowly moved up and landed and Andrew.

He felt exposed, though he didn’t really know why.

He mustered up his voice, careful to leave in the necessary amount of nonchalance. “Your shit’s in the bathtub.”

“Do you need me to move it?”

“Why is your shit in the bathtub?”

Neil blinked and all of his timidity was gone, instead replaced with that endearing truthfulness that always sent the both of them reeling.

“The bed felt too big.”

Andrew didn’t know what he felt. Instead he dragged his eyes over to the half-deflated mattress and then back to Neil.

“That could hardly be considered a bed.”

And just like that, Neil snapped back, eyes sharp, ever-present smirk lingering on his lips, even if it was out of sight.

“I suppose you could say that, the bathtub was pretty fucking comfortable.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” He shrugged off his jacket. “I’m sleeping in the bed. You can join me, unless you want to spend another night cradled in the arms of your new lover.”

He felt Neil’s pillow hit him in the shoulder for that.

He laid down for bed, listening to Neil rant about the merits of sleeping in a bathroom, the words Renee spoke earlier slipping back into his mind.
You’re not alone anymore.

He supposed she was right.

***

Things had been tense at first, but Andrew was relieved with at the ease at which Neil adjusted. It was almost as if nothing had happened.

That didn’t mean the other foxes were the same page. In particular, he tried to avoid being around Nicky and Aaron at the moment as Nicky kept getting this sad look on his face and Andrew honestly didn’t want their pity.

Neil, on the other hand, rolled with it. It almost made Andrew want to ask what he had seen to make him able to cope so easily with all of this.

“Oh, Nicky and Kevin have been asking about you.” Neil mentioned the next morning at breakfast.

Andrew had missed breakfast with Neil. Breakfast at Bee’s had been fine, but he didn’t have fruit loops.

“Kevin just wants to know if I’ll be able to practice.”

Neil conceded. “That’s true.” He paused at his drawing, paints and pencils strewn across the table. “But Nicky really is worried about you. He wants to know if you’re okay.”

“Tell him I’m peachy.” He remarked drily.

Neil scoffed. “He won’t believe it until he sees you for himself. I don’t think he’s as okay with everything as you are,” his last words were sharp and sarcastic.

“That’s his problem, not mine.” He looked and Neil, “You’ve coped.”

Neil breathed in a shaky breath. He dipped his brush into the water and looked up.

“I know that things are horrible. Nicky doesn’t get that the same way that we do. But what Drake did-” he paused. “I don’t get that.”

“It’s called sex, Neil.”

“No, it’s not. It’s called rape,” his voice was heavy and serious. “And I meant hurting someone without a purpose. My dad- he did really messed up things. He liked to hurt people. But he didn’t beat around the bush. He just hurt them. I can’t understand why someone would do what they did. So no, I’m not okay with what he did. But I’m not going to linger in the past. People like us can’t afford to.”

“Tunnel-visioned obsessors?”

“Survivors. We make it through the day because we keep going.”

“Your father must have done a number on you for you to be so cool under all these circumstances.”

Neil let out a humorless laugh. “Like you wouldn’t believe,” he muttered, head turning back down to his art.

Andrew studied him.
“You never asked about my past,” he found himself saying.

“You have boundaries.” Another stoke of the brush, another bite of cereal. “I didn’t want to push them. If it was important, you let me know.” He set down his brush. “I remember things you don’t like Andrew. You don’t like being touched without permission you don’t like specific words so I didn’t say them.”

“You don’t even know why.”

“I know you, Andrew. Enough to know that you have a reason for the things you like and the things you hate. You respect my boundaries and I respect yours. It’s simple.”

“Simple.” He rolled the word around on his tongue.

“Something in this life has to be.”

“Everything is fuck-all complicated.”

Neil snorted. “Yeah.”

Andrews’s eyes went back to his cereal. He prodded the loops with his spoon.

He was feeling impulsive.

“We’re going out today. When you’re done. Be ready.”

Neil nodded and downed his breakfast.

In no time at all they were on the bus heading towards the shopping center. Neil got off and followed him. Andrew weaved through the area until he came to a large department store. He booked it to the left. He finally came to a stop in front of a sea of white.

“We need to get one. It’s time.”

Neil looked out at the sea of mattresses as if he was about to protest but he smartly shut his mouth. The inflatable one that they had was starting to lose air again. They had patched it up so much that it was more duct tape than mattress at this point.

Some part of him couldn’t help but register that this sort of thing might have been a big thing for a lot of people. Buying a bed with the person you slept with usually was. And it did feel big, not like that, but big nonetheless. This felt permanent. The apartment was rented, the busses only had monthly passes. They were living day to day, month to month. But beds didn’t last months; they lasted years.

He could see in Neil’s eyes that a part of him was screaming to turn away, to run. But after a moment that look vanished. He walked over beside Andrew and began testing it.

“This one’s too soft.”

“Not all of us are used to sleeping on the bathroom floor.”

“It was the bathtub, and it was only for a few days.”

“You’re trying to defend yourself, but you’re just digging yourself into a bigger hole.”

Neil could only laugh at that.
Andrew felt his stomach lurch.

***

They ended up finding one. They had enough money saved up over the past year and it felt like a big thing. Maybe it was. Neil knew fuck-all about being normal. But maybe this was it. He had always thought being normal was boring, mundane. And it was. But there was beauty in simplicity, and now that he was no longer running, he actually had the chance to see it.

They borrowed Wymack’s truck to pick it up. He never used it very much, though he was a bit reluctant to lend it out, but he did. It wasn’t hard getting the mattress on the truck, but it was much harder maneuvering it up the steps to their apartment. Only when they held the door open with a brick, were they finally able to get it up there.

They stared down at it on the floor and took the plastic off. Andrew took it down to the dumpster and brought the car back. He went up the stairs to find Neil staring contemplatively at it.

Andrew sat next to him. Without saying anything, they both fell onto their backs staring at the ceiling, saying nothing at all.

There was nothing in the world right then. Nothing but the water stained ceiling above them and the sanctuary beneath them- untainted and new and clean. And the companionship beside them.

Neil’s face eased was one of bliss. He held out his hand silently

He took Neil’s hand and laid down beside him and immediately felt relaxed. He closed his eyes a moment and absorbed the feeling. It was so much different than the old air mattress they had. That hadn’t really been much better than sleeping on the floor. Every pressure point of their bodies dipped so they touched the floor. They had tried to patch up the shitty air mattress, but the air kept escaping.

Now their backs were supported.

When he finally let his eyes open, he found Neil gazing at him with a fond smile playing on his lips.

“Staring,” he mumbled as he rolled onto his back. Damn that felt good too. He glanced over at Neil out of the corner of his eye and saw that Neil still had that goofy grin on his face.

“Is the door locked?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, wait a minute.” He sat up and pulled at the curtains closed above the mattress.

Neil came back with a bundle of stuff.

“Head.”

Andrew complied, lifting his head and Neil slid his pillow underneath his head. He tossed down his own and crawled onto the bed. His hand slid back into Andrew’s and he tugged the thin sheet up and over their bodies.

“Night Andrew.”

“It’s the afternoon.”

“And we have work tonight and we will barely have any time to sleep after,” Neil reasoned, eyes
already half closed.

“Okay. Fine. Good night, Neil.”

Neil hummed, already on his way to sleep.

He felt the callouses of Neil’s fingers brush against the palm of his hand. He wanted to run his fingers past the roughness of Neil’s palm, but he didn’t, simply content with the warmth against his skin.

When he finally fell asleep, they were still holding hands.

***

They were picking up a domestic adult sort of routine- work, school, music, sleeping, and, when they got the time, reading.

It was an easy way to pass the time and Neil always seemed to have more books at his disposal on any given day than Andrew thought should be realistic.

When he came back from work, he found that nothing was different. He found a pile of books on the table and Neil was flipping through one.

He picked up one of the covers and looked at the Fabio-esque man on the cover. The man had long hair and a broad chest had was holding a dramatically posed woman with her dress sleeves falling off her shoulders.

“You like what you see?” Neil asked as he came into the room, drying off his hair. Andrew felt his mouth go dry. Neil wore sweatpants that hung low on his waist and a t-shirt that actually fit him for once that did nothing to hide the lean muscle of his arms and stomach. And shoulders. Andrew thought that the Fabio man didn’t hold a candle to Neil.

He dropped the book back on the table. “Not really my cup of tea.”

Neil laughed and tossed the towel onto the back of his chair and picked up the discarded book. “Allison leant this one to me. I figured it would help me to learn more about romance or whatever.” He looked at the cover and scoffed. “That doesn’t look practical.”

“I don’t think that’s what they were really going for,” he replied dryly.

“Yeah well, it’s worth a shot.” He took up his chair across from Andrew and began reading. Andrew pulled out his own book and read it too, but often found himself sneaking glances at Neil.

Neil, as it turned out was a very entertaining person to watch while reading. He seemed to be engrossed with the book, face mimicking whatever he was feeling as he read. Occasionally he would get grossed-out look on his face and then skim through a few pages before his face would relax again.

“You enjoying your book?”

“It’s okay.” He set the book down on the table to look at him. “Annabelle is getting married to a rich town merchant and she locked him into marriage by making sure she got pregnant during their night of passion. But he’s cheating on her with her cousin’s neighbor’s sister, but she can’t be with him because she can’t leave her deadbeat husband. And Annabelle is starting to regret trapping in Clyde because she’s taken by the dashing pirate that’s is only in town for a short while.”
“That’s dramatic.” He grabbed the book. “How far are you in the book?”

“About a hundred pages.”

“Shit. What the fuck?”

“I know. And they have so much sex, Andrew it’s ridiculous.”

“Have you learned the seduction techniques of the elusive female?”

“According to this, it seems like all that is required is,” he flipped the book, and then met Andrew dead in the eyes, “eye contact.” And he cackled. “Andrew why are straight people like this?”

“I have no clue, Neil. No clue.”

And Neil laughed.

***

Neil relished the response he got from Andrew, the dry humor that no one else got to see. Sometimes Neil liked to fantasize what it would be like to see Andrew laugh. He wondered if it would be as pretty as the rest of him.

He was pondering this hours later in the grocery store, a handbasket filled with rice, pasta, and fruit. He was making his way to the back of the store to get the last item they needed: ice cream.

He was looking through the flavors when he heard a horribly familiar voice.

“Hello, Neil.”

He whipped around to see Riko standing a few feet away from him in the freezer aisle, cold air descending like a fog around his feet. It took Neil a second to realize Riko was having Jean open and close the freezer doors for dramatic affect.

“Riko.” He stood, closing the door of the freezer he was looking at. “I thought this place had a strict policy of ‘No Shits, No Shoes, No Service.’”

“Oh, Neil. You think that you’re so clever, don’t you. I’d watch what I’d say if I were you.”

“And why should I?”

“I have connections, Neil. Like down at the mechanics down on East Street. One of them wasn’t very good at his job, though. I think he has this horrible habit of accidentally cutting brake lines,”

Riko stopped himself as he waited for the realization to sink in.

Neil felt cold, and not from the open freezer doors. He hadn’t ever really connected with Seth but the cold-bloodedness of his murder sent a familiar shudder of guilt through his body, the likes of which he hadn’t felt since his days on the run.

“Now you will come and meet me at the warehouse on 34th street at 9, I think.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Oh, Neil, you of all people should know how boring corpses are. Besides, that would be too easy.
No,” he tapped his chin, “though, maybe somebody else’s. Andrew’s perhaps. I have this friend see.
And he likes to spend his time down at the prison and he’s made friends with one of the inmates
there. Spear or something.” He snapped his fingers. “Oh that’s right, Drake.”

“He’s in jail,” Neil pressed. “He can’t get out.”

“No, but my friend has learned a lot from him and he has this really cool trick. Imitation. I wonder if he would be willing to try it out on Andrew.”

Neil couldn’t find any words. Riko seemed pleased and handed Neil a map. “Be there.”

***

There was a churning in Neil’s stomach as he made his back to the apartment.

He silently put away the groceries. He could feel Andrew’s eyes on him.

“I have to go out for a few hours. Should be back by midnight.”

“Neil-”

“It’s no big deal. I promise I’ll be back.”

***

The warehouse was dark, other than a single floodlight that dangled over the middle of the room. In the center of the light stood Riko, and his French shadow, Jean.

Neil strode forward, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans.

“What do you want to talk about, Riko?”

“I wanted to talk about you. Nathaniel,” he sneered.

Neil froze.

“How-”

“It wasn’t hard. All I had to do was find out who the new special somebody Kevin has been spending all his time with and do a little digging. And you would never believe who the father of this very special kid is. None other than my dear father’s ex-right-hand, The Butcher of Baltimore.”

“What do you want, Riko?” he somehow repeated, even though it felt like his lungs were seizing.

“I thought you looked familiar,” Riko continued, as though Neil had never spoken. “Glad to see my memory hasn’t failed me in those few years.”

“I don’t look the same.”

“Please. You have the same eyes as your father. They’re unmistakable.”

Neil felt his fist clench. “Shut up.”

“Oh, will you make me? Did you inherit your father’s charm? Or perhaps his skill with a blade? Taught you well, didn’t he? Or were you too busy being a pincushion to pick up on his lessons?”

“Shut up.”

“You can’t kill me Nathaniel.” There was a disgusting sort of confidence dripping from his mouth.
“My brother would know you were behind it and avenge me.”

“I didn’t know he even knew who you were.”

Riko looked like he had been shoved off the pedestal he put himself on. Riko fumed and Jean stood nervously beside him. He looked like he wanted to beg Neil to stop.

“We may not be that close, but I’m close enough to still have some power. You stay in my way and I’ll make sure you pay for it.” He leaned closer to Neil until he was the only one who could hear his corroded words. “Or perhaps I could hurt Andrew.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Are you threatening me? I’m not scared of the likes of you. You wouldn’t dare lay a finger on me.”

Neil had had enough of Riko’s stream of words and pulled back his fist and punched Riko in the face. Riko stumbled back.

“Shut up Riko.”

He turned on his heel, counting down trying to regain whatever control he had left.

And then he felt a hand on his shoulder and then a kick to his ribs and he was on the ground.

***

Neil didn’t know how he made it back from the warehouse district or why the bus drivers let him on their bus when it looked like he just lost a street fight, but they did. Bus drivers were truly some of the most underappreciated people in the world.

He staggered up the stairs and fumbled with his key, trying to slide it into the lock.

The door opened before he got the chance.

Andrew stood there and stared, silently stepping aside and letting Neil enter.

As soon as the deadbolt slid into place, Andrew to face him. Neil bumped into the counter and winced at the pain. Andrew took a step back, seeming to acknowledge the pain.

“How was Riko?”

“What makes you think it was Riko?”

“I couldn’t have been anyone else.” he narrowed his eyes. “What did he want?”

Neil clenched his fists until his nails dug into his palm.

“It’s not important.”

Andrew turned away and made his way over to the counter. He reached over by the sink and then walked back by Neil.

“Could it be because of this?”

Andrew dropped a single card on the counter. It was a pretty innocuous, fairly standard business card. But the name was enough to send a chill down Neil’s spine.
The name PROUST was printed plainly yet clearly on the white cardstock.

“This was dropped off here while I was next door,” Andrew explained, tonelessly. “Vanya said a skeevy man came by tonight and left.”

“Did she call the police?”

“She couldn’t get a good look at his face.” Andrew twisted one of the cards in his hand. “That man better fucking not have had anything to do with why you spent time with Riko.”

Neil didn’t say anything, keeping his mouth resolutely shut.

“Fucking Dammit, Neil. I don’t need your fucking protection.”

“Did you see him?”

“No.”

“Then it was worth it.”

“I can handle it.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean that you should have to, Andrew.”

“Your martyr complex isn’t cute Neil. What would he have done Neil? Beat me? Kill me?” When he got no response he continued, voice dangerous. “Rape me?”

Neil tried to keep his face impassive but he must have moved enough for Andrew to figure it out.

“Fuck you, Neil,” he spat. “Fuck you.”

“Andrew it’s not a big deal. I’m fine”

He clapped his hand over his mouth. “Shut up, Neil. For once in your shit life shut the fuck up.”

“Andrew I’m-”

“Don’t, Neil. Don’t.”

“I really am fine, Andrew. Look it’s not that bad.”

“You look like you got into a fight with a Rite-Aid.”

“It’s just proper first aid.”

“Don’t deflect, Neil. Stitches?”

He deflated.

“Yes.”

“Great,” he replied sarcastically.

“I’m good for tonight, though. I don’t have to do it until the morning.”

Andrew studied him, eyes scrutinizing.
“Sleep Neil.”

“Okay.” He walked over to the bed and sat down. Andrew stayed where he was by the table and Neil’s heart sunk. He was still mad. It was his own fault Andrew was angry with him, but he couldn’t bring himself to regret what he had done. He would do it again if it meant that Andrew didn’t have to suffer.

“Do you want the bed? I can sleep in the bathtub.”

“You’re not sleeping in the bathtub, Neil. You are injured.”

“I thought you’d want some space.”

“Do you want space?”

“It’s not about what I want.” When Andrew said nothing he pushed on. “Andrew I’m- I don’t need space. You can sleep here if you want, or you can sleep somewhere else if you need that.” He looked into Andrew’s eyes, imploring. “Andrew, I’m not lying.”

“I know.”

He walked over and took up the space on the other side of the bed. Neil laid back against the bed barely able to hide his wince.

That didn’t stop Andrew from noticing it, though.

“What was it?”

He could feel another lie on the tip of his tongue but he pushed it away.

“Ribs.”

“Are they broken?”

“No, I dislocated one, though. Its back in place but there’s bruising.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Andrew it’s not that bad.”

“You know, you keep saying that but for some reason I don’t believe you.”

“Andrew, it’s not.” He turned on his side, ignoring the pain, so that he was facing Andrew, whose eyes were trained on him in the dark.

“Andrew I’m not saying it’s not bad. But it’s not the worst. I’ve had worse.”

“Just because you have had worse doesn’t mean that this isn’t still bad.”

“That’s rich coming from you Andrew. You were just acting like Proust would be nothing, like anything that he did to you would be nothing.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t dealt with before Neil.”

“Just because you’ve had worse doesn’t mean it wouldn’t still be bad,” he parroted back.

Andrew was silent a long time before he spoke again, words low on his breath. “You shouldn’t have
done it.”

“Andrew, I’d do it again if it meant you’d be okay.” He needed Andrew to understand. “You act like you’re worthless Andrew but you’re not. One day you’ll realized that.”

“I don’t need protection.”

“Why not? You’re a fucking person. You aren’t some cheap bottle of booze people just pass around and throw away when they’re done.”

“Some people are into recycling. Reduce, Reuse and all that shit.”

It made him feel sick. “You don’t deserve any of that shit Andrew. You never did. And you can’t say people should put themselves first when I know for a fact that you put yourself last every time.”

“You’re getting angry.”

“Damn right I’m angry Andrew. You are worth so much. You aren’t something to be bought. Or bartered. Children aren’t currency or toys or projects. They’re people.”

“I know all of this. Bee and I talk about this stuff all the time. ‘You are not your trauma’ and all that. I’m learning to cope with it.”

“And what are you coping with?”

“Rape, Neil. I can say it.”

“How long did that take?”

He was taken back. “Longer than I’d like to say,” he admitted.

Neil deflated “You act like you’re nothing. But you’re not Andrew.”

“Almost everyone would beg to differ.”

“‘Everyone’ would be wrong.”

“I hate you,” Andrew whispered. He fingers twitched in Neil’s direction and Neil couldn’t help but want lean into them, to feel them brush against his skin. “I’m not making you sleep in the bathtub Neil.”

“Oh. Cool,” and he knew he sounded exhausted. “Thank you, Andrew.”

“93% Neil.”

“If you’re going to kill me, could you wait until the morning? I’ll be able to give a better show when I’m more awake.”

“What makes you think I want to hear you speaking, Neil? I might kill you while you’re sleeping.”

“You won’t. Trying to get blood out of sheets is a bitch. If you really wanted to kill me tonight, you would have just let me sleep in the bathroom. It’s easier to dispose of a body in the bathtub. Easier to clean.”

“Idiot.”
“Love you too, ‘drew. Nighty-night. Don’t let the bed bugs bite you in the ass or whatever.”

“Asshole. Night junkie.”

***

They took turns doing the laundry. One of the only nice features of the complex was the laundromat. And by nice Andrew meant that it was fairly clean and there were three chairs, four washers and two dryers. Andrew went at night when most of the other residents were asleep, claiming all the machines to himself.

Andrew would go down once week while Neil would stay up in the apartment and calculated their expenses and rent payments. They kept the money stored orderly in the safe Neil had bought what felt so long ago. It was almost hard to imagine that there was a time where they hadn’t been living together. It was almost a nice line of thought. Almost.

He still didn’t really get having a future yet, but he was starting to get what it was like to live in the present. It was jarring and too real. Neil was too real. Too unreal. Someone like him shouldn’t be able to exist.

He had read up about some forms of depression having a hallucinogenic component and he wouldn’t have been surprised that Neil was just a figment of his imagination that he brain had conjured to keep himself alive one more day. But the fact that other people saw him too was a strike against this theory.

Neil. He could hear himself scoff mentally. With his pretty face and dimples. And soft hair. Why was his hair so soft? Why did he even let Andrew touch it?

He lugged their laundry back up the stairs.

Neil looked up from his calculations and smirked.

“Staring,” he said sarcastically. He looked back down at his work and then looked back up. And his brow furrowed. He wasn’t wearing his ugly brown contacts. He didn’t wear them a lot when it was just the two of them. Andrew could see into the blue of his eyes. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Andrew shook his head and turned back to sorting their laundry into piles on the floor. “More like a hallucination.”

Neil snorted “I’m not a hallucination. But if I was one I’d be a pretty fucking efficient one, doing taxes and all.”

“A pipe dream, then,” he said scooping up his closes and dumping them in his drawer. But his eyes weren’t completely trained there, instead drawn to Neil out of the corner of his eye.

Neil laughed in the way he did sometimes. His head flung back, eyes crinkled around the edges. Just laughing.

And it hurt, for some reason. It really, really hurt.

It hurt to see someone happy when he couldn’t even remember what that felt like. If he had ever felt like that at all. It hurt even more that someone who had never felt it before finally got to feel it. He didn’t really believe in miracles, but that was as close to one than he was willing to admit. And he knew when he saw it, that Neil would be okay. Not fine like he always insisted, but okay. One day
he would realize he didn’t need Andrew and he would leave. And it was getting harder and harder for Andrew to admit that he didn’t necessarily want that to happen.

Sometimes he liked to indulge himself with fantasies. The one thing the world couldn’t touch, couldn’t take away. He pretended that he didn’t have them, these whimsical dreams, but he did.

Sometimes he imagined being with Neil. Sometimes he imagined that they hadn’t been hurt the way they had, like they could live a normal life, and not be haunted by their memories and demons that wouldn’t loosen their grips on them. He couldn’t really remember what it felt like to be happy, but he thought he could imagine it well enough.

Sometimes in those dreams they sat together and he would eat ice cream, so close that their sides touched each other’s and they could feel each other’s warmth. Sometimes he imagined Neil would get up to get something. And he imagined Neil coming back.

Sometimes he imagined kissing him. His mind could never decide if Neil’s mouth would be sharp like the words he drew to defend his friends, or soft like the humming he made while he stirred dinner. He wondered if his lips would be harsh from all the lies that slid and scraped out of his mouth or tender like those moments of honesty on the roof.

He never imagined he loved him; that was too hard to imagine and he had a hard time believing such a thing could be possible. But he imagined that what they had was enough. And that they were content. And it was nicer than anything he had ever had.

But that wasn’t real. Neil was a pipe dream. Like the smoke from the end of a cigarette- elusive, impossible, gone. It slipped through his fingers before it disappeared forever.

These fantasies, these *imaginings*, were just that: fake. They were nothing. Just like he was. Just like Neil was. Just like they’d always be.

And the sooner he accepted that, the better.

***

They were back at Wymack’s when Nicky came bursting through the door.

“Okay, the music video is finally done!”

“That’s great, Nicky.”

Nicky beamed at their praise. “I was thinking we could have a launch sort of thing.”

“That’s cool!” Matt exclaimed.

“We could have it here.”

Sure, Nicky you can use my apartment for hosting,” Wymack muttered in faux-affront.

“You’re the best, coach.”

Wymack waved them off. “Yeah, yeah.”

“So tomorrow afternoon?”

“Matt and Dan have a date at the movies.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You could go to the movies too, Neil, if you wanted to kill some time.”

“I’ve never been to the movies,” Neil threw out nonchalantly

Nicky almost dropped his laptop.

***

“You’ve never been to the movies?” Andrew asked on the walk home.

“When would I have gone?” Neil threw back, scoffing. He turned away blowing on the smoke emitting off the end of his cigarette. “My mom wasn’t really one for family bonding moments. I think the whole ‘being on the run’ thing was enough bonding for her. We almost never left each other’s side. Ever. Only for school, really.”

Andrew tapped the ash off the edge of his cigarette. “Yes or no?”

“To what?”

“Going to the movies.”

He thought about it. He wasn’t a big fan of movies, but it would be better to get it out of the way so he wouldn’t have to do it again. He could only imagine how Nicky would react if he didn’t go soon. He could practically hear him now, moaning and groaning about how deprived Neil had been as a child and saying things like “even though my parents were shit, they still took me out to the movies, Neil.”

Neil shrugged. “Sure.”

Andrew nodded.

***

It took forty-five minutes to for Andrew to decide on a movie, and thirty minutes to get to the movie theater.

And it only took Neil five minutes to realize that the movie theater was not really his scene.

There were people all around them and apparently the movie was pretty popular because most of the seats were filled. They didn’t really care where they sat so they made their way very to the middle of the theater. Andrew reached into his bag and pulled out a stash of food he had brought with him.

“Aren’t we not supposed to bring food in?”

Andrew gave him a look.

“You’re concerned about breaking rules now.”

He thought about it and shrugged. He doubted he would get caught by his father’s men because he got busted by an usher in the theater. And if he did that would really suck. He grabbed some of the food and waited for the movie to start.
The lights dimmed after not very long and he immediately felt on edge. He wasn’t used to being in a place that blocked his exits and limited his ability to see. He could feel panic beginning to rise before he felt the firm, steadying hand on the back of his neck. He forced himself to breathe and leaned back against the seat.

The chatter began to fade away as more trailers played and he felt himself sink back against his seat. Andrew carefully extracted his hand and brought it back to his food. After what felt like ten trailers the lights went out the rest of the way and the movie began.

It wasn’t one of Neil’s favorites, in fact it was pretty terrible. There were explosions every other minute signaled by loud screams. It wasn’t realistic in the slightest, but he figured most of the people there didn’t care about that at all. About halfway through the movie he felt a small bump in the back of his chair. He thought nothing of it a before there was another. He realized the thumping was muffled for him because it wasn’t his seat that was being kicked; it was Andrew’s. Neil turned and looked behind him. There was an obnoxious child furiously kicking the back of Andrew’s chair.

Andrew made no acknowledgement of the irritating thumping and kept his eyes trained on the screen. Neil figured that if Andrew could ignore it, so could he and turned back to the movie. The movie had just had its third explosion when the couple in front of them began leaning close together murmuring. Despite the loud noises emanating from the film, he couldn’t ignore the mumbling coming from the seats in front of him. He was about to say something when the talking stopped. He was almost about to feel relieved before the silence got replaced with a weird smacking noise. He slowly lowered his eyes down to them and found the couple was now sprawled across each other, armrest pushed up.

He pried his eyes away and tried to drone them out. He was able to for the most part, except when they got really into it, and started thumping back against the seat.

He turned his eyes to Andrew but Andrew was resolutely not looking at them. Andrew caught his glance and turned to him, raising an eyebrow. Neil nodded down at the couple as they rammed forcefully into the chair, both the guy and the girl moaning obnoxiously. Andrew followed his gaze and then looked up at him and then looked past him. Neil turned to find another couple kissing, though they were much subtler about it. Neil looked away from them, trying to look elsewhere, only to find the same thing everywhere. There were several couples making out, when he looked around.

Neil sighed and looked back at the screen. After about an hour and a half the movie finally ended and Neil couldn’t wait to get out of there. The floor was sticky under his shoes, but that didn’t slow him down as he made his way out the exit. He blinked at the bright lights of the theater hallway. Andrew followed behind him and picked up his place beside him.

“What did you think?”

“I don’t know. It was cool to see the movie like that, all big and everything, but the people were kind of annoying.”

“The characters or the people in the theater?”

“The theater.” He tossed his trash in the parking lot trashcan. “Why were they making out in the middle of the movie?”

“It was dark, they could get away with it.” Neil stifled a groan. “But they missed, like the whole movie. And movies are expensive.”

Andrew shrugged. “Not everyone has the same view of money as us. And this was a dollar film;
they were reshowing old movies.”

“So that movie came out already and people still came to see it.”

Andrew shrugged. “I hadn’t seen it before.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “I wanted to know if it was as bad as everybody said it was.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

Neil nodded. They walked on the edge of the sidewalk. “What I don’t understand,” he said, balancing on the ledge at the edge of the planters, “was why there was that whole bee thing. How can bees detect royalty? That just doesn’t make sense. And what was the point of that ten-minute scene with the paper work? Like they could have cut that out.”

“I think it was to be relatable.”

Neil considered it. “That was probably the most realistic part of the whole thing.”

Andrew nodded.

“When I had to get my new name it took forever and I had pretty easy access to the paper work. It was a nightmare-”

***

Andrew had never claimed he wasn’t selfish. He was. It was indulgent. He knew Neil was opinionated. Did he choose *Jupiter Ascending* because he knew Neil would likely spend the entire ride ranting and raving about the action scenes and the strangely coded scenes between pretty much all of the characters?

Maybe.

Okay, no. He did it on purpose.

And if he got an excuse to hear Neil’s voice the entire bus ride to Wymack’s and the first half of the party, an excuse to look at him as his eyes lit with passion, well…

He didn’t really have an excuse.

Except that he was gay and stupid and maybe just a little bit romantically interested in Neil.

Maybe.

Fuck, he was so screwed.

***

The first half of their launch party was relatively tame. The upperclassman and Kevin crowded around Nicky’s computer and watched the music video over and over. Neil spent the time talking with Andrew about that stupid movie, the lyrics of their song playing over and over in the background.

*I don’t want to die or fade away*
But after talking about the movie for so long and not about music, Neil decided he needed a drink, so he went into the kitchen and where he ran into Aaron.

Great.

Aaron looked over at him.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

Neil leaned back in the counter and closed his eyes.

“Good. I don’t really want to talk to you either.”

“You better watch yourself around him.”

Neil glared at him. Aaron didn’t seem to care about that response, seemed to expect it actually. But a moment later a serious look passed over his face.

“Did he- did he tell you?”

“Did he tell me what?”

“About Drake. And Luther.”

“He told me he had issue with them. He hinted that something had happened, but he didn’t say what it was. I didn’t know what Drake had done.”

Aaron was furious. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“Excuse me? What?”

“If you knew something happened, why didn’t you ask?”

“Why didn’t you?” Neil shot back. “I know you must have been pretty fucked up when you two first met and I know you’re angry about your mom but didn’t you once ever ask about what happened to him in the years you two were apart? Or did you think it was all sunshine and rainbows at those foster homes?”

“You knew something had happened,” Aaron pressed, “and you didn’t do anything.”

“I wasn’t going to pry into his life, Aaron. We have an understanding.” He leaned back and looked at the wall. His eyes slid over to Aaron. “Tell me this, Aaron. Would you have killed him?”

“Who?”

“Drake. If you had come into the room. If you had thrown that thing across the room and you had the chance to kill him, would you have?”
“Yes,” he said in less than a heartbeat. “I would have. That isn’t even a question. I would kill Drake a thousand times over if it meant that Andrew never had to deal with him at all.” He closed his eyes. “You knew though, before we got there.”

“I suspected something was going to happen or was happening. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“You ran up the stairs.” He studied the dark-haired teen next to him. “Would you have killed him, if you got there first?”

“Without hesitation.”

Aaron turned away and stared at the sink.

“Okay.”

It wasn’t a truce, but it was close to one. It was a beginning, and honestly, that was better than Neil had ever expected. And he was good at making do with that.

“Also, I don’t appreciate you butting into mine and Katelyn’s relationship.”

And there went the truce.

“Katelyn and I get along, Aaron. It isn’t a crime for me to talk to her.”

“You don’t see me getting involved in whatever’s going on between you and my brother.”

“There’s nothing going on between us,” he said. He thought he was telling the truth, but even as the words were rolling off his tongue he could taste the old familiar taste of dishonesty. He didn’t know why the more he confirmed the nothing between him and Andrew, the more it felt like a lie.

“Right,” Aaron drawled. “Still a liar, I see. I know my brother well enough to know that something is going on between the two of you.”

“We’re roommates. And he hates me. And I think you’re lashing out at me because you want to be closer to him.”

Aaron said nothing so Neil continued

“You need to make up your mind. I think that it’d be better if you two could get on speaking terms. No one should have to be alone, Aaron. You have Katelyn. You could have him, too. It might get easier if you go off to college. Sometimes the space give room to breathe.

“I don’t want to lose him,” Aaron said in a tight voice. “After everything- I don’t want to lose him.”

“Then don’t. Katelyn is your reason. You two can make it work, despite everything.” He waved his hand in the air. “All of this. You’ve given up drugs, and that’s pretty fucking hard. You can give it a try.”

“Andrew’s a bit more stubborn than a drug.”

Neil chuckled. “He can be. I can talk to him; he might be willing to make something work.”

Aaron nodded and walked over to the door and slipped on his coat. He turned to look at Neil one last time. “You’re good for him. I don’t really like you, but I think you are good for him.” He looked constipated but he wasn’t lying. It was strange moment that passed between them.
Neil shook his head, a faint smile sneaking onto his lips. “Andrew had been great for me. I haven’t done anything.”

“You have, Neil. You have. He’s different.”

“No. People are just paying attention.”

Aaron hesitated before nodding.

“If it helps, I think you and Katelyn are good together.”

“She’s everything.” He said, a soft smile playing at his lips.

“I can tell.”

“Neil, I-”

“Is everything going all right in here?” Nicky yodeled as he swung into the kitchen.

“Yes, Nicky. “Everything’s fine” They said at the same time.

Nicky didn’t look like he really believed them.

“O-kay.” He sing-songed before swinging back out into the living room. Neil glanced at Aaron who merely rolled his eye. He held his SOLO cup up in a mock salute and went out to the living room.

Well wonders never ceased.

He was pondering this as he made his way back over to the computer where Nicky was starting to read the comments that appeared under the video

“Rav3n says: I love this song. Who sings it again? Chris? Alex? Stephan?”

Nicky frowned at the words.

“Who the heck is Chris? Or Alex?”

Neil felt like he had been punched in the gut.


Nicky kept scrolling. “Ooh, here’s one in French. Kevin, what does it say?”

Neil spun back to look at whatever it was that caught Nicky’s eye and felt his blood run cold.

Es-tu content, Nathaniel?

He could tell the exact moment Kevin read it. His face paled and he looked sick. Neil shot Kevin a frantic look that screamed not now.

“It’s nothing,” Kevin said. “Just some French trolls.” The word sounded unnatural coming from Kevin, but he continued. “They probably think we won’t realize they’re being an ass if it’s in another language.”

“Okay. Goodbye rav3n,” Nicky said as he clicked the comment away, completely unaware of the danger that came from such words.
Neil knew no more comments would come. The fact that they deleted them was proof enough that they had been seen, that Riko’s message had been received.

Riko knew who he was. He knew his ties and he sure as hell knew about his father.

And now Kevin knew too.

***

*To pull yourself from harm*

*To be the braver one*

*To raise a weary hand*

*In a house that’s built on sand*

*To wear it like a crown*

*To kick before you drown*

*To fight it and to cry no more*

Chapter End Notes

Es-tu content, Nathaniel- Are you happy, Nathaniel?

I tried to make this chapter happier, so I hope you enjoyed it.
Neil could felt he weight if Kevin’s gaze on the back of his head throughout the rest of the viewing party. It was different from the intense stare Kevin usually fixed him with when he wanted him to practice. Kevin wasn’t a halfhearted person; he never had been, and he never could be. He came across as cold and arrogant but Neil saw his drive and persistence and almost masochistic sense of determination.

Which meant that he couldn’t just brush off this new revelation. Kevin cared too much to let that happen.

He leaned up beside Kevin.

“After this, when everyone goes and Andrew is at Bee’s,” he whispered in French.

Kevin’s eyes widened just a bit, just enough for Neil to know he had surprised the taller boy.

There was a reserved pall to Kevin’s energy after that, but no one really paid it much mind, too busy celebrating their video as the views-accrued climbed higher and higher.

After what felt like an eternity for Neil, whose stomach was churning with excitement at the video’s success and the dread of telling Kevin the truth, Wymack bid them goodbye and headed back down to the shop and the other foxes began to go their separate ways, too. Andrew gave him his signature two finger salute as he made his way out of the apartment with Bee.

And then they were alone.

Keep in cast a furtive look around the room before he walked down the hall to his room. Neil followed behind him and shut the door at Kevin’s behest. He turned back to face him and he saw Kevin sitting in his desk chair, elbows leaning heavily on his knees. His hands were pressed to his lips like a prayer and the light of the room illuminated the pale scars on his hands. But what hit Neil the most was the look in his eyes. If it had been any other time, he could have interpreted the body language as contemplation or pending judgement, but his eyes tore away that possibility.
Kevin’s eyes were dark and haunted, like he was staring at a dying man, and maybe he was. It felt like an anvil landed on Neil’s chest the second he saw that look. It had been easy when he was the only one who knew. Now it felt like his fate was inescapable. He was condemned, he was damned, and now he was exposed.

“Nathaniel,” Kevin whispered reverently, as if he was speaking a language he had long since forgotten he knew. “I thought I forgot about you.”

“It seems like you haven’t.”

“I don’t think I’m the only one.” He grabbed the sweatshirt on his bed and knotted his fingers into the fabric so hard Neil thought it would tear. “Your father. Ichirou. I was staying with Riko when the Ichirou came to power.”

“I’m surprised you knew about it.”

“You shouldn’t be.” Kevin shook his head absently. “We always paid attention to the things Riko thought were important.”

Neil let that settle in his stomach.

“He let you stay,” Kevin whispered Neil’s legs felt weak and he sat down. “He’s still undecided. He might have something for me but if not…” he trailed off.

“How long did he give you until he makes up his mind?”

“End of high school.”

“So a year and a half.”

“Or less.”

Kevin’s face was solemn.

“You could have done so much. You were untrained as shit, but you had so much potential.” Kevin closed his eyes and breathed in slowly, deliberately, as if each breath caused a pain in his chest. “You could have been anything, everything.”

“I’ll still practice, with you. Train. If you’ll let me.”

_Don’t abandon me_ his mind pleaded. _Please don’t leave me behind. Please don’t forget me._

And Kevin met his eyes, a steely fervor running through them.

“It isn’t even a question. I’ll be here.”

And the two mourning men sat in silence as the grieved the truth they could not tell.

The heaviness stayed with Neil even as he left, as he climbed down the steps of Wymack’s apartment, as he grabbed a ride on the closest bus. He felt like he was in a distant headspace, even as he got off the bus at the store to pick up the things he and Andrew needed.

Money had always been something that was tightly regulated under his mother’s watch, though that was to be expected. Even though she had stolen quite a large sum, money didn’t last long when you
needed it to. Junk food was off the table, same with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Though he didn’t like vegetables, he savored how crisp they were on his tongue and teeth. And nothing compared to the taste of fresh fruit. In Europe they had stayed in one place longer than they did in the States and sometime they would get to get nicer foods from the corner shops in France or the subway market in Germany.

But they spent most of their time in the United States, running from place to place. Mary would take them to a 24 hour grocery store and buy peanut butter, bread, and nuts in bulk. He bought vitamins as supplements to diverse food and he had to swallow them in the car with a bottle of water they filled up at the park water fountain or a public bathroom sink.

She had hammered her stingy-ness into him like she had with most of her rules and he kept to them, for the most part.

But when he saw the box of soap on the shelf at the store, he knew he was going to buy it. He didn’t look at the price, already knowing he’d take it out of his own personal funds, knowing he needed it, needed to buy it. The fog he had been feeling was gone and his mind was clear.

He shoved it into his coat along with his receipt as he took the bus back to the apartment. He gave Andrew a quick nod before he made it back to the bathroom.

His hands were shaking, but he was determined. He slipped off his clothes and stepped into the shower, box in hand and turned on the water. He had forgotten to take the bottle out of the box before getting in, so the cardstock was soggy and sopping as he tried to open it. The box tore apart in his fingers and he tossed it outside the shower curtain and poured the liquid into the palm of his hands.

He scrubbed the shampoo into his hair and watched as dark brown dye began to stream down his back and down the drain. He washed his hair over has over again until the water ran clear and he washed the rest of his body with the bar soar to get rid of any traces of the dye.

He toweled off and slipped on his clean clothes, refusing to look in the mirror. His hand hovered over the door handle before they stopped. He lifted his hands and took out his contacts, dropping the plastic in the trash. And he opened the door.

Andrew was cooking but he looked over when Neil got out and his eye caught on him.

An irrational part of Neil’s brain thought that Andrew recognized him as his father, that he saw the terrible man in front of him. But he had never met Nathan, and if Neil had the choice, Andrew and everybody else he cared about never would.

And even though Andrew said nothing, there was an acceptance in his eyes and Neil could breathe.

***

The morning was quite like they world around them. They were eating their breakfast at the counter and Andrew snuck glances at Neil over his book.

Neil’s hair was sticking up all over the place because he went to bed right after washing his hair for what felt like an hour the night before. He hadn’t bothered to flatten it down, saying something about how he didn’t need to if he wasn’t going out. It was shoddy reasoning, but that was Neil.

“Andrew.”
He glanced up to see Neil looking at him like he had something he wanted to say. He walked over next to Andrew and held out his hand expectantly.

Andrew eyed it warily and took it reluctantly. Neil pulled the book out of his hand and placed it on the table, marking his place.

Neil walked them over to the living room to where their shared bed was. Their curtains were closed most of the way, blocking out prying eyes, but not hiding the sun as it slipped through the fabric, illuminating the room despite its intended function. Neil sat on the bed, still holding onto Andrew’s wrist.

Andrew looked down at him before he sat down across from where Neil sat, facing him. Neil looked down for a moment. He said nothing for so long Andrew was tempted to break his revelry.

Suddenly, as if he had finally made up his mind, Neil grabbed the hem of his shirt and lifted it over his head. Andrew stared at his arms as they lifted above him, the muscles gliding and shifting with every movement. He had never gotten chance to see them before him. It took him a moment before his mind caught up with what was happening and his eyes slid to Neil’s chest.

It was covered in scars.

It took him only a moment to realize they were much different than the ones that lined his own arms. While his were surgical and precise, Neil’s were a haphazard puzzle of his past, bits and pieces interlocking to illustrate a clearer picture of his past.

It was obvious in just the first few seconds that the scars had been caused by dozens of different means. There were burns and suture marks and areas that looked like someone had tried to cut him apart. Neil was watching his face, but he knew that it remained impassive. Neil held his hand out again for Andrew and Andrew obliged, putting his hand in his. Neil held his hand and brought it up against his chest, running Andrew’s fingers along one of the longer scars on his abdomen. He let go.

“You can touch them if you want to.”

Andrew hesitated a moment before he touched a nasty scar by Neil’s shoulder. It had to be a burn.

“It was a fire poker. If you were wondering.”

Andrew looked up at him, meeting Neil’s eyes. The stark blue startling in contrast to their usual dull brown.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I want to tell you. You deserve to know. You deserve to know who I am.”

He nodded as he traced his fingers along the other scars that Neil had. They wove all though his skin, weaving a story Neil hadn’t yet told. His body had been a canvass for others to paint in blood. He had been cut apart and sewn back together so much that Neil’s body was now patchwork quilt of his past and his pain.

Neil’s past had always been a mystery, and Andrew had a feeling that even if Neil told him about it for hours there would still unseen parts to him. But that didn’t matter, because, at his core, Neil was the same person Andrew had met that fateful day at Marbury, the same person he was a year ago, and the same person he was now.

He looked up at Neil, their fingers entwined, their eyes locked.
“I already know who you are.”

***

Sometimes in the afternoon on Tuesdays, Vanya had bingo. She couldn’t do it every week, but about a few times a month she liked to go. However, since Anya was working almost every hour of the day and her only off time she spent sleeping, that left no one to take care of Sasha. Neil wasn’t quite sure how it happened, but somehow he and Andrew ended up volunteering to babysit.

Well, he actually knew exactly how that came about.

Vanya had taken to teaching them Russian on the afternoons they had to spare. It was incredibly helpful to learn from a native speaker, one that could correct them if they were ever wrong. But both he and Andrew didn’t like being in the position of owing anybody anything, even if it was just the kind woman next door. So they offered to babysit.

It really wasn’t as hard as he had thought it would be. Andrew already had experience taking care of other kids from many of the foster homes he had lived in and Neil- well he was a fast learner, which he felt made up for his overall lack of experience.

For some reason, Sasha seemed to love Neil. But he knew it was probably because he could draw.

Most afternoons they would spend drawing. Each picture had some adventure or another made up to go along with it. She was thrilled when Neil could draw her favorite animal, unicorns, for her. Neil also was pretty good at story telling. Little Sasha liked to speak in a mixture of Russian and English so they were able to pick up some of the more beginning level Russian from her.

It was a strange way to spend their summer afternoons, but Neil found that he kind of enjoyed it and as much as Andrew would never admit it, he enjoyed them too.

***

“Neil, what is your favorite animal?”

“A fox.”

“And what about you Andrew, do you have a favorite animal?”

Andrew had to keep a straight face. “Foxes are pretty cool, I guess.”

She considered it with all seriousness before she went back to her drawing.

“I guess that makes sense. Foxes look very soft. They’re not as cool as unicorns, but they’re still pretty cool.”

Today was just one of those days with Sasha. She was still incredibly well-behaved, but she was filled with questions. Andrew stayed silent, trying against all odds to draw a dog that actually looked like a dog and failing miserably. Neil of course, was having no problem with that and was also answering every one of Sasha’s questions.

“Are you two married?”

Andrew felt his throat dry. Was he that obvious? “Why do you ask that?”

“In school, this kid names Johnny has two moms and Mommy and Grandma told me that sometimes two boys or two girls get married and they live together and have kids. And you two live together
without your parents.”

“Uhhh, no were not married,” Neil answered awkwardly. “We’re not that old.”

She wrinkled her nose. “How old do you have to be to get married?”

“I don’t know. Usually you have to be an adult.”

“How old’s that?”

“Like, eighteen.”

Her eyes grew large. “That’s super old.”

Neil laughed “I know.”

“How old are you and Mr. Andrew?”

“We’re sixteen.”

She furrowed her brow and her frown deepened before her face lit up. “So you could get married in two years!”

“We could. That was some very good math.”

She beamed. “We learned adding. In class. And sub- sub-” she shook her head. “Minus-ing”

“We could, but we’d have to talk about it first.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. When you’re in a relationship with someone you have to talk with them to make sure you both are okay with whatever you’re going to do together.”

“Like going to the park?” She asked, eyes imploring as she tilted her head to the side. “Sometimes I want to go to the park but my mom says no or sometimes she wants do something and I don’t so we do nothing. But when we both want to go to the park then we have a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, just like that. If both people don’t want to get married then it’s no fun.”

It was a good answer, but Andrew was having trouble paying attention.

Marriage was just not- it wasn’t anything people like him considered. Something people like Neil considered. The idea of falling in love with someone seemed so foreign, so fake, it couldn’t possibly be real. It could only exist in fairytales. In stories that gave people hope.

Though he supposed the things he lived through were nothing more than stories to all of those other kids, though ones of horror instead of ones of hope. But he couldn’t hold it against her. She was young, naïve. He was like her, to an extent, when he was her age. He wasn’t going to ruin her if he could help it.

He wanted things to stay simple for her, if only for a little longer. He could let her have her stories of magic and princesses and talking animals that Neil told her. He knew how to tell a good story, though Andrew supposed that just came with the territory.

But Neil wove stories of magic and good and evil. Everything was simple, black and white. He drew
pictures of his characters and he happily named the main princess after her. Sometimes when Andrew sat with them, he only pretended to zone out. Sometimes he listened to the stories, as enraptured by them as Sasha. Neil confided in him that he made up the stories as he went along, a whole set of improvisation. But he never forgot an important detail, always paying attention.

“What about you, Mr. Andrew? Will you get married?” Sasha asked him and he turned to face her.

He figured he’d humor her. Who was he to predict the future? He of all people knew the future was unknowable.

“Maybe.”

Her eyes lit up.

“Really? Would you marry Mr. Neil?”

“Only if he wanted to.”

“Okay. That makes sense.” And she dropped it, like it was really that simple and went back to coloring. They watched her the rest of the afternoon until Vanya came home and then they made their way back to their apartment.

He walked across the room and picked up his book and reading glasses and settled on the bed.

“So… you want to marry me.”

“Shut up.” He flipped the page. “You know I probably won’t get married.”

Neil laid back in bed beside him, shit-eating grin never leaving his face.

“There goes my chances Andrew. If you don’t get married, I sure as hell won’t.”

“If you’re desperate enough I’m sure you could find any number of girls ready to fall at your feet.”

“If I was going to get married, it would probably be for convenience or something. And I’d probably only marry you.”

If he was drinking something he might have spit it out. “What?”

“It would totally work for tax reasons. And I know I can live with you. It’d be great.”

“You’d marry me, to keep doing what were already doing?”

“I’m just saying if I had to get married. Could you imagine me married to someone else? No thanks. It wouldn’t be so bad. I’d let you pick out the cake.”

“Damn right,” he muttered. “Like hell I’d let you anywhere near that cake without me.”

“Cool. Now we have our wedding plans if we ever decide to get married. I’ll pick up the paperwork, then we’ll go to courthouse, bam married, then we stop by the supermarket and you pick out the cake.”

“Your sense of romance never ceases to amaze me Neil. However do you do it?”

“What can I say, it’s a gift.”
Time kept going, in that way it always seemed to.

It felt like maybe things should have come to a stop, or at the very least a pause after Neil reverted his hair back to its original color, but it didn’t. He was worried what the other foxes would say, but it hadn’t been bad. Allison had gushed over the fact he had done something to take care of himself, and in a roundabout way he had, though his self-care wasn’t exactly what Allison was assuming it was.

Matt ruffled his hair until it stuck out in all sorts of directions, until Neil could look in the mirror and not cringe. The thought of his father walking around so undignified was so ridiculous that he could finally see the difference between the two of them.

Dan and Renee had taken it in stride, which he supposed was only natural, considering both of them were used to dramatic hair themselves.

Nicky showered him in compliments and Aaron didn’t give a shit. Kevin’s eyes passed over in fear before the settled into a look of normalcy.

Once that hurdle was crossed he began to relax. He didn’t see his hair most of the time anyway, so it was all good.

And then school started and it had been so long since he had changed his hair, he forgot that he used to have brown hair and brown eyes last semester.

Greg’s eyes widened when Neil got to the lunch table. “Neil, your hair.”

“What about it.”

“What do you mean, what about it?” Greg asked incredulously. “Dude it’s completely different. It looks nice and all but why… whatever color.” He said gesturing to Neil’s curly locks piled on top of his head.

“It’s my natural color. I went back.”

Greg grumbled and Neil easily ignored it. He felt the rush of air as someone moved up beside him.

“Hey Neil,” Ashley said as she sat down in the seat next to him and leaned close to him. Way too close. He had really hoped this whole crush thing would be over by now because he didn’t like people getting in his space.

It looked like summer break hadn’t been enough for infatuation to go away. She was so close he could smell her perfume, which admittedly, smelled nice, though it would smell much nicer father away from him.

“So, pre-calc looks like it’s going to be hard.”

He shrugged. “It seems fine so far.”

“I think I just need help,” she threw out casually, twirling her hair around her finger.

Please don’t ask please don’t ask please don’t ask.

“Would you mind helping me?”

Neil suppressed a groan. Yes, yes I very much would mind. I have a thousand of other things to do.
He smiled. “Of course.” Damn societal expectations and constraints.

He combed through his mind for the time that would be the least invasive.

“How about lunch?”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Great.”

He nodded and turned away from her, trying to fix his attention anywhere else. He pulled his sandwich out of his paper bag and began to eat it.

“Did you hear about Jessica?” Ashley said.

“No, what?”

“She has a crush on Andrew.”

“Wait, Andrew Minyard, Andrew?”

Neil almost choked.

Ashley nodded, smiling like a cat who ate a canary. “One and the same.”

He caught Katelyn make a face at the gossip and almost laughed. Katelyn was nice enough. She appeared to not be fucked up beyond all reason, but she also seemed to know way lot about how the world worked, something he could appreciate.

She covered her mouth to stifle her laugh and walked over to the trash at the same time Aaron happened to be there.

*What a coincidence* Neil thought sarcastically.

Katelyn and Aaron were talking to each other and Katelyn seemed to be trying hard not to laugh at something Aaron had said. He didn’t know what that could be though. She tucked her hair behind her ears and stared at him with rapt attention while he spoke to her under his breath and Neil had caught the way Aaron’s eyes would seek her out when she was across the room or when she wasn’t looking.

She glanced back at the table and over at Aaron and then back. He picked up her backpack and made to leave. “Katelyn and I are working on a project,” he said and he left.

He walked over to the Katelyn and Aaron and saw Aaron eyeing him as he came closer with Katelyn’s backpack.

He urged them to follow him with a glance and the walked beside him until they turned the corner, out of sight from the rest of their peer group.

He handed Katelyn her backpack. “I told them we were studying in the library.”

She nodded in understanding. Aaron looked at him like he couldn’t quite believe what was happening.

There was a sort of longing look developing in the couple’s eyes and he decided that now would be the best time to make his exit. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I actually have go to the library,” and he turned on his heel and left, leaving any further awkward interactions behind him.
Across the campus Andrew saw Neil say something to Katelyn and Aaron before leaving. Which was odd because Neil didn’t talk to either of them. There was a part of him that wanted Neil to join him, though he was sure that if Kevin and Neil sat together they’d make his ears bleed with their constant music talk.

And then Aaron said something to Katelyn and then he made his way back to the table.

With Katelyn.

They both sat across from Andrew and it was quiet. Aaron looked nervous, like he couldn’t quite think of what to say.

Well same, buddy. Same.

Aaron hadn’t really talked to him since the Drake thing. He hadn’t really expected him to, and why would he? Andrew was disgusting and now his disgusting past was all out in the open. Aaron had to share DNA with a monster.

Aaron’s mouth opened one more time before he suddenly got up from the table and made his way to the bathroom.

And then he was left alone with Katelyn.

Okay, technically, he wasn’t, Kevin was there, but he was reading musical theory with soundproof headphones so he could focus. He was enough of a buffer to prevent anyone from getting murdered, but not enough to buffer the awkwardness of the situation.

“Andrew,” Katelyn piped up after two minutes of silence.

He ignored her.

“I don’t know what happened between you and Aaron, but I know it was bad. Aaron won’t really talk to me about it and that’s fine, but it’s eating him up inside.”

“He can talk about it if he wants.” The words were forced, but he didn’t take them back. “He can deal with his problems however he wants.”

“You don’t have to tell me what happened, Andrew.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

Her mouth was terse.

“He told you.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. He did.” She fiddled with her napkin. “Is he going to jail? The guy who did it.”

“I don’t know.” He pushed his potatoes around on his tray. “Maybe.”

“I hope he does.”

“Vicious.”
“I hope the other inmates find out what he’s done and kill him for it.”

He looked at her. There was a dead serious look in her eye. It was odd, but it didn’t seem to contradict her face, as if she had always possessed such a fierceness, after all. He usually didn’t underestimate people, but he was starting think he had with her.

“Didn’t know you were so violent.”

“When someone hurts my family, I get angry Andrew. And I know I’m probably not yours, but you sure as hell are mine. Even if Aaron and I don’t work out, he means something to me. You and Nicky and Neil do, too.

She leaned back in her seat. “And even if didn’t give a crap about you Andrew, I would still wish him dead. People like him deserve to burn in hell.”

He nodded. “You have strong feelings about this.”

She shrugged. “My older sister has been through some shit. A couple of really bad boyfriends, an addiction problem, all of that. It was really hard on my family and on her, of course. But I know how hard it is to quit. I saw how hard it was for her. I know how hard it must have been for Aaron, too. I remember how he was in junior high. I’m shocked he even made it out of there. But he hadn’t been using for too long at that point and Luther and Maria sent him to rehab.” She shook her head. “And I used to be thankful to them for doing that, for helping him. But then when I found out what they’d done it made me feel sick.”

“Aaron may not have connected the dots but people like those pieces of shit are too common.” And he could see there was a sort of darkness in her eyes when she said it.

He nodded. “They are.”

“When that motherfucker dies, call me. I’ll pick up a pie. Chocolate.”

“Of course. It is one of the best ones out there,” he said easily. She wasn’t so bad, he figured.

***

Neil was taking the long way to the library, which involved many unnecessary twists and turns. If someone would have asked him why he was doing that, he was sure to have thought of an excuse. But as it was, he was alone and he could admit to himself the truth: he was trying to put off doing his homework for as long as he could.

Which was how he found Aaron leaning against the wall, a concerted look on his face.

“If you’re looking for the bathroom, it’s over there,” he said, pointing off down the sidewalk.

“Oh fuck off, Neil.”

He walked over and leaned casually on the wall, looking down at Aaron.

“So is there a reason you’re sitting here looking like a constipated idiot, or is that just usual for you.”

He made a face. “Shut up.”

“You’ve finally got the chance to spend time with Katelyn and you’re wasting it brooding.”

“I’m not- Andrew’s there.”
“Uh, yeah. He is. So is Katelyn.”

“You just don’t -ugh, Neil you’re so fucking annoying. You might find it easy to talk to him because you’re fucking or whatever.”

“Andrew and I are sleeping together Aaron.”

Aaron made a face. “I know. You’ve mentioned that before.”

“Just sleeping, Aaron. We’re not together. It’s cheaper.”

“You’re not gay,” Aaron said, but it sounded like a question.

“No. I’m not. I don’t swing.”

“What do you mean you don’t swing?”

“Someone looks good but I don’t feel attracted to them. You brother is the only person I would ever, you know. I trust him, though. Maybe that’s why it feels different with him, I don’t know.”

“I thought people were making shit up,” Aaron said as he sunk back against the wall. “Katelyn and I- we don’t have sex. We haven’t even talked about it. We just sleep, too. When her parents are away for the weekend, I was relieved when we never talked about it.”

“You should still probably talk about it.”

“Yeah. Probably,” Aaron conceded, grudgingly.

“Andrew and I talk about this stuff because we live together and we want to have a good relationship. It’s not romantic, it’s just necessary. I know shutting down is usually your MO, but it’s not going to work with Andrew. You need to talk to him.”

“Andrew doesn’t need me. He doesn’t need anyone.”

“Aaron, he’s human. He needs you more than I think he knows.” He tapped his leg. “Just don’t give up before you’ve even tried.”

Aaron stared at him and after a moment gave him a quick nod before he left, making his way back to his lunch table.

***

“-Well what about Sweetie’s? They have a good cheesecake there.”

“That’s true, but the cupcakes are shit.”

“Well it depends on which ones you’re getting—Oh! Hi, Aaron.”

Andrew glanced up and saw Aaron looking between the two of them talking with a confused look on his face. Katelyn laughed. “Aaron you’ll catch flies.”

He grumbled a bit before settling down next to her. It wasn’t much but he was talking again, throwing in parts for Andrew to contribute if he wanted to.

It wasn’t much, but Andrew began to feel a weight lift off his chest. Things weren’t better, but they were getting there.
Alicia was leaning on her desk to talk to her friend Marilyn or whatever, completely ignoring Andrew where he sat right behind the both of them, voices lowered to gossip.

“He’s just been so polite. A real gentleman.” Alicia whispered, voice heavy with conspiracy and Andrew felt sick. “He’s unlike any of the other guys at this school.”

Andrew wanted to evaporate from the area. He really didn’t want to hear about how far Neil and his girlfriend were going. For whatever reason Neil hadn’t brought it up. Though maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised; Neil always had been one to value other people’s privacy. It was one of the most appealing things about him.

Andrew knew he could always use a truth in their game to find out about it, but he didn’t really want the thing he was low-key dreading to be confirmed and have to live with most beautiful boy in the world like some sort of pining idiot in a rom-com.

Also, it wouldn’t make any sense to ask Neil about it; he had no reason to bring it up. It wasn’t exactly one of the things they talked about after all. Andrew never really brought up the thing he had with Roland. And Neil was smart. Andrew didn’t want Neil to figure it out about his stupid crush.

“Wow that must be so cute,” the friend gushed as Andrew found himself, yet again dragged into the conversation.

“Yeah, but,” and Alicia leaned closer to her friend, lowering her voice, but not enough for Andrew to not hear. “Not for much longer,” she whispered, pulling out slender package out of her pocket holding it between her finders casually. “He’s been going slow, but tonight I’ll give him the green light.”

“Lucky, I wish I was getting laid,” Marilyn sighed.

Andrew deliberately tore his attention away, focusing on trying not to imagine what that would be like.

To hear his name tumbling out of Neil’s mouth, Neil trembling underneath him, the feel of that sharp mouth against his own. He wondered if it would be as harsh as the words that so often spewed out of it, or if it would be soft and malleable against his own.

He wanted to run his fingers though Neil hair to see if it was softer without the dark dye that plagued his hair for so long. He wanted to feel Neil’s scars again, feel Neil’s skin buzz against his own in want and desire and yearning. To kiss him until his body was exhausted and he could bury his face in the crook of Neil’s neck and breathe him in.

He wanted to want it, and that was fucking terrifying.

But such thoughts were unbecoming and stupid.

And, living with Neil, he was already past the threshold of allowable stupidity. He had to get these stupid emotions in check before they ruined him.

***

Alicia led the way into her house, chatting idly about something that happened during the day. Neil trailed behind her, half paying attention. He was running over musical arrangements in his head. He wanted to run them past Kevin and he’d try to run them past Andrew if Andrew was in the mood.
There was nothing in the world better than that. Andrew had this look in his eyes when he was really listening to him and he loved it more than anything. As much as Andrew gave him shit for being so invested in music, he never tried to crush it.

Damn, he hadn’t even gotten to Alicia’s house and he already wanted to go back to the apartment. He hoped that it wouldn’t take too much time.

He didn’t exactly mind helping her with math, but he really wished that they could have done their work at school. He barely had any free time between work, practice, and school. He spent almost all his free time sleeping or babysitting Sasha (though he found he quite enjoyed the time he spent with her, she was super excitable and she loved talking about music, unlike some five-foot tall blond guys).

But, all the same, he couldn’t help longing for those moments in the midst of their busy schedules where he and Andrew could sit together, sometimes for a moment, sometimes longer, just the two of them.

It was comforting, the time they spent together. If his mother were still alive she would probably beat him half to death for becoming so complacent, and part of him knew that there was still a possibility of threat. But somewhere along the line he had decided, he didn’t really know when, that he didn’t really care. He was willing to feel these moments for however long they were offered to him.

“We’re here,” she said as they made it up to the front door of her house. She unlocked the door and opened it so he could enter and then closed it behind him and led the way to the living room. He set his backpack down and began to pull out his notes. She leaned up beside him draping her hair off to one side doing some sort of swishing thing. Like a flirting thing.

Fuck.

She leaned close to his shoulder. It was more than a little awkward. Even after all this time he wasn’t really comfortable with anyone in his space. Her leaning only reminded him of the times when Andrew had leaned against his side, strong and firm, unshakable, even if it was only for a few fleeting moments. He felt like he could maybe sit there forever, sometimes.

But not with Alicia.

“You know, my parents are out of town tonight. They won’t be back until tomorrow,” she said in a voice that was probably supposed to be seductive, but for him was just off-putting. He knew she was trying to get him to look at her, but he steadfastly kept his eyes directed away.

Eye contact is how straight people flirt, he reminded himself. Don’t look at her.

“Hmm, that’s nice,” he managed, barely glancing up from his notes.

She huffed a sigh and took hold of his notebook and tugged it out of his hands and tossed it on the coffee table. He counted backwards in Spanish to keep himself from snapping at her in frustration. Instead he looked up at her face with an expression that he was sure said Dude, what the fuck?

Satisfied that she had his attention, she placed her hands on his chest and pushed him back until his back ran into the cushions of the couch. She threw her legs on opposite sides of his, bracing him until she sat down on his lap. Before he could say anything she lunged forward gripping his face and pressing their lips together, his eyes wide open.
She ground forward into him, mouth working furiously against his. He opened his mouth to say something but her tongue slid in and began to run its self around the interior of his mouth. It was really… weird. And he was starting to get angry.

He knew what was going on but he didn’t really get how it got to this point. He had a feeling that that wasn’t exactly what the teens in all the young adult novels were talking about. In the books it usually was mutual, both people enthusiastically falling together. This felt nothing like that. She ground her hips more into his creating friction. This felt uncomfortable.

He wanted her off of him, right now but he didn’t know how to do it. Pushing her off could make her angry and he couldn’t deal with a police report. He wanted her to stop.

She finally broke away, only to tug her shirt off over her head and toss it on the floor. She still had a bra on, but that did little to relieve him.

“What’s going on?” He whispered furiously.

She leaned forward pressing her lips against his.

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing?” he placed his hands on her shoulders, firmly pushing her away, creating space between them.

“I thought it would be obvious. Sex.” She looked at his face and misinterpreted his disbelief. “Don’t worry,” she pulled a condom out of her pocket, “I have protection.” She swooped down to kiss him again, but he turned his face, dodging her lips.

“No.”

She had been leaning forward to kiss him again, but stopped suddenly at his words. “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“What? Why not.”

“Why would I?”

“What did you just say? A lot of people want to have sex with me. I’m hot and popular.” Her eyes widened and she sped on, words coming out frenzied and overwhelmed. “Have you been using me as a beard? You’re gay.” She shoved him away and Neil’s head was reeling from all the conclusions she was jumping to. She leaned back staring up at the wall. “That was why you haven’t made a move.”

“Why would I have made a move? It’s not like we’ve been dating.”

“Not dating? We’ve been dating for weeks! We’ve had all those dates.”

“You mean the study sessions? We were studying.”

“Are you serious? Oh my- it all makes sense now. But still, how could you not know? Everybody knew we were dating.”

“Except me.”
“Well, we still could,” she said slowly, a smarmy smile slowly spreading across her lips.

“Wait, do you even need my help?” he asked coldly.

“Well, no.”

Neil nodded. “Okay. Well I guess I’ll be going.”

She scrambled to the side as he began putting his notebook back in his bag. Her hands kept grabbing at his arms to slow him down or comfort him or whatever, but Neil didn’t care, shaking them off.

“We could still date you know, or hook up. So your trip over here won’t be a waste.”

“Bye.” He left the house and he made sure he slammed the door in her face.

***

Andrew was busy sitting at the table trying not to think about what Neil was doing when he decided enough was enough.

He walked over to the refrigerator and began taking out ingredients for dinner, unsure if he should make enough for the both of them, as he didn’t know how long Neil would be out, or if he should just enough for himself. He settled for making extra. Even if Neil didn’t eat it, he could save it for himself for lunch tomorrow.

He was alerted to Neil’s entrance by the forceful opening of the door. It didn’t hit the wall or anything, but there was an urgency in the way Neil twisted the door handle open.

Neil came in, face a mask, and set his stuff down.

Neil walked over. “Do you need any help?” he asked. He seemed agitated.

Andrew nodded indicating some of the stuff he could need help with. They worked in silence as they prepared the food until they sat down.

There was something on Neil’s mind, something Andrew could see was causing such a long period of contemplation and introspection.

Neil finally made eye contact with him. Andrew simply raised an eyebrow at him.

“Did you know that Alicia and I were dating?” He asked, voice stilted as he swirled at the pasta with his fork.

His eyebrow went even higher. “Everyone knew.”

“Except me.” He stabbed the pasta with his fork.

“What.”

“Everyone knew we were dating except me,” he bit out, voice bitter. “She invited me over to her house and then tried to have sex.”

Andrew couldn’t help but look over sharply, Neil’s words hitting his mind at an uncomfortable angle. “She didn’t, though?”

“No, she stopped when I said to stop.” Neil chewed on his lip. “I didn’t even know she thought we
were dating. Those ‘dates,’” he said fingers flying up in air quotes, “were the worst dates I’ve ever been in in my life.” He scoffed, scooping up the pasta and watching it slip off his fork. “She understood and everything when I told her I didn’t know we were dating. She still offered to have sex with me.”

“Did you?” And Andrew wanted to cringe for asking that; it was none of his business.

“No.”

“Why?” Andrew asked, because apparently he was a masochist. “If you both wanted free sex.”

Neil scoffed. “Why would I want to have sex with her?”

“So what if it was her. You turned downs sex, for what.”

“I don’t know. Do I need a fucking reason to say no?”

Andrew stilled. “No.”

“And did you ever consider I just would have rather spent my time here.”

“Making spaghetti,” Andrew drawled in disbelief.

“With you.”

He raised his eyebrow. “I’m not having sex with you.”

“What, Neil sputtered, fork clattering to his plate. “I wasn’t- that’s not- I like to be around you. You don’t expect anything from me. I don’t have to pretend around you. You tell me what you are thinking. You don’t try to mind-fuck me or gaslight or whatever they call it now. And I’ve- I’ve never had that.”

He breathed in deeply and continued. “What I had with my mom wasn’t like that. We barely even knew each other. Between all of the aliases we had, we lost whoever we were before. We were barely anything more than strangers by the end. She cared but I’m not sure about what. I want to be with you.”

And Andrew’s heart lurched so hard it hurt.

It was pretty said and done after that conversation, but the whole thing plagued his mind, he didn’t want this thing to happen again.

“How was I supposed to know it was a date Andrew?”

“I don’t know. Did she call it a date?”

“No, she asked if I could help her with her homework.” He slammed his book down on the table in alarm. “She was twirling her hair Andrew. Don’t girls do that when they’re flirting?”

“How the fuck would I know.”

“I don’t know, you read?”

“I mean I thought she was acting weird but I didn’t want to bring it up.”

“So you just let her act all sketchy.”
“She was acting teenager-sketchy, not I’m-a-murderer sketchy. Also I didn’t want to talk to her.”

“Cold. But true,” he conceded. Andrew was giving him a look and he rolled his eyes. “But I know what you mean. She’s nice but I don’t really have anything in common with her.”

“You aren’t just supposed to assume that someone is into you. Egotistical, much?”

“Ugh,” he ran his fingers over his face and flopped back on the bed. “This is why I don’t do this whole dating thing. It’s such a pain in the ass.”

“And the whole romance and sex thing.”

“That too.” He rolled over to look at Andrew. “How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Like you and Roland, you know.”

“We aren’t together anymore. Not that we ever really were.”

“But you two, like, talked it out and set it up. Straightforward.”

“Yeah. Roland had a hard time following the rules, but yes.”

Neil hummed. “You know, if they were supposed to be dates they were pretty sucky. All we did was math homework.”

“Seems like she just wanted your undivided attention. Maybe she figured you’d put it together and it’d all add up. But I bet she wasn’t expecting such a negative reaction.”

“Well she was kissing me, how was I supposed to take it?”

“So you subtracted yourself from the equation.”

“Are you doing that on purpose?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m just trying to help you get to the square root of your problem,” he deadpanned.

“Oh my- fuck you Andrew. You are.”

Andrew looked like he had no idea what Neil was talking about. But that didn’t stop Neil from laughing as he fell back on the bed. He looked beautiful with the light shining on him and with his musical laugh.

Andrew had to yank his eyes away.

Damn him.

***

“We’re having a fair,” Howard announced to the class mid-September.

“Us, as in the class?” Adam asked.

“No us as in the whole school. Well, sort of,” Howard amended. “The school will be able to set up a few booths at the local fair.”
“Why? Not that I’m complaining, but really, why?”

“Why do we do anything?”

Adam frowned. “I don’t know how this has anything to do with education.”

Marissa rolled her eyes. “He was talking about money.”

“Exactly!” Howard exclaimed with all too much enthusiasm for 7:45 in the morning. “They found that if the student agree to volunteer at many of the fair stations, then the school will get a part of the proceeds”

“So basically were being used by the school for free labor.”

“How is that any different from any other school fundraiser? The students who help get to ride the rides for free. I mean, you still have to pay for everything else, but you get to ride the rides.”

The whole thing was less than ideal, but they had no choice but to go. Everybody was closed for the fair, as it was one of the biggest events of the year. Even Eden’s because even burly bikers and ravers liked to take their kids out to the fair.

So, two weeks after the announcement Neil and Andrew took two connecting busses to get to the fairgrounds.

It was still pretty empty around there since it was still two hours before the fair’s start. There were still a lot of people milling around, but it didn’t take long to spot the gaggle of teenagers surrounding Mr. Howard who was waving his clipboard up and down in an effort to get everyone to calm down.

They gathered around him and he told them which area to set up at. They were at D-7. They took up their spot at the table and pulled out their sign. Andrew took one look at it before snorting.

“Palm reading. Really?”

“Mom used to do this sometimes to pick up some extra cash.” Neil said, trying to pull out the legs of the table. “Among other things. On the run you have to be able to read people. You’d probably be good at it, too.”

“I try to avoid deception.”

Neil acquiesced. “That’s true.” He pulled out the legs of the table and set it up on the wilting grass. “My mom made me watch those fake psychics on TV. There able to ‘read’ people because they’re being fed information by someone off camera. It’s like- wait I’ll show you,” he ended in a whisper nodding his head at some of their peers who were heading in their direction.

He quickly unfolded his chair and gestured for Andrew to do the same.

Andrew plopped down in his chair and placed the wire-mesh basket on the table for the tickets.

“Are you guys open for business?” Jessica asked tilting her head to the side, a silky curtain of hair cascading over her shoulder. Her friends were chittering beside her.

Neil gave one of his overdone prize-winning smiles and gestured to the empty chair across the table from them.

“Of course. Take a seat.”
Jessica took as seat across from him her friends on either side. “Hi Neil. So… um. Could you read my palm?”

“Sure,” he said, and Andrew felt a stab of ridiculous jealousy when Neil reached forward to touch her hand. Neil took her hand in his and traced her palm line.

“I see. You are seeking love, are you not?”

Her eyes widened slightly, as if she hadn’t been expecting him to go there. “I am.”

“And this love is very hard fought on your end. You feel as though they don’t even see you.”

“Yes.” Her friends were now growing silent as they stared at him.

“And I see one more thing. You’re also torn with what you want to do.”

“Yes! Oh, my gosh!” She clasped her hands together while Neil leaned back in his chair. She fluttered her eyes in a way that was probably supposed to be seductive but just looked like she had something in her eye. “You’re so good at this.” Her friends nodded enthusiastically.

“All in a day’s work.” He offered them an overly bright smile that was undoubtedly fake. It filled Andrew with a small bit of fierce pride that these girls hadn’t been able to draw out one of Neil’s real smiles. Her two friends also got their palms read and they both ohh’ed and ahh’ed over his accuracy and skill, eyes blown wide in amazement.

Neil waved them off after they dropped their tickets in the basket and they left whispering and giggling to themselves.

“Nice job. Very vague.”

Neil leaned back in his chair and gave a shrug. “People make connections where they want them. That paired with the things I’ve heard them saying over the past few weeks just help to make the predictions more specific and believable. The more you know about someone the better the predictions.” Neil paused, studying Andrew scrupulously. “Do you want me to do you?”

Andrew’s heart stuttered and he felt panic rising in his veins.

“What?” he asked, voice only slightly strangled.

“Do you want me to read your palm?”

Andrew swallowed his panic and rolled his eyes and held out his hand. Neil barely touched it at all but Andrew savored the way his fingers traced his heart line and glanced the back of his hand to hold it in place.

“Ah, I see it Andrew. It’s so clear. This is clearest palm I have ever seen.”

“Really,” He asked drily

“Yes,” he said face dead serious. “According to your palm you were always destined to be a concert pianist.”

“Really.”

“Yes. That or a lumberjack.” He traced further across his palm. “And you will have seven wives and twenty-four children. All of which will go to Oxford.”
“Naturally.”

“Naturally,” he smiled. “Oh, and what is this I see?” His finger traced lightly along one of the longer lines of his palm. “You will be able to bring in extra money by being an infomercial spokesperson on one of those channels that that airs the three hour infomercials. Like those juicer commercials that Kevin always watches.”

“Those damn commercials.” Sometimes he swore he could hear that overzealous voice haunt him in his dreams. Damn Neil and his propensity toward watching them. Neil had to know how much he hated them.

“And you?” he asked savagely. “Will you be in my future? Or will I only have the memory of watching infomercials to remember you.”

“I’ll be the one seductively pouring beets into the juicer. Obviously.”

“Of course.”

“Really, Andrew. I thought you knew of my passion for advertising things. I will be an infomercial actor by day, harlequin romance novel model by night. Moonlighting as a writer.”

“Oh you will?”

“It will throw everyone off when I have my own line of erotica. I was thinking a doctor pirate spy who is so ruggedly handsome that all the women he meets fall in love with him.”

“Basing this off our own life, are you now?”

Neil laughed. “Very funny. But I wasn’t a spy.”

“I was talking about all the people falling over you Neil.”

“What?”

“Jessica. That’s why she came over here asking you to read her palm. And asked you about what you saw in her love line.”

“You see, I never get why people do that. Why don’t people just ask people if they want to go out with them? Why do they dance around everything? It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Says the liar.”

“I lie to protect myself.”

“That’s why they do it, too. To protect their feelings.”

Neil laughed. “It’s been a long time since I cared about anyone hurting my feelings.”

“Yeah, but it’s all these people have. They haven’t seen the things that we have.”

“I don’t want them too. I mean some of these people annoy the fuck out of me, but I wouldn’t wish what happened to me on anyone.”

“So they just have their drama about who takes who to the school dance.”

“I’ll pass. I’ll stick with not doing that.”
“Oh,” Neil barked out a laugh. “I almost forgot. She doesn’t have a crush on me.”

“She came over here to talk to you.”

“More like be around you.”

*You feel as though they don’t even see you.*

“Fuck.”

“That’ll be two tickets.”

“Asshole.”

Neil was pretty good at reading palms and Andrew found he was very good at taking people’s tickets. Neil confided in him during the down time the bits of gossip that lead to certain predictions.

After about an hour and a half the other guys in their grade came by to see how their booth was doing.

“You would have been more successful with a kissing booth.” Adam mused. “Tons of girls would have been lining up.”

Greg hit his friend on the arm. “Dude we should have done that.”

“I’d rather be doing this,” Neil said smoothly.

*“Dude, a kissing booth.”* Adam insisted, as if Neil had somehow misunderstood him. “Neil that would be great. If we do this fair again next year do you want to run it with us Neil?”

“No I’m doing fine here.”

“You say that now, but give it some thought. What about you Andrew?”

“No.”

“Oh, right. You’ve got that girlfriend. The nice girl, Renee. How’d you snag her? I’m surprised you too are still together. Does she kiss well?”

“Oh does she put out?” Bryce chimed in.

“Renee and I don’t have sex.”

“Dude, why are you still dating her? A man’s got needs.” Bryce pointedly stared at him and he shrugged and walked over to Neil and put a ticket in the bucket.

“Fortune.”

Neil barely glanced at his hand. “You’ll be single a long time if you keep being an asshole.”

“What the hell.”

“No look, see how this lines breaks off into two paths, this one is if you remain a jerk you’ll stay single, this longer branch shows your potential if you aren’t a jerk. Douchebags don’t get laid.”

“Dude, since when do you stick up for Minyard?”
“I don’t. You’re acting like an asshole. Girls don’t exist just to have sex with guys. If that’s all you’re getting from your relationship with them then you’re missing out.”

“Says the virgin.”

“Tell it to someone who actually cares, Bryce.”


Howard walked over to their table and tapped on it.

“You here for a palm reading?”

“I’m here to tell you that you can go. You’ve been here for three hours.”

“Great.”

“Here are your tickets.” He handed them the standard fair tickets and started walked away, before pausing a moment. “And don’t kill each other, okay?”

“Don’t worry. There won’t be any traces of the body.”

Mr. Howard pulled a disgruntled face riddled with actual concern that they actually would kill each other, but shrugged and walked away.

Neil held the strips of tickets, studying and folding each of them along the perforated line. “I’ve been all over, but I swear, they have the same tickets that had been used a thousand times at a thousand different events.”

“Probably buy them in bulk.”

Neil looked at his watch. “We have a couple hours until work. Did you want to check something out?”

He made his way over to the Ferris wheel, Neil following behind him chattering aimlessly. They got to the long line leading up to the metal death machine and he stepped into the line beside Neil. He pondered the wheel and his stupidity when they got there but made no move to get out of the line.

It was slow going, but it didn’t feel that way with the way Andrew stomach churned and he wasn’t sure if it was because of the imminent exposure to one of his biggest fears, or if it was from being in such close proximity to Neil.

All too soon they reached the uncaring teen who manned the Ferris wheel ticket station and they were handing over their tickets and choosing a seat.

He slid into the seat and Neil sat beside him and the safety bar clicked into place. He thought that the bar was very ill named. The bar was barely enough to keep two average sized adults in place, let alone two small teenagers. The wheel got higher and higher as they lifted further from the ground.

“Have you ever been on a Ferris wheel before?” Neil asked, eyes filled with wonder and amazement. Andrew found that look worth the growing discomfort he felt leaving the ground. He had to look away before he started confusing Neil eyes with the night stars.

“No,” he grit out. He forced himself to keep looking out.

“My mom took me on one,” Neil started, his voice taking on that nostalgic and cautious tone he had
when he talked about his past. “We were visiting her family and for a surprise she took me on one. It was higher than this one, but this one is pretty cool, too.” He leaned forward to look at the ground below, shaking the seat a little.

Andrew’s arm shot out, keeping Neil from leaning over the bar. Neil looked over at him and eyed his white knuckles but wisely didn’t say anything. He leaned back in his seat and looked over at him smirk on his face.

“What ever happened to pushing me off the roof? Are you growing fond of me?”

“In your dreams, Josten,” he grunted, pulling his arm back to himself. “It just won’t be as satisfying if you fall because you’re a dumbass.”

“This isn’t too high. I could still survive.”

Andrew’s fingers gripped the bar harder.

“Wait, Andrew are you afraid of heights?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Andrew what the hell. Why-”

“My turn,” he grit out. “What are you afraid of?”

“Knives.”

“Knives, or the people who wield them?”

“Knives. People you can kill. A knife can be used against you no matter who is wielding it.”

There wasn’t anything Andrew could think to say to that, so they just stared out at the view in perfect silence. He snuck a glance over to Neil and saw him, the moonlight illuminating his hair, his eyes, his every feature. The light glanced off his cheekbones and highlighted the curls of his hair. He found in that moment he really wanted to kiss him. To get his mind off of the height or the rickety Ferris wheel seat or the way Neil was shaking him to his very core, he wasn’t really sure. He felt like he was going to fall and he didn’t know if he thought it was off the ride or for Neil.

Fucking Neil.

Fuck Neil and his pretty smile and pretty face. Fuck him and his clever fingers and sharp tongue that could wound almost as well as his knives could. He didn’t know why he was getting so caught up on Neil, anyway. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen an attractive guy before. But this attraction, much like the object of said attraction, just wouldn’t go away.

A clanking sound shook him out of his reverie and his head shot up. There was moaning and smacking noises coming from the seat above them.

“Fucking hell. Are they having sex on the Ferris wheel? They could fall of and die.”

“Here’s hoping,” He said dryly.
Neil hummed and leaned back against the backrest and looked out at the view. It wasn’t so bad if you didn’t look directly down. It reminded him of the roof at Marbury. Only this was set in the fields outside of town, the only place big enough to house the rides that came into town. There were miles of yellowed grass all around them, darkened by the cobalt night sky. The horizon was dotted with small fluorescent lights that could have been mistaken for stars if they weren’t so close to the earth.

It wasn’t peaceful, per say, as he had too much fear and adrenaline pulsing through his veins right now to be at peace, but it was closer than he had been before.

And maybe that was the scariest thing of all.

***

*I know you’re seeing black and white*

*So I’ll paint you a clear blue sky*

*Without you I am color-blind*

*It’s raining every time I open my eyes*
Hello, here is chapter 11 aka the chapter that contains the whole reason I wrote this fic in the first place. But because I naturally make things too difficult for myself, I couldn’t just write some short little thing. No, I had to write this monster to give it exposition. Oh well. That’s how it is sometimes.

Anyway, you may notice that there is some law/court stuff in this chapter. You may also realize that it is not very accurate. I can assure you I have a very good reason for this: I know absolutely nothing about how courts work. Again, oh well.

Hope you like it anyway!

Chapter Warnings: mentions and vague discussions about past abuse and rape, mentions of kale, Drake, and Luther.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sleep on me, feel the rhythm in my chest, just breathe

I will stay so the lantern in your heart won’t fade

The secrets you tell me I’ll take to my grave

There’s bones in my closet, but you hang stuff anyway

And if you have nightmares, we’ll dance on the bed

I know that you love me, love me

Even when I lose my head

Guillotine, guillotine

***

It had been close to a year and a half since Neil had sworn to himself he would never step foot into Eden’s Twilight during club hours, and Neil couldn’t help but absently marvel how much had changed.

One, he was taller, five-three instead of the minuscule five-feet zero inches he had been before.

Two, he now knew the town better than the back of his hand.

Three, he was about to willingly walk into the building during prime business hours.

He nodded at the bouncer who recognized him easily enough from all the times Neil hung around before the club actually opened. And, surprisingly enough, Neil found he wasn’t repulsed by the familiarity.
The club was still as chaotic and bizarre as he remembered it, but he was here for business, not pleasure.

He scanned room bathed in flashing lights and filled with writhing bodies until he found Roland where he was mixing drinks at the bar. He made beeline for the bar, performing his own sort of weird dance to avoid hitting anyone.

“And how may I- oh, hey Neil.”

“Hey Roland.”

Roland’s eyebrow quirked up in surprise. “You picking up Andrew?”

His fingers fidgeted against the zipper of his bag he had been zipping and unzipping for the last half-hour- the one that held the real reason he had detoured here instead of going straight back to the apartment. He adjusted the strap on his bag and finally managed to get the zipper closed. “Yeah. I just got off shift.”

Roland leaned back on the counter, smiling to himself.

“Well I'm happy for you two. I'm glad you finally got your shit together. I was worried Andrew would never do anything.”

Neil’s fingers froze and he slowly looked over at Roland. “What are you talking about?”

Roland’s smile fell. “Uh, what?”

“What are you talking about? Why are you acting strange about us going home together? We're roommates.”

“Uh,” he turned his head to the employees-only door Andrew has just walked out of. Andrew shot them a searching look as he took in Neil's bewildered face and Roland’s guilty grimace.

“Uh, sorry Andrew. I'll see you tomorrow. I've uh, I've got to go do that… thing,” he said quickly before vanishing almost into thin air. Neil decided he’d have to ask him how he did that later. It seemed useful.

Andrew just looked at him before walking out the door.

They walked silently before Neil's curiosity got the better of him.

“Why did Roland congratulate you on getting your shit together when I told him I was picking you up after work?” Andrew tensed for a moment before he began walking again. Neil stared at his face, waiting for some sort of explanation.

“Do you really want to know?”

They way he said it almost made Neil want to retract his question, but he ignored it and rolled his eyes.

“I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know.”

“He thought we were together sleeping together.”

Neil was confused. “But we are. We live together and sleep together.”
“Together like sex, Neil.”

“But you’re with Roland and you hate me.”

“One-” Andrew held up a finger for emphasis, “Roland and I were never together. Two- that aspect of our relationship has ended. It ended a while ago. Three- I may hate you but that doesn't mean you're not attractive.”

“What?”

“I wouldn't mind kissing you.”

“What?”

“You're starting to sound a little repetitive.”

“You've never said you were interested in me.”

“You weren't interested. No reason to bring it up.”

“Oh, okay.”

It was strange to think about, kissing. Like being that close to someone else’s face, with your own face. Like, sure it might be worth it once the actual kissing began, but getting to that point? Much too awkward. There was a reason romance books usually glossed over the approach.

Andrew looked at his face out of the corner of his eye.

“You're making a stupid face.”

Neil couldn’t help the laugh that escaped his lips. The same lips that could be kissing, his one-track brain thought unhelpful. “Thanks, Andrew. I can always count on your kind and gentle words to soothe my soul.”

“I try.”

Neil smirked.

They approached the apartment and Andrew slipped out his key and unlocked the door and let them both inside. He flicked on the light and turned causally to Neil. “Not that I don’t appreciate being walked home by a gentleman like yourself, but is there a particular reason you did?”

Neil’s smile slipped off his face. He slowly unzipped his bag and pulled out the envelope that had been haunting him since the moment he saw it.

“I got the mail.” And he slid the letter to Andrew across the counter.

He watched as Andrew’s face grew devoid of anything, so stoic and blank he looked like a statue, as he read the return address, as he recognized the sender.

The Palmetto Court System.

***

“Andrew, so tell me how you’ve been doing so far this week.”
He stared at her and she stared back. It was a heavy question, especially considering the fact that Drake and Luther’s court date had finally been set.

“Things have been going- fine.” He almost wanted to cringe. He was hanging around Neil too much.

“The depressive episodes haven’t getting to be too much for you?” She eyed him carefully.

“They’re no worse than they usually are.”

“And the anger? Have you been getting into any fights?”

“No.”

“Is that because you haven’t wanted to, or no opportunities arose?”

He said nothing, but she interpreted his silence how he meant it. If it was any other shrink they probably would have sighed, disappointed that he was still where he was. Bee didn’t. She knew that people like him had a lifetime of reasons to be angry.

“It helps to be productive, sometimes. To create something. I know you’ve expressed interest in knitting. Quilting, those types of things. Are you still considering it?”

He shrugged.

“What are your main reason why you wouldn’t want to pursue something like that?”

“Time.”

She nodded.

“And…” he couldn’t find the right words. “They just feel too-“

“Domestic?”

He hesitated before nodding.

“Do you think your reluctance to do those things now has something to do with the reemergence of Drake and Luther in your life? Two people who were supposed to give you that feeling of safety and security but that ultimately took it away.”

He stilled. He looked up at her and he knew he couldn’t avoid what he had been feeling.

After the session ended, he went by the department store and picked up a spool of thread and then went by the library.

Janice was on staff today. She still looked relatively young, even almost ten years after starting there. She was one of the only people who never questioned why he read the books he read or said the books he read they were too old for him.

She also was the only one to not make jokes about how short he was when he had trouble reaching the books.

He was silently thankful for that small thing.

He made his way over to the checkout desk with the book he picked up. She looked at the book and then back up at him.
“Are you thinking of starting quilting, Andrew?”

He grunted a response, reaching for his wallet to grab his card.

“Because if you are, there are better books than this one.” She looked around at the near-empty library and, satisfied that no one needed her help right then, got up and lead the way back to the how-to section. She stopped in front of where the crafting books were and ran her finger across the spines, stopping on the one that she wanted. She pulled it out halfway and smiled and then handed it to him.

“This will help you get started, and,” she pulled out another book and stacked it on top of the other, “this one has a lot of good patterns. You’re a smart dude. You’ll probably be able to figure it out.”

He nodded and she smiled and led him back to the front.

“My whole family quilts so we’re always looking out for the best.” She got behind the counter and began scanning his books. “I hope you like it.”

He nodded at her before leaving the library, books tucked under his arm.

***

Neil stared at the pile of clothing. All of it worn, growing holes. He had patched them up over the years with his mother and he hadn’t grown much while on the run, but now the clothes were starting to grow smaller. It wasn’t that he had grown much since he had arrived in town, but he had, a little, as well as filled out a bit more, too. And now the once generous clothes were getting small. And, as everyone had pointed out over and over again, they made him stand out. Even though he wasn’t on the run anymore, the idea of standing out to anyone rubbed him the wrong way.

And it wasn’t like these were the only clothes he had anymore. His clothing bin now had clothes he had bought for himself, hand-me-downs from the other foxes, and items of Andrew’s wardrobe that he had taken at some point and never gotten around to returning. Even now the box was close to capacity, and that was with his old clothes taken out and bundled into old shopping bags.

Yet still, he found himself staring at the clothes. It wasn’t that he was sentimental, per say, but he had learned not to be wasteful. His mother made sure to beat that lesson into him.

That was how Andrew found him, hours later, sitting at the table with two plastic bags of his clothes. Andrew set down his library books and walked over to open one of the bags.

“I don’t need them anymore,” Neil found himself saying.

Andrew gazed at him. “And yet they’re still here.”

“I can’t get rid of them. Mom always told me not to be wasteful.”

Andrew turned his attention back to the bags again. After a moment he spoke.

“I can reuse them for something.”

“Really?”

Andrew shrugged and then grabbed his pack of cigarettes and walked over to the window.

***
As the date of the trial grew closer, Andrew felt his entire body teetering on some unseen ledge.

He still remembered the conversation he had had with Neil about it right after they got the letter.

“You’re not upset about the whole thing, Andrew? Because I’m pretty fucking pissed. And furious.”

He tugged at his hair in frustration. He dropped his hands and breathed in and then looked at him, eyes steely. “You care what happens to Aaron and Kevin and Nicky and me, but you never seem to give a shit about yourself.”

Andrew said nothing, only returning Neil’s cool gaze, which only seemed to frustrate Neil more.

“What he did wasn’t okay, Andrew.”

“You don’t think I know that.” Andrew remembered saying, his words cold and empty and hard. “I know that. Trust me. But I’m not going to cry over it. I’m used to it. It’s nothing new.”

“It never should have happened to you in the first place. He hurt you, Andrew.”

“That’s really rich coming from you. You think I don’t know you’ve been hurt before.”

“Not like—”

He waved it off. “Maybe not like that, but I know an abused kid when I see one, Neil. What was it? Hitting? Kicking? Stubbing out cigarettes on your skin? I don’t know what whoever it was did, I just know they’re not doing it anymore.”

“Drake is done. He’s in my past. I still remember. He took my body, but I’m not going to let him take me. I didn’t die. I’m not dead yet. Life may fucking suck but I’m not dead yet. It’s going to take more than him to kill me.”

Neil stared at him shaken. And they said nothing.

It was more than he had ever talked about his trauma with anyone other than Bee or Renee but the words had already left him and he could almost see them where they floated between them, the way Neil seemed to see them, too.

He felt vulnerable, exposed, as all of those memories came flooding back.

He remembered the pain of being discarded over and over again. How they would use him over and over and it still wasn’t enough.

He remembered wanting Cass so badly it ached. How he yearned for her comforting touch the way she would touch his face when he had a cold. How cool her fingers felt against his overheated face. She cared about him. But he knew she would always care about Drake more.

He would have done anything for her.

Anything. Everything.

But in the end he was nothing. Wanted nothing. And it was safer to want nothing.

Neil stared at him, mouth opening and closing, trying to find the words he needed.

“I look like my father,” Neil said, the words spilling out like water from a dam. “I’ve been running from him, but you already know that.” He let out a humorless laugh. “He’s in jail but I’m still running from him. I can’t look at myself half the time because I just see him.
“He’s dictated the past few years of my life and I’ve barely even seen him. He’s been controlling me and he wasn’t even there. I’m done running.

“I want to stay. I want to be here for you. I want- I want you to be happy, Andrew.”

And Andrew had to pull his eyes away. Neil with his wants and desires and dreams. He wanted so much.

Neil was a fool.

The memories were overwhelming and he found himself searching for something else to think about. He grabbed at the patterns in his head and pulling out the bags of old fabric. Despite being very worn, they were still fairly whole. He quickly began planning out what he wanted to do and set to work. The planning wasn’t strenuous, but it was enough to pull his mind away from the dark paths his thoughts were heading down. It was quick and easy to spiral; it was much harder to pull himself away from the edge he was teetering on.

He found that he liked it. Taking something broken and worn and reshaping it into something new, something whole. He had been ripped apart broken more times than he could count. But he was trying to recover. It wouldn’t be perfect, but it could be enough.

He worked on it a lot at Renee’s house; it was something to do while they talked or watched documentaries.

Renee edged up beside him in his way out from school. “I’m free today,” she told him, which was odd because today was typically the day she went to the gym with Dan and Allison. “Do you want to come over?”

He shrugged and followed her, which meant yes. They made it to Stephanie’s and put their backpacks down out of the way. Renee went up and got an orange and offered Andrew one. He shook his head and picked up his pattern instead.

“Gym day cancelled?”

Renee shrugged, flipping over to a fresh page in her music notebook. “They’re still going. I told them I was busy."

Andrew leveled her with a look. “You’re not.”

“I’m spending time with you.”

“You’re bullshitting.”

“Okay, fine I lied. I told them I was busy when I wasn’t and then I saw you leaving after school and wanted to hang out with you. Happy?”

“Never.”

She smirked. “Now who’s bullshitting?”

“Fuck off.” He stitched the fabric and glanced up at her, her face still reserved and distant. “Trouble in paradise?”

“No. Everything’s fine.”

“Okay, Josten.”
“They were just going to be talking about Dan and Matt’s relationship and how things have…
progressed. Knowing Allison she’s going to pry a lot and give a lot of details of her own.” She stared
at her orange, picking at the peel. “I don’t like talking about that stuff. And you don’t have to say
anything; I know it’s stupid. I mean I’ve been working through this stuff for how many years? And
talking to Bee helps a lot but it’s still hard to hear about people losing their virginity and then only
being able to remember him.”

She glanced up and their eyes met. A heavy, sick sort of feeling weighing on his throat.

“That’s not stupid.”

Her eyes were dark with understanding. “You were too young.”

“You were too.”

She closed her eyes slowly and he could finally see the weight of her past heavy on her shoulders.
“You don't even know how old I was.”

“Anytime rape happens we're too young. No one should ever have to deal with it. Any age is too
young.”

“Do you think it will ever get easier?”

He knew she wanted the truth but it was something he didn’t want to say.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I don’t know either. But maybe, someday things could get better.”

He felt tired. “Maybe.”

“I hope so,” she whispered.

“I’m holding on,” she sang softly, “why is everything so heavy?”

***

Neil walked up to Wymack’s apartment after his training in tattooing. Matt and Dan were off doing
dating stuff and he wanted to work on his music. He expected to find the apartment empty, but it
wasn’t.

It wasn’t Kevin he found, as Kevin had occupational therapy that day, but Nicky who was putting
away some of the recording equipment.

Nicky looked up at him. He tossed a weak smile in his direction. “Heeyy, Neil. How are you
doing?”

He walked further into the room, leaning against the door handle.

“I’m fine.”

Nicky snorted. “I should have known you’d say that.”

“What are you doing?”

“Renee and Andrew are recording stuff. I don’t know if it’s to help cope with everything that’s going
on, but I’m never one stifle the creative process.” He paused as he folded his extension chord. “How’s- how’s Andrew doing.”

“You know him.”

Nicky nodded and went back to folding his clothes. “I do. That’s why I’m asking you not him.”

A silence fell between them.

“So when are you heading back to Germany?”

“I’m not.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’m not. At least not in the near future. And if I do, not for very long.” He sighed and rest his hands on top of the pile of equipment he was trying to fit in his case.

“Is everything okay with Erik?”

“Yes! Yes,” Nicky hurried to squash that ridiculous question. “Everything between us is fine. He’s actually been really great about this whole thing. He helped me to figure out what to do.

“I’m staying here. At least until Aaron finishes high school. Erik and his family offered us a place to live with them, but I know Aaron has friends here and Katelyn and that he doesn’t want to leave them. Lord knows that he’s been uprooted enough over the past few years,” he said darkly. “And he’s not going back to my parents. I don’t want to see them again. So were moving out to an apartment. I can squeeze in some community college classes and then in a few years I’ll have a degree.”

“That isn’t what you planned.”

“Since when has anything gone as planned, Neil? Besides, we’re family. I know that Andrew is always touting the whole chose-your-own-family-and-blood-doesn’t-mean-anything thing, but they are, Neil. There my blood and my chosen family. And I’m not going to turn my back on them. I won’t be my parents. I’m not turning by back on Andrew.”

Neil stared at him.

Nicky closed the clasp on the equipment box.

“The police asked me to testify, Neil. And I think I’m going to.” He took a deep breath. “I’m scared.”

And for once in his life, Neil was at a loss for words. There was nothing he could say to the man in front of him, the one who was choosing to speak against his parents in defense of, not himself, but his cousin. Neil didn’t know if he would have ever be strong enough to speak against his father, let alone his mother for all the things they had done to him. It was scary. And here was this man who had hope, who had a future, who had strength, not because it was given to him but because he fought for it.

But he couldn’t tell Nicky these things because he knew the taller boy would brush it off or play it off like a joke.

Instead he reached forward and pulled Nicky into a hug. He felt Nicky wrap his arms around him
and hug him back.

“Thank you,” Neil said, and he hoped that would be enough.

***

It was cold. It always was cold. The heater in their shitty apartment building had broken. Andrew would like to have said it was a surprise, but it wasn’t really. They were paying for one of the cheapest places in town. Even Nicky and Aaron had found a nicer place, though not by much.

They had piled all of their blankets up on top of the bed but it barely was enough to keep them warm. It was only enough to keep the cold out, but not trap the heat in.

They had both taken to wearing socks to bed. They had jokingly gotten each other a pair of socks for Christmas the year before. He told Neil it was because he didn’t want to accidentally feel Neil’s freezing feet in the middle of the night. It had been a joke, but some nights before they went to bed, or in the morning when they woke up, their feet would brush and he could feel Neil’s frozen toes. Neil said Andrew’s feet were just as bad, but that was neither here nor there.

But now it was just cold, like never-warm always-cold, cold. He had lived in foster homes like this before, where they didn’t have enough money to pay for the heat, all the foster money going to pay their latest addiction.

But here it was as if the whole room was frozen; it was all completely still. Their movements were almost in slow motion and even as they did things, it would seem as though they were frozen in place- Neil contemplating over a painting, himself poised over his book.

Now in bed he was still cold but he could feel Neil’s warmth- distant, vague, and so enticing. He felt impulse rise in him. He was spending too much time with Neil. But he pushed that thought away and spoke.

“Neil.”

“Yeah.” His voice wasn’t more than a whisper, as though speaking too loud would shatter the silence.

“Yes or no.”

“Yes,” he said automatically. The idiot never even questioned what he wanted. It should have been more annoying than it really was. He scooted closer to Neil until they were barely touching, his chest brushing against Neil’s back. Neil tensed a moment before he hesitantly relaxed.

They weren’t exactly pressing against each other, but it was enough. Already he could feel his heat seeping through the cotton of his shirt and it felt nice, like this. He had control and no one could hurt them here. He wasn’t afraid of Neil.

There was a gasp of cool air as Neil pulled away from him for a moment to turn to face him. He could barely make out Neil’s eyes in the dark but he could tell he was looking at him. He didn’t say anything for a while, but then his voice came out tired and soft in the night.

“My mom. When we were on the run we used to share a bed. To make sure no one came in in the middle of the night.”

“Did anyone ever?” he whispered back
“A few times.”

“What did you do?”

“We killed them. We used to sleep with a gun under our pillows, or a knife. It really just depended. My mom was always better with a gun than I was.”

“And you?”

“I was better with knives.” He was silent for a moment and Andrew could hear Neil’s fingers running along the edges of his pillowcase. “I like sleeping with you.”

“Because it reminds you of your mom?”

“No. You’re you. I like that.” Andrew saw the silhouette of Neil’s hand tracing the space between their pillows. “Yes or no.” His voice was so quiet he almost wouldn’t have heard him.

His mouth felt dry.

“Yes.”

Neil looked at him a moment before turning around again and taking his hand. He led Andrew’s hand up to rest on his arm as he laid. It wasn’t enough to hold Neil to him, but it was far more intimate.

He hesitantly stretched out his fingers and traced them along the spot where they rested in Neil’s arm. Neil hummed distantly, already beginning to drift off to sleep.

It was calming to feel Neil’s chest rise and fall. He didn’t know how long he laid there listening to his steady breathes before he pulled himself away. Neil was too deep in sleep to notice the loss of heat, but Andrew could feel it. It felt as though his body had been robbed. He almost wanted to curl up against him, but he knew he couldn’t.

He knew he wasn’t ready to be that close to someone while he slept. He didn’t know if he would ever be ready for that. Not that anyone would ever want him that close. Well, Neil did, but Neil was an idiot sometimes, (he stubbornly ignored he part of his brain screaming that he was lying). But even more than that he hated the people who had made him like that in the first place. Who had made it impossible for a child to find comfort, impossible for a teen to find peace. He hated every single one of them. The ones who hurt him and the ones who did nothing. He hated that woman (Sherece, his mind reminded him) who left the heat off all winter, who broke his window and never fixed it. He hated that he couldn’t forget anything about them, how he would always remember their names, even if they were too strung out to remember his own.

He hated Cass and the betrayed look on her face when he was taken away, the betrayed look when she found out that she couldn’t foster anymore children because she had been negligent with the child in her care. He hate how confused she looked, as though her son hadn’t been the one to drive him to carving up his own arms, releasing the pain that was trapped within his veins.

He hated Neil and his pretty face and soft hair and sharp mouth. He hated the way Neil cut others like barbed wire atop a chain-link fence. How he closed his gate to everyone except Andrew. He hated how his hair seemed to glow when the sun hit it just right and he hated the way his face scrunched out when he was painting.

He hated the way he never put up with any shit and could always find the words he needed to say. He hated how Neil got him and listened to him when no one else ever had. He hated how Neil could
look at him and see him, scars and all, and still look at him the same. He hated how Neil made him want to stay somewhere for the first time. He hated how Neil made him think he was worth something when he had spent his whole life learning he wasn’t.

Neil was a fucking pipe dream, and Andrew fucking hated that.

Andrew was still waiting for the day when he would wake up and find he wasn’t real. But every day he opened his eyes and saw Neil’s sleep-tousled hair and bleary blue eyes. He would deny it, but sometimes he thought he felt his heart stop. And then Neil’s eyes would open and he would look at him and sometimes he would smile and Andrew would get the urge to look behind himself to see who Neil was smiling at.

He fell asleep sometime in the middle of his thoughts only to be woken up by the same thing that plagued his mind before he slept.

Neil was slowly waking up, smiling sleepily. He rubbed his face, yawning.

“Hey, you’re up.” Neil propped himself up as he looked over at him. He groaned as he stretched out and got up. “I’m going to run. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

He ducked into the bathroom and came out a moment later and went out the door for his morning run.

Andrew slowly pulled himself out of bed, even his feet where he had buried them in Neil’s still-warm side of the bed and started making the coffee. Neil came barreling in half an hour later and headed straight for the bathroom. He heard the shower turn on and off a few minutes later.

Neil came out of the room toweling off his hair and went over to the plastic bins where they stored their clothes. He shuffled through it a bit until he pulled out one of Andrew’s black turtle necks and pulled it on over his head. He walked over to the counter and poured a cup of coffee and sat down at the table across from where Andrew sat.

He pulled open his book and started reading it. It was another one of Allison’s shitty romance novels. For some reason Neil loves those books. He thought that it might be because they were so over the top and ridiculous. Either way Neil seemed to get a kick out of them so they must have been all bad. He glanced up from his dry book and looked over at Neil. He looked like he was trying not to laugh, biting his finger to keep his laughter from spilling out. He glanced up and caught Andrew staring.

“Andrew.”

He let out a put-upon sigh that he knew nether of them believed for a second. “What is it?”

“Oh, so the Prince, Troy and this one girl, Cassandra are apparently madly in love and all that. So they hooked up and all that and then she found out that’s she’s pregnant with twins and she doesn’t even know his name, Andrew. And then Troy is just so sappy and over the moon that he doesn’t realize that his step brother is plotting to kill him in order to get the throne. And then Cassandra’s dad knows something is going on because he’s seen this guy straight up barrel roll out of his daughter’s room every night and he’s worried that he won’t get a proper dowry if the town finds out she’s pregnant. And she was his prettiest daughter so he was hoping to get a cow and two goats for her.”

“You’ve unlocked it Neil. The true language of love- the exchange of farm animals.”

Neil closed his book to look at him, finger marking the page. “It really makes sense if you think about it. People go on dates all the time and end up with a pig.” He leaned back in his chair with an affected sigh. “I never even stood a chance. My mother never taught me to raise livestock.”
Andrew nodded “I wouldn’t go on a date with anyone unless they gave me a cow.”

“Oh, you’re worth three cows, at least, Andrew.” He nodded at Andrew’s book and made a face. “How’s your book going?”

“It’s really picking up. They actually are making eye contact and talking. She even took off her hair bonnet while she let her demon child run around in the woods.”

“Scandalous. I don’t know why you’re reading that book, Andrew. I’ve heard people make summarized versions of a lot of the required reading books so that people don’t have to read the original.”

Andrew just looked at him. “How dare you talk about The Scarlet Letter like that, Neil? Hawthorne didn’t painstakingly write each word for someone to just read Spark notes.”

“How has anything actually happened?”

“Shut up.” He pointedly reopened his book, ignoring Neil’s laughter. He really didn’t care for the book, but it was better than reading The Great Gatsby. He didn’t need to read a book about someone pining over someone else, someone they had no chance with.

Honestly, he may be self-destructive but he wasn’t a masochist. And since the book wasn’t very exciting he could sneak glances of Neil’s face and the light streaming through his hair.

Sometimes they would just sit at the table, Andrew reading and Neil drawing or painting. He sometimes would catch Neil staring at him while he worked on whatever he was working on. Neil didn’t really show his art off. Sometimes once it was finished but rarely before.

“Staring, Neil.”

Neil sighed and let his face drop into his arms. “So dramatic.”

“I just can’t get it right.”

“What?”

“Your jaw, where it meets your ear. I do it but it just seems off.”

He felt his mouth go dry. “You draw me?”

“Of course I draw you, Andrew. I live with you. I’ll stop if it makes you uncomfortable. It’s mostly just practice stuff, you know?”

He pushed aside the small part of him that was disappointed before. “Wait? Most?”

“I do just draw you as you are. Not a sketch. I’ve drawn all the foxes. I’ve drawn you more, obviously, since I live with you and I don’t always have them as a reference.”

“By that logic you could draw a lot of Aaron.”

Neil made a face. “You and Aaron look nothing alike.”

“We’re identical twins.”
Neil waved him off. “Yeah, but you two have a lot of subtle differences. Like in your face.”

“I don’t think many people think that way.”

“Katelyn probably does. She and Aaron are really close.”

He refrained from saying that Katelyn knew the difference because she spent so much time making out with his brother and Neil and himself- weren’t. Doing that.

“Katelyn is attracted to Aaron and wants to have sex with him. Of course she knows which one of us is him. You’re not attracted to either of us, so you’re not really giving a good example.”

“Just because I’m not sexually attracted to you doesn’t mean I don’t think you’re beautiful. I’m not blind Andrew.”

Andrew blinked.

“Draw whatever the fuck you want Neil. I don’t care.”

He hurried and gathered up his stuff and left the apartment. The next thing he knew he was knocking on the door to a modest house in the middle of a fucking cul-de-sac.

The door opened and Stephanie stared at him questioningly. “Hello Andrew.”

“Hello Stephanie. Is Renee here?”

“Yeah? Come on in.”

“Renee, Andrew’s here.” Renee glanced up from where she was sitting on the couch.

“Andrew? Let’s go to my room.”

He followed her and she shut the door behind her.

“What is it.”

“I’m so fucking gay.”

“I’ll get the cocoa.”

***

Andrew walked into the room and it felt cold. He hadn't been in court since he became emancipated.

He didn't want to be there.

At all.

Drake was guilty. Everybody knew he was guilty. But still he was having them go through all of this. What was worse was that Aaron had to be dragged into this too, as well as Wymack, Neil, Nicky, Kevin, and Luther.

He didn't like how his past was being laid out. They asked a barge of questions. *What happened? Had it happened before? What damage occurred?* Question after question.

After a while it felt like they were just asking the same questions over and over.
Why?

As if Andrew hadn’t been asking himself the same question for years.

He had been fairly well-behaved the past few years in order to get his emancipation, but they still had his records from before and they were able to see how his acts of delinquency lined up with his time with the Spear’s.

He had to watch as Drake denied the charges made against him. It made him feel sick.

Neil went up to the stand and answered the questions directly.

"Mr. Josten, it was said that you were the one this who went searching for Andrew Minyard."

Neil leaned closer to the microphone. “That's correct.”

“Was this due to impulsive decision on your part?”

Neil narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

“You lashed out at Luther Hemmick after the attack.”

“I did that because he was directly involved.”

“How so?”

Neil clenched his fists and Andrew could see the physical strain Neil was under to keep himself from lashing out. “He was the one who helped set up the meeting between Andrew and Drake.”

“But it wasn't Luther Hemmick’s fault that there was an attack.”

“He knew what Drake had done to Andrew. Andrew told him. He didn't do anything.”

“Is this true?”

“Bring either of them up to the stand and they'll tell you it is.”

“Thank you, Mr. Josten. That is enough for now.”

The bailiff looked at his notes and then gestured towards Andrew’s defense.

“Luther Hemmick please take the stand.” The bailiff turned to address the court. “Luther Hemmick is being implicated in charges of child endangerment and an accessory to rape.”

Luther looked startled and walked to the front. Neil ran into his side and mumbled an apology Andrew knew he didn't mean.

"Mr. Hemmick, are the allegations Mr. Josten has made against you true?”

“Well, I think that he is very young and that this is a very emotional time for him.”

“You aren't answering the question. Did Andrew Minyard tell you about the sexual abuse he was experiencing at the hands of Drake Spear?”
“He was so young. It didn't make any sense. I thought it had to be an excuse.”

“Yes or no, Mr. Hemmick.”

Luther fidgeted. “Technically, yes, but,” he hurried on, “how was I supposed to know he was telling the truth?”

“So you knew about Andrew's accusations against Drake Spear and you knowingly facilitated a meeting between them without Andrew's knowledge.”

Luther shrunk.

“Yes.”

“That will be enough for now.”

It was hard to watch Cass up there on the stand. She was crying and repeating that she didn't know, she didn't even think anything was going on over and over. She was utterly destroyed, and Andrew couldn't stop himself from thinking it was all his fault.

He hadn't ever been planning to bring it up. He wasn't going to have Cass know. Her whole family was being destroyed in front of his face. He had never seen Cass cry like that.

Neil's eyes were vicious and cold. He had no mercy for Luther or Drake. He tore them apart in the clear, concise way he had.

Nicky was visibly upset.

Andrew heard him crying in the bathroom before the trial.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have anything to say.

When court resumed Nicky had stopped crying by the time he got up to the stand. He and Aaron gave their testimonies and then they were dismissed. Nicky wanted to talk to them about it but they were gone, leaving him behind in the hall. Despite what he had been saying, it was what Nicky needed; he needed to be alone to call Erik.

Andrew and Aaron walked down the hallway in silence. They left the doors and headed off in opposite directions.

Aaron was angry. He liked to pretend he was different than his brother, but he was alike in more than just appearance. Katelyn came with him and during the breaks he went outside. Andrew knew he was spending his time with Katelyn. He couldn't find it in himself to be mad about it. Not when he sat in the cement planters on the edge of the courthouse by himself staring at all the cars driving by.

It sucked.

It really, really sucked.

He wanted leave and go home. He wanted to crawl into bed and pull the covers over his shoulders and sleep.

He just felt really, really tired.

There was a shadow that fell over his shoulder. Part of him felt that it was Drake or Luther and he
just felt resigned. Nothing was going to come out of this trial. It was all a formality. They were going to come after him. He felt like he was twelve again: helpless, young, and vulnerable. He felt his breath shorten. But then he looked longer at the shadow and felt his breath slow again.

The shadow wasn't much taller than his own, even though he was sitting and the other was standing, and he knew without looking up that it was Neil.

Neil lowered himself down onto the concrete beside him, giving a little space to his side.

“You want a cigarette?”

Andrew felt his head move and then the brush of paper against his fingers as Neil handed him one. Andrew shifted to one side and flicked out his lighter and lit his cigarette. He beckoned Neil closer and he leaned forward, cigarettes between their lips. He could breathe in his scent with the nicotine and he found it intoxicating. Neil blew through his cigarette, coaxing the spark to life and then pulled it out of his mouth, holding the stick between his fingers.

He settled closer and Andrew leaned into him a bit. Their thighs were flush against each other and it was warm. In the late October it was comforting. It was enough. He didn't try to say anything, though maybe he knew that there was nothing he could say right now.

They sat smoking their cigarettes until the recess was over and they were ushered back into the courtroom.

***

The nights after the trial were the hardest.

They sat together in their apartment, like they always seemed to. And Andrew shook.

Neil wouldn't have noticed it if he didn't know him so well. He shouldn't have seen it in the darkness, but he did. His fingers reached out tentatively, in a gesture neither of them really did. Andrew was bold and sure and Neil was smart mouthed and sharp.

Sometimes he forgot that he was still a kid and that Andrew was still one, too. Their eyes had hardened underneath, in a way reminiscent of a veteran of war.

The tips of their fingers touched and Andrew inched them closer until their fingers were woven together.

Neil could feel Andrew hand tremble. His eyes were faced forward and Neil realized he never turned on the light after the sun had gone down.

“It's late.” Andrew said an indiscernible amount of time later.

“I could stay, Andrew.”

Andrew’s hands ran over his skin, across his scars and blemishes, a secret sign language only they knew.

I know you, his fingers whispered. Stay, his muscle-bound palms said.

I will, Neil’s body replied.

***
They had somehow managed to sneak onto the roof of their apartment building and had been playing their game of truths for the past hour or so. Neil didn’t know whose turn it was, the order getting more convoluted the longer they played. Now, though it was Andrew’s turn.

“Your turn.” Neil said from where he was lying beside Andrew.

“Tell me something about your mother.”

Neil paused for a moment.

“Her name was Mary.”

“But she wasn’t a saint.”

Neil scoffed. “Far from it. What about you?”

“Depends on the mother you mean. The only woman I ever considered to be my mother was Cass. Which is ironic in a way.”

“Why?”

“Are you familiar with Greek myths?”

“Yeah.” His eyes widened. “Cassandra was the women that was able to tell the true future but cursed so no one would believe her.”

Andrew tapped his own nose.

The thoughts flew through Neil’s head. He remembered Andrew mentioning it before when he talked about Luther the misunderstanding.

“It’s ironic because you were more Cassandra than she was.”

Andrew studied him a moment then turned his head back to the sky. Neil noticed his forced swallow and let it go.

He turned to face him. “Ask me.”

“What?”

Andrew’s eyes were still trained on the sky and Neil couldn’t help but notice the way the glasses Andrew wore were beginning to slip down his nose.

“Ask me question,” Andrew repeated. “I owe you.”

He wanted to tell him it wasn’t true, but he knew it would be pointless; he knew Andrew’s code almost better than he knew his own.

“Fine. Um,”

“And not a stupid question.”

Neil smirked. “I thought I always asked stupid questions?”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “You’re going to be the death of me one day.”

“So you’re planning on sticking around that long?”
Andrew just glared at him.

“Okay,” he drummed his fingers on the counter. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do after high school?”

“What?”

“You know what I asked.”

“What did I say about stupid questions?”

“It’s not a stupid question, Andrew. I want to know. I’ve been meaning to ask you about it for a while, actually.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Why, Andrew? Why doesn’t it matter?”

“You’re not Bee. I don’t have to tell you.”

“You’re right. You don’t.” Neil locked eyes with Andrew. “But you should really try and tell yourself your reasoning. Ask yourself why you don’t have a future for yourself. You think you don’t have anything after this Andrew, but your life isn’t just over when everybody graduates. Do something you want to do Andrew.”

Andrew’s I don’t want anything hung heavy in the air between them, in the space between their words. Andrew closed his book resolutely.

“And what about you, Neil?”

“Tattoo place with Wymack.”

“You’re staying in town?”

“I’m staying with you, as long as you’ll have me, Andrew. If you don’t want to be around me anymore after graduation or whenever, I’ll leave. But if you’ll let me, I’d like to stay.”

“I don’t have authority over town, Neil. I can’t kick you out.”

“I meant with you.”

Their game of truths was done for that night.

***

As the year drew to a close, Neil couldn’t help but find himself feeling somewhat at peace. The trial was over and done with, and although they would be dealing with the fall out for the rest of their lives, at least that part was over. And at least they had each other.

He had started to think of foxes as his own family, and it scared him how much he cared about them, how much his love for them had grown over the past few years.

Allison, Dan, and Renee were all like sisters he had never had. Matt, Nicky and Kevin were like brothers. Aaron was like- a cousin. He still didn’t get along with him that well but they had come to a sort of level ground between them so they could tolerate each other. Wymack was like what a father should have been, Abby was like a mother. Bee was like an aunt. And Andrew, he was like a
partner. He didn’t know why it felt like that but that was the only way he could see him. They were equals. Partners. And he would be happy to be that way until he died.

And now winter break was approaching and Neil couldn’t be more excited.

This was the first time where they had nothing but work and long days spread out with whatever they could fill them with and he smiled.

He had found a special project for them, something he had stumbled across while he had been riding to the apartment on the bus. There had been a neon page of card-stock duct taped to the bus stop sign close to the apartment complex. He had followed it on a whim, as he was wont to do.

It had been early in the morning after work, five maybe six in the morning, when the garage sales were just starting to get set up. He walked past the driveway, the blankets laid out on the concrete with clothing stacked on the top of it. There were a lot of t-shirts with city names on them written in fancy script but he walked past them; he had spent so much time on the road the idea of becoming a billboard was less than ideal. But he saw a box, unopened in the corner of the lot leaning against the side of the house.

“Are you interested?” an older woman, probably one of the people in charge, asked him.

He wasn’t sure, the images on the side of the box distorted and difficult to see due to age and dust.

“Bernie and I never got around to building that. And now that we’re retiring, well we don’t want to lug it all the way to Florida.”

“What is it?”

She leaned closer and swiped harder that the top-facing edge, showing off a set of dimensions.

She frowned, dropping her dusty hands to her waist in an exasperated stance. “I thought for sure that would work. Oh well. I think it’s some sort of cabinet or bookcase or something.”

He stared at it, then looked up at the top of the box at the dimensions that laid there. They could use it. They were actually accumulating stuff. Their one bookcase was almost filled with their books. And if the dimensions were what he thought they were, it might be big enough to house the safe that was currently stuck in the corner of the apartment on the floor.

“I’ll take it.”

She studied him appraisingly. “I’ll sell it to you for five dollars.”

He looked back at it. “Okay.”

She nodded and helped him get a firm grip on it.

He carried it up to the apartment and Andrew stared at him, spoon frozen halfway in the way to his mouth. He blinked before slowly lowering his spoon and resting it back in his bowl.

“What. The fuck. Is that?”

“Storage.”

“Neil it’s six fifteen in the fucking morning.”

“It’s garage sale time, Andrew.”
Andrew got up with a put-upon sigh and walked over to where Neil and put the box on the floor. He slit the tape of the box open with his knives and Neil eagerly began to pull out the pieces.

“There’s stuff in the box,” Andrew said and Neil couldn’t tell if he was actually surprised or just being sarcastic.

“It’s a book case,” he said without even looking up from where he was looking at the instructions.

“Yeah.”

“There was a sale and it’s supposed to be very reliable.”

“It’s in pieces.”

Yes.” He pulled out the last of the pieces. “It’s domestic.”

“Of course. Of course you choose putting together IKEA furniture as what you want to do over break.” Andrew pinched the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “Not looking at Christmas lights or sleeping. Fucking assembling furniture.”

***

Neil plucked the instructions out of the bottom of the box with a triumphant flourish and Andrew settled down beside him and worked on opening the plastic bags, resigned. He spied the way Neil’s brows pinched a moment before smoothing out. He flipped them over and laughed.

“The instructions are in German.”

“Yes, I noticed.”

“Do they have English?”

He gestured to the lone sheet of paper with his knife.

“That’s all we got.”

Neil laughed, head thrown back.

“Wow that’s sucks for everybody else. Good thing we speak German.”

He pointed to the tool box Wymack had dropped off months ago and had never gotten around to picking up.

He opened the box and looked at the tools and nodded.

“Read the instructions.” He pointed. “You are better at reading German.”

Neil nodded and read line after line handing tools to Andrew.

Neil watched him in admiration. “You’ve built things before.”

“One of my fosters thought building was good character development or something.” He twisted the screw into place. “We worked on the car.”

“Which one? Were you even old enough to be around the car?”
“It was my last one, the Spears. Richard would have me help and when his son came back we’d work on his car too. Drake would help us.” He pulled himself away from the thoughts of that car. Neil seemed to sense his unwillingness to continue and just nodded. Those memories were still there in the back of his mind, he knew they probably always be. But this was a new one. One with Neil sitting awkwardly with one knee up and the other bent an angle. With his voice filling the air and Andrew’s mind until all he was thinking about was piece A3 connecting to part f4 which was attached to G3.

It was nice, he thought, to see that. It didn’t take long before all the pieces on the floor were picked up and put into place, leaving nothing but tiny beads of Styrofoam and padded packing sheets. Neil wadded them up and tossed them in the trash and swept up the left over debris.

They pulled out the boxes they had from when they moved. There weren’t very many at all. Andrew unloaded his books and started to place them in up alphabetical order, the books with well-worn edges and pages made soft from their use. He left a space without even discussing it and moved to the side for Neil to put his things onto the shelf next to his things. Neil had even less. His binder, no longer hidden, and some art supplies.

When Andrew backed up after Neil was finished up, the sight of it all sent a pang to his chest. One he hadn’t felt in a long, long time. It was one that made him to simultaneously want to never move from that spot and also turn around and never look back.

He didn’t know why it hurt so badly. He should walk out the door right now. Never set his eyes on Neil Abram Josten again. Turn his back on pain. But this pain was so addicting that he couldn’t let go. Not now. He wanted to feel it over and over again. He had always been self-destructive, but if he had to die someway, he’d rather it be feeling this.

***

After living for years on the run, Neil had thought he was accustomed to the unexpected. He didn’t want it, but he was used to things straying from what he expected.

Living with Andrew was one of those things.

If someone had told him what it would be like to be living with the blond boy, Neil would have scoffed. They were both too volatile when they first met to even handle being in the same room as each other. And even months later when they shared a room in Marbury, it was nothing like that. There we always other people controlling what they did and what time they did it. They had privacy, but not true privacy, knowing full well it could be taken away at a moments notice.

This, this was calm, this was peace. There was no school and their jobs were at night, so when morning rolled around they were able to get up at their leisure. It got light later and even at night it wouldn’t be too bright yet. They could lay sprawled out beside each other underneath their quilt Andrew had made. It was soothing to both of them, though for different reasons.

For Neil it was a demonstration of his life’s changes- how everything he was before made everything he was now. For Andrew it was grounding, there were specific stitching patterned at the edges of the quilt that Andrew ran his fingers across. In one of their late night games of secrets Andrew told them that he had never had a quilt in any of the places that he and been, that the texture and feel was enough to pull him away from the memories of his trauma.

Neil had never had a quilt before either, though that was more because his mother wasn’t a huge supporter of sentimentality. But he could see how such a thing could be dangerous. Neil stared at it. Andrew had taken those years on the run, those years of loneliness and isolation. The pain of his
mother’s death, the pain of his father’s knives, the pain of the road burn beneath his palms and turned it to something safe, something warm, something comforting. Something like home.

And now it laid upon their bed and it gave the whole place the feeling of home. And home wasn’t a place he wanted to leave.

It terrified him, more than his mother’s blows or his father or death, the vulnerability of having a home. It opened him up to attach to loss, but he didn’t want to give it up. He had lived his whole life as nothing, forever caught up in the winds to nowhere, but it all felt so empty. But now he was here and his chest felt like it was filling every day he stayed, weighing down his heart like an anchor until it became difficult to leave.

He wanted to stay, to wake up with his fingers entwined with Andrew’s, staring at his sleep flushed cheeks pressed with pillow creases. He wanted to take the bus over to Wymack’s and debate the merit of bagpipes in modern music with Kevin. He wanted to meet Aaron’s eyes across the room when someone at school did something particularly stupid. He wanted to run with Matt and take Macie to the park and give her pets. He wanted to laugh with Dan on the bus and he wanted to hear Nicky talk about his future plans with so much hope and optimism despite his shitty past that Neil felt a pleasant pang or jealousy. He wanted to read the newest trashy book in the _HeartThrob McPearson_ series with Allison and he wanted to watch Renee and Andrew make each other happy.

He wanted so bad it hurt sometimes, but it was a pain more pleasant than he and ever felt in his life. And it twisted at his throat and pulled on his heartstrings. It was more than anything and he loved it.

***

Kale should not be eaten. There weren’t many things that Andrew believed in, but that was one of them. Thankfully Neil agreed after having been tricked into trying some. He had to appreciate the skill Neil had at concealing his disgust until Kevin went down to talk to Wymack before she was compelled to spit the drink back into the cup and then pour it down the drain.

“That shit’s disgusting.”

Andrew just shook his head. “It’s a wonder you’re still alive,” he said, barely even looking up from his book as he turned the page. Neil flipped him the bird.

“I wasn’t going to die,” he swished and spit again. “Though that drink tasted like how I would imagine the grave would taste. Literally.” Neil tried to stick his tongue under the stream of the faucet. “Tasted like someone uprooted a shit-ton of grass and dumped it in a blender.”

They heard the door open and Neil sprinted back to his chair and placed his now empty glass in front of himself.

Kevin’s eyebrows flew up.

“You drank it?”

Andrew elbowed Neil in the side. He shot him a look and then turned back to Kevin.

“It sure was... something.”

“Neil was just saying it had a very natural flavor.” Andrew butt in, enjoying the dirty look Neil was sending him. “Earthy. Fresh.”

“That would be the wheatgrass.”
Andrew didn’t miss the way Neil’s face contorted behind Kevin’s back.

Wymack came up and looked at them to the blender still mostly full of lettuce juice or whatever Kevin had blended. “Why don’t you take some home? I’ll help you bring it. Kevin why don’t you go down to the store and watch everything.”

He waited for him to leave and then walked into the kitchen and began pulling out Tupperware containers and started dumping the smoothie into them. He pushed it along to Neil to seal them.

“I’m not drinking that shit.” Neil tried to shove it back defensively.

“Neither am I. Just dump it or whatever. I can drink anymore of this stuff.”

And that was how they ended up on the bus with three Tupperware containers between them filled with green sludge.

They stacked the containers and then carried them onto the bus. It was always amusing to watch Neil try and juggle things back and forth as he tried to pull out his bus pass. He finally managed to pull it out by balancing one of the containers on one of his propped up legs. He swiped his pass and walked forward, Andrew following, swiping his card with ease, as he had taken it out before they picked up the Tupperware. He didn’t get his reputation for being a loner rebel by dropping kale juice across the bus. The bus driver gave them an unimpressed look before swinging the doors shut behind them.

She was a traditional bus driver who liked to pull all the classic moves. Like starting to drive before the passengers were sitting. Or not coming to a complete stop before passing a stop. Or leaving the stop early. Or, his favorite, turning at such a sharp angle that people who were not already holding their bags secure watched in dismay as they toppled to the floor.

While sitting Neil would always take the window seat and spend the entire trip looking at the same roads they saw everyday while Andrew pulled out his keys so they would be able to get into the apartment.

“You have a thing for staring, don’t you?”

Neil turned and looked him in the eyes. “It depends on what I’m looking at.”

Andrew pulled his eyes away just enough. “It’s always the same. The say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

“I know. I like it. It used to freak me out to see the same place a lot. Even when we stopped somewhere, we almost never took the same route anywhere in town. We always mixed it up so we wouldn’t become too predictable.”

Andrew almost laughed. Neil was many things, but the longer he knew him, the less the word “predictable” seemed like it would ever fit.

“But now I’m here,” Neil continued. “And I’m not leaving. I don’t have to.”

Andrew yanked on the cord and the bus came to a stop. They grabbed the Tupperware and walked back to the apartment.

“Andrew-” Neil started as he shut the apartment door, but Andrew cut him off.

“You’re always saying stuff like that.”
“I don’t want to hide anymore, Andrew.” His eyes were earnest. “I have spent my whole life cowering and hiding, running and lying. And it’s kept me alive. But I can’t really live if I keep doing this, not really. I have been given a second chance at life and I think I’ve finally decided to take it for myself. With you I can be real. I just want to be real. I don’t want to be nothing anymore.”

He was leaning forward, closer to Andrew. Andrew felt his breath slow and he leaned forward. Their bodies were more than a foot apart, but their mouths were less than a hair’s breadth and the heat from Neil’s breath was warm against his skin.

“Yes or no.”

It felt like time was standing still.

“Yes.”

And then Andrew leaned forward and kissed him.

The first thing he noticed was the warmth pressed up against his own lips, the rush of adrenaline that made him feel like he was falling hard and fast, but he didn’t want to stop.

He moved his lips against Neil’s until Neil responded with a feeling of unceasing adoration that caused Andrew’s stomach to twist.

They were kissing and kissing and it felt like he didn’t need any air at all, like Neil was his new lifeline, the only thing that he needed to keep air in his lungs and oxygen in his blood.

And just as suddenly Andrew pulled away and he felt to cold brush of the world slowly seeping in around him, but he was still in a daze, nothing in his world but Neil and his lips and his hands and the sound of his shaky breath.

It was stupid. He shouldn’t have done it, but he had. He kissed Neil and now he couldn’t get his wide blown pupils and flushed cheeks out of his mind. He remembered noticing Neil’s hands, the muscles strained to keep away from him, the way they slowly unclenched to reveal his palms, stained red with crescent marks from where his fingers dug into his palm with short nails and self-control.

He grabbed his jacket and walked out the door.

***

Neil watched the door close behind Andrew as he took his jacket and walked out the door, the tingling sensation still lingering on his lips.

That kiss had been unlike anything he had ever felt in his life. He had wanted to pull closer, to hold onto him, but he kept his hand away, hands clenched to prevent his fingers from wandering across Andrew’s skin. He felt as though if they separated, the whole world would flood back in and drown him.

It had been minutes? Hours? Seconds? Years? Since the kiss, but Neil still felt like he was trying to catch his breath.

He had suspected the change in his feeling towards Andrew, but he hadn’t wanted to acknowledge them, wanted to push them aside and ignore them. But he couldn’t. Because thinking about him filled his heart with a yearning he couldn’t explain, and his heart ached for it, for him. He wanted to hold him, to care for him. But who were they? They were two broken people. How could they even begin to learn to love if they didn’t even know how to live?
He moved to the floor beside his guitar and rifled through the junk mail on the counter until he found a mostly blank page, some postcard with a random number on it, 273 or something like that, and wrote the words of his heart, until the song was dripping from his lips, glittering with the heartache of their first kiss.

Stitch by stich, I tear apart

If brokenness is a form of art

I must be a poster child prodigy

Thread by thread, I come apart

If brokenness is a work of art

Surely this must be my masterpiece

I’m only honest when it rains

If I time it right, the thunder breaks

When I open my mouth

I want to tell you but I don’t know how

I’m only honest when it rains

An open book with a torn out page

And my inks run out

I want to love you, but I don’t know how

I don’t know how

No, I don’t know how

I don’t know how

I want to love you but I don’t know how

I want to love you

***

Kiss my lips, feel the rhythm in your heart and hips

I will pray so the castle we built won’t cave

The secrets you tell me I’ll take to my grave

There’s bone in my closet, but you hang stuff anyway

And if you have nightmares, we’ll dance on the bed

I know that you love me, love me
Even when I lose my head

Guillotine, guillotine

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
JUNIOR YEAR- SPRING

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: A lot of thought of death and putting affairs in order, mentions of past abuse, implications of torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I am not the only traveler, who has not repaid his debt

I’ve been searching for a trail to follow, again

Take me back to the night we met

And then I can tell myself what the hell I’m supposed to do

And then I can tell myself not to ride along with you.

***

It seemed to Neil that nothing of significance in his life ever occurred only once.

That wasn’t to say the things in his life were repetitive- they weren’t. If anything, he had probably lived one of the most varied lives he knew, and he grew up with two mobster parents.

But, despite that, everything of import in his life happened more than once, even if in different iterations.

He didn’t have just one scar.

(His entire body was vandalized with them.)

He had never been hurt just once.

(There had been Lola or his father or his mother. Hands or knives or hot irons. The combinations changed, the pain didn’t.)

He never feared his father only once.

(It was impossible to, especially when the man haunted his life and stalked his dreams.)

He never stayed in one place.

(His mother made him move until his feet bled and his head spun from how fast they ran.)

He wasn’t surrounded by one person.

(The foxes were now a part of his everyday life. Him. The guy who never had a friend before now had several. They called themselves his family.

Looked like his family no longer consisted of just one person anymore, either.)
He didn’t go to much one dance.

(He went to the spring fling dances his first two years and the second the senior prom was announced Allison had him roped into going with her to dance the night away.)

But there were two newly emerging patterns that stuck in his mind as the school year was coming to a close.

The first was that he hadn’t kissed Andrew only once.

The thing, he found, was that once they had kissed once, it was so, so easy to do it again.

A peck on the lips in the morning, a drawn-out make-out session in the afternoon, fingers running along each others hair, across each other’s jaw. When Andrew felt comfortable enough to allow these intimacies, Neil seized them hungrily. He wasn’t sure how he felt about sex yet, but kissing, that was something he was going to find hard to live without.

The second thing was that the series of mysterious numbers did not stop with just one, either.

At first he thought it might be a coincidence, but then the numbers continued to appear, the number decreasing with every passing day. As much as some people said he was obtuse, he really, really wasn’t. He knew a countdown when he saw one. After about two weeks be pulled out the calendar and counted out, day zero landing on a Tuesday a week and a half after school let out. There was nothing special in the slightest about that day, except the fact that it would probably be his last.

It was in the middle of summer, so the school wouldn’t have to worry, which was probably why the date was what it was.

He hadn’t really noticed it at first. There were numbers in the sequence that were missing.

But they weren’t really missing; he just hadn’t found them yet.

He rarely went to his locker, he had no need to. He had always preferred to carry everything he needed with him. But during student body election week he needed to put Kevin’s flyers in his locker so he could put them up after school. And his locker was empty enough to hold all five billion copies and six rolls of masking tape.

Except it wasn’t empty, at least not completely.

The kids at this school were always slipping announcements through the open slats of the locker, informing the student body of the upcoming events. He had anticipated those. He usually crumpled up the papers and tossed them aside without a second glance, but those announcements weren’t alone.

These extra scraps of paper were plain white instead of the pastel colored paper usually used for announcements. He unfolded the paper to find it blank except for a bold, black 132 written on one, 104 on another. 126, 128, 113. Half a dozen more.

He wasn’t naïve enough to think that this was nothing and he couldn’t stop the small bits of panic that were starting to pool in his stomach. He crumpled up the pieces of paper, thought about it, and then smoothed them out and refolded it before shoving it into his bag and hurrying out of the hall.

The days followed much like the ones before. The classes were dull and the weather was getting warmer and the notes kept coming. At first he tried to convince himself that they might be a prank, but he couldn’t. Not after days of the notes showing up in other places too- on the front door, in the
mail, slipped under the door. He managed to take them and hide them away, but he couldn’t hide the implication of them from his mind.

The fact that the notes followed him to school and home and work showed that they knew who he was, where he was going, what he did. And that was terrifying.

He knew it couldn’t be the FBI since they would be able to speak to him directly without all this fanfare and subterfuge. Also, they were government, so they didn’t have the funds for this petty bullshit.

That left him with the Moriyamas. If they had a task for him, there was no reason to draw it out. That probably meant that they were going to eliminate him, and that they were being merciful, giving him a countdown as a sign of good faith, perhaps a reward for not ratting them out. No doubt they would abandon it if they ever thought he was turning on them.

The realization slipped through him like ice and he could feel it as a solid mass as it dropped into his stomach. To be honest, he hadn’t expected to live this long in the first place, but he had forgotten what it had been like to live with that fear.

He had forgotten and tricked himself into thing that he could have a life- that he could have whatever it was he had with Andrew. He wasn’t sure if it was happiness, but it was more than he had ever thought he would have.

The thought of Andrew, and subsequently the other foxes washed over him with a wave of not sadness, but regret, maybe.

He had never had the chance to grow close to people before, and this was different from leaving people who were strangers masquerading as acquaintances. He had grown close to them and he didn’t want to hurt them. For once he didn’t want to be remembered for leaving.

Surely the Moriyamas wouldn’t leave a body. The Foxes would probably think he had run. Unless Ichirou left a body. But even then, who knew what state it would be left in? It would hurt them, but they were in the process of making new lives for themselves. Soon he would fade into one of those distant memories of youth. They were getting their lives together. They would be making something of themselves at college. They would all be fine. They had each other.

But his thoughts snagged, as they so often did, on Andrew. He made plans for the future, but Neil had noticed his lack of interest in life past high school. He had figured they would talk about it later, but he supposed he didn’t really know what he could offer. Andrew might not have anybody. He may hate Neil, but Neil knew, without a doubt that Andrew had him, just as he knew he had Andrew. Andrew hated him but they would stand side by side as they had. But now he would be leaving him. And that hurt. Neil didn’t want to abandon him.

He knew that he should just turn himself over to the Moriyamas now, despite the fact he had no way of contacting them, and just get himself out of the picture as soon as possible, and give the foxes more time to recover, to move on.

But deep down Neil knew he was too selfish to do that. He didn’t want to give up this life. He was too much like his mother- his instinct to survival surpassed all others. It was a part of him, ingrained in his very essence.

And even further embedded was his desire to be a part of something for once in his life. Maybe they would find his body, maybe they wouldn’t, but he would still be remembered, even if it were only for a short time. He didn’t want to waste a second of it on useless things.
And, he realized as he pictured the future he could have had, that there were still so many things he wanted to do with his friends, and with Andrew.

He might still have time to do some of them, but he knew he needed to start getting his affairs in order.

He would regret having wasted so much of Wymack’s time for the internship, but he didn’t want to worry him by turning it down. He could store up the money he made and set it aside for Andrew to pay the rent in the upcoming months, maybe even do something. Andrew had stood by his side, even when he didn’t ask for help. Even though Andrew hated him, he still stayed and for that Neil would always be thankful. The only person who had stood by him like that had been his mother, and he knew that Andrew had never had a person like that.

He had come home late when he started to write, and he didn’t know why, but it took him hours to start.

He had always been good with words, but now they seemed to fail him. He couldn’t think of how to convey everything that Andrew meant to him, the things he wanted Andrew to tell the others. He knew he would probably have things to add as time went one, but he could just add pages. He knew that by the end the letter would look a mess, but Andrew deserved a reason, if only for once in his life. He wished it didn’t have to be this way.

In the end, the letter was thick, written over a long period of time. There were two envelopes- the first one was filled with pages addressed to the different foxes, to Abby, to Wymack, even to Bee and Katelyn, but in the second it was something else. It was still a letter but instead of one page it was several, obviously started and stopped at different points.

He wanted to be brief, but there were so many parts he needed to add, so many things he needed to say. In the margins and in the edges he had pictures illustrating his past, the places he’d been, the things he had seen. The fields of Marseilles, the train stops of Germany, the dusty desert road to Arizona. An illustration of the bullet that grazed his shoulder, sketches of the fox paw logo that adorned their YouTube page.

Every ounce of himself, he poured into those letters. And as he sealed them, after months of work, he only hoped they would be enough.

***

Andrew should have known from the get-go that he shouldn’t have agreed to be involved, but as Neil had pointed out on more than one occasion, Andrew had always been self-destructive.

Which was how Andrew was spending his hard-earned lunch designing campaign posters and helping Kevin with his speech to be student body president.

Aaron and Katelyn had gotten roped into helping too, though not without Aaron bitching about everything Andrew wanted to say out loud but didn’t.

But boredom aside, they still worked. Katelyn had the nicest handwriting, so she was writing the lettering in the poster board signs they were going to put up around campus, while Aaron and Andrew were in charge of coloring them.

“But I swear, it’s ice cream in a container, but there’s chocolate all around it like a shell.”

“So, like a drumstick.” Aaron asked, voice obviously confused about how they were still on this topic after 15 minutes.
“Kind of, but without the cone,” Katelyn affirmed.

“Well that’s stupid, if the shell sticks to the container you can’t eat it,” Andrew muttered.

“Well they probably thought of that already, I just haven’t eaten it yet.”

“Guys,” Kevin asked, lifting his binder, “have you seen card number 6?”

Andrew glared at him, but started looking himself, nonetheless. “You know, if your speech was shorter, you probably wouldn’t lose the cards as much.”

Kevin shot him a look. “You know I have to address all my points if I want to be taken seriously. And speaking of, you should be taking this whole thing more seriously since you’re my Vice President.”

Andrew just stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Ever since the start of junior year Kevin had become a knot of nervous energy, on the edge of insufferable. He was desperate to get into Juilliard, terrified he’d be a failure and not get in.

Kevin never actually said it out loud, but Andrew knew Kevin stayed awake at night wondering if he had made the right decision by leaving Riko and the Edgar Allen Academy. If he should have subjected himself to more abuse for a better shot of getting into his dream school. And Kevin was convinced he needed to pad his resume by doing student council or selling them his firstborn child. And since the latter was not an option, Kevin was desperate to try student council.

“You needed a co-runner.”

“Don’t put this on me, Andrew. You need this. Just think of how it will help your college applications if we win.”

“What makes you think I’m going to college?”

“You’re taking the SAT, Andrew. No one takes that unless they have to.”

“Maybe I live to be contrary.”

Kevin dropped his head to the table and banged it repeatedly against his folded arms. “Fuck. My. Life.”

“Found it!” Katelyn chirped.

This was a disaster.

***

Allison stood in the middle of Wymack’s living room which was scattered with craps of fabric.

“Remind me why I let you do this here?” Wymack asked from the hallway as he stared at the disaster that was now his living room.

“You love us, Wymack,” Allison said through all the pins in her mouth. “Dan stay still.”

“You’re taking forever.”

“Well, it’ll be worth it when Matt faints when he sees you.”
“True,” she nodded. “Thank you for sewing this,” she said, placing a hand on Allison’s arm. Allison smiled just wide enough that Neil could pick up on it from where he sat across the room with his sketchbook in hand. Renee was sitting near him watching them from her spot on the couch, head resting on her arms. Neil sketched her the look of adoration on her face as she watched Dan and Allison laughing.

“Okay, I think I’m done. Look at yourself.”

Dan turned to the full mirror and gasped spinning her skirt back and forth.

“It swishes.”

“That’s the whole point of wearing dresses,” Allison said matter-of-factly. She started packing up the bits of cloth on the floor but stopped when Dan put a hand on her shoulder.

She grabbed Allison by the shoulders and wrapped her up into a hug. “Thank you so much.”

“Yeah- well. You deserve it.”

Neil couldn’t help but agree. She worked so hard with her job and school and music and friendship. She more than deserved to have a nice night out and have a nice dress. And Dan looked great in her orange dress with a golden belt under the bust. The bold color showed off Dan’s confidence and amplified her natural, striking beauty.

Dan swished the dress again. “It’s awesome.”

Allison smiles softly as she watched Dan laughing and smiling. She tore her eyes away. “Okay, your turn Renee.”

Renee took in the emotions on Allison’s face and nodded, grabbing her dress and heading to the bathroom to change into it.

It only took a moment, but when she came out she was a sight to behold.

Renee came out in a light colored dress with bits of sheer material around her shoulders and pale fabric that was soft and billowy that went with her hair. Allison fussed over the hem and the edges of her dress.

Neil flipped the page and sketched the way Renee looked with Allison staring her, the way they stood an arms-length apart but their faces were closer as they spoke to each other. When Dan came back from the bathroom back in her normal sweats she exchanged a knowing look with Neil after she took in Allison and Renee.

He didn’t know how long he watched them, drew them, but when he looked out the window the sun was staring to set. The alterations were still going on but he didn’t want to distract them from the task at hand, so he made quick and quiet work of packing up his stuff.

“Neil, don’t think you’re leaving just yet,” Dan called out when she saw Neil trying to sneak away.

“Yeah. We made you a tie. I cut it and sewed and Renee embroidered it.” Allison yelled across the room. She jumped up and dug through her bag until she found the desired swatch of cloth. She put the pale flowery silk in his palm. It was a beautiful tie.

Allison went on, if she had ever stopped (he was so caught up with the gift and it’s stitchwork he might have missed something). “I know that getting you to buy something new is like pulling teeth
but now at least we’ll be coordinating.”

“Yeah. Definitely.” He rubbed his finder along the ridges of the fabric. “Thank you.” He looked over at her and then at the tie and then Renee.

“So, your dress is pink, I’m assuming.”

Allison leaned back against the table, glass of water in her hand as they watched Dan and Renee play with the floaty ends of her dress. “Yes, of course it is. I look fantastic pink.”

“True,” he conceded. Allison smiled smugly.

“I think this would be a good shade for you,” he continued.

Allison hummed in agreement, nodding absently

“It’s also close enough to Renee’s dress to look like you two are going together, but different enough to not be cheesy.”

Allison choked on her water in a way that still managed to not make her look any less elegant.

“What.”

“I have eyes Allison.”

“You’re ace.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “People keep saying things like that. Asexuality isn’t synonymous with stupidity in relationships. And I can read your body language. Don’t even try to distract me, Allison.”

“Well, whatever.” She brushed her cup across her lips. “Do think it’s obvious?”

“Not to Renee.”

“How do I let her know I like her though?”

“You could ask her out.”

“But she could say no.”

“Since when have you let someone stop you from doing anything, even yourself?”


Neil laughed and rolled his eyes.

“I don’t get that reference.”

Allison laughed. “Oh you will before the school year’s up. I’ll make sure of it.”

***

The night of prom fell on the weekend before the last day of school. Though the dance began at 8:00, Neil and Andrew left the apartment at 6:30. They were going to Bee’s to pick up her car and use to give a ride to the rest of the foxes to the prom. They had to take the bus to Bee’s apartment.

It was sort of an other-worldly experience to take the public bus in formalware, but it was a Saturday in May and they were going to Senior prom as Juniors, so normalcy was sort of out the window.
Neil had already put on his tie, but Andrew hadn’t yet, instead choosing to wrap it around his wrist.

Bee let them into her apartment and she took pictures of them and Neil glanced around her apartment and took in all the polished wood and shiny glass figurines and then they were off to Wymack’s, Bee’s keys dangling from Andrew’s fingers.

Andrew drove like he lived his life. Every movement was sharp, dangerous. His driving was all abrupt turns and fast speed. He could hurt someone if he wished it and other cars gave him space. But even more than that, he saw the way Andrew would carelessly disregard his own safety. It was as if he didn’t care if he lived or died.

Neil didn’t know how someone could be already at peace with dying. He hadn’t exactly been ready when he was on the run, but he had been prepared to face it. He knew his time was numbered; he knew that it wouldn’t take Ichirou long to find out that Neil wasn’t worth much to him. He was actually surprised Ichirou was being so generous with his life.

He knew he had to get ready and prepare, but he found it harder and harder every day.

When he started getting the numbers, he knew his time was up. He didn’t want to tell them yet. Maybe he was selfish, but he didn’t want his last days to be spoiled with their sad faces or their desperate attempts to save him. He knew every attempt they made would be futile, which would be all the more heartbreaking.

He mentally cataloged them and made sure they would be okay. Dan, Matt, Allison, and Renee all had college and each other. It would put a damper on their summer but they would survive, he knew. They were strong. They had already fought wars, and he knew that this would be a battle that they could defeat.

Kevin had Wymack and his crazy campaign for student body president and his ridiculous, yet ambitious plans to get the cafeteria to serve healthy food.

Nicky had Erik and Aaron had Katelyn, though he and Aaron weren’t that close.

Andrew was a different story. Andrew had his promises, but Riko was less of a problem than he had been, what with Ichirou keeping him on the other side of the country and far from them. So that was a relief.

He felt bad that he had wasted Wymack’s time. Very guilty. He knew time was valuable and he had wasted Wymack’s for years. He hoped the note he wrote to thank him would be enough. He had to write a lot. And he thought about the one he wrote for Andrew.

He had worked out the budget and figured out how long Andrew could keep living there.

He had grabbed a sheet of printer paper from his sketching stash and wrote out his and Andrew’s finances and pulled out the calculator to figure it out. In the margins he wrote down the things he would have to do before he was gone. If he worked extra shifts he could probably make enough money to pay for maybe a year’s rent. He knew that Andrew liked the apartment. Or he could move in with Aaron. They were getting along better and with their incomes and Neil’s money they’d probably be fine until college. And Nicky could go back to Germany.

He had sat back and stared down at the list of things he still had left to do and ran his hands through his hair. It was relieving to have the list and he felt it twist his heart that there were so many things listed. Three years ago he wouldn’t have had anything on that list. Now he had people to miss, and people who would miss him. Neil Josten may have never been real, but he had been real to them,
and he would be missed. He would die a person, instead of a ghost.

He was used to being like a ghost, passing through, only attracting the attention of people whose lives he disrupted and only noticed by people who were looking for him.

He shook his head. He was waxing dramatic, and he knew he had spent too much time in his English class. He would have liked to graduate, but it would work out for the best this way. Andrew would finally get to move on. He didn’t know why Andrew put up with him so much in the first place. Andrew deserved so much. He just needed Neil for the rent. And to remind him that he was worth something. But he had Bee and Wymack to push him forward. Andrew was strong. He would survive. He could do without one other thing he hated.

He knew that the hatred that Andrew upped every few days wasn’t all that he made it seem, but he knew that after Neil left, it would change that hatred to something new. He was almost glad he wouldn’t have to see Andrews face when his hatred burned like the flickers of darkness he had seen deep in the recesses of his eyes.

But he needed to explain everything. He needed to let Andrew know that he wasn’t doing it on purpose, that he wasn’t abandoning him. Andrew needed to know that. After everything he had gone through in his life that it wasn’t his fault.

But until then, he just needed to tell everyone he was fine.

One more lie.

All he had to tell was one more lie.

He told to them and he felt a pang of aching sadness in his chest. It took him a while to recognize that it was mourning. He didn’t regret not telling them about his impending death. Except Andrew. He felt each lie rip into him. He wanted to think that it wouldn’t hurt him, but it did. He knew that it would be better to try and push him away so his disappearance wouldn’t hurt so bad, but he couldn’t put Andrew through thinking he had done something wrong. And he knew, once he read the letter, that he would figure it all out and become even angrier.

The grief was old but familiar. He hadn’t felt it this strongly since he had walked along that abandoned Arizona road, the sun stifling and so hot at times that it felt hard to breathe, but it didn’t choke him as much as the smoke he swore was still swirling in his throat.

He could do it.

Just one more lie.

He would die with his last word the only thing he had ever been:

A lie.

He wished he could be like he was around Andrew. He wanted to be real.

He wanted to be the truth.

But he wasn’t.

He was a lie.

He was nothing.
And when he died, he would actually become it.

***

Andrew pulled up outside of Wymack’s apartment in Bee’s minivan, Neil seated beside him, staring outside the window. He yanked the gearshift into park and Neil blinked back to reality. He turned to him and offered him a little half smile before unbuckling his seatbelt and going up to the apartment.

They were all meeting there, and then they would all ride to the prom, aside from Matt and Dan who were taking Matt’s truck. Wymack and Abby took pictures and then the were ushered out the door. They all piled into the car, Aaron, Renee, Allison, Neil and Kevin, who hadn’t wanted to come but was to keep up appearances for his nonexistent campaign.

The time it took to get the prom was so much shorter than Andrew was used to, as he wasn’t used to getting there by car instead of by foot. They pulled up outside the school, the front looking the same as it did every day, but somehow containing the venue that would be a trove of golden high school memories.

He unwrapped his tie and tied it around his neck. And then they all strode into the prom together.

***

At first all Neil could think about was the first dance that he gone to, how this dance was so similar to that one, except now Seth was gone. It had taken them a while to adjust to his death, but it reassured him that the foxes would adjust to his own death as well.

He thought about those things throughout the dance, even as they danced. After a while Neil was able to pull himself out of his head and throw himself into the prom.

He danced with most of the foxes, but when the slow songs were put on, Allison sought him out. They were slow dancing, but Allison was staring off to the side, eyes vacant, and something was clearly on her mind. They were standing a full arm’s length apart from each other, partially for the irony, partially because Allison said it was like some scene from a movie that was really popular, but he didn’t remember what it was.

“Allison.”

She her attention snapped back to him. “Hm, what?”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She quipped. He gave her an unamused look. Her eyes drifted to the side again, before she straightened out and looked back to him. Her eyes were blazing with determination. “You know what? No. I’m not. I have to do something. I need to go.”

“Okay.” She turned from him and strode across the room, every step filled with purpose. He strayed behind her as she matched up to the table where Andrew and Renee were sitting. He wasn’t far behind when she reached them.

“Sorry, to cut in.” she interjected breezily. She fixed her eyes on Renee. “Would you like to dance with me?”

Renee looked up at her, unreadable expression on her face. She glanced at Andrew and they had one of their silent conversations in a split second before she looked back at Allison and nodded. She
stood and took the hand Allison extended to her and they made their way out to the dance floor.

Neil walked over to the chair Renee had vacated and sat, looking out at the teenagers milling around and dancing. He could see Aaron and Katelyn dancing in a corner, Matt and Dan dancing with each other, not caring that their movements were far from perfect, laughing into each other’s shoulders. He heard the music switch to some slower song and he looked back to Allison and Renee as they held each other as they pulled the other closer as they slow danced to the song. Their smiles were almost blinding when they looked at each other, their noses touching as they smiled.

If the whole world was watching, I’d still dance with you

Drive highways and byways to be there with you

Over and over the only truth

Everything comes back to you

And he felt he was where he was meant to be, by Andrews’s side at the cheesily decorated table. The paper streamers strung through the backs of their chairs. Life had never been easy, and it probably never would be. Everyone would have to face their demons, but right now they could ignore them, if only for a little while.

He didn’t dance anymore, but that was okay. It was more than worth it to see the way Allison and Renee were glowing as they danced together, the fact that they left the dance still hand in hand. He pulled his eyes from them and found his eyes drawn to his companion, watching as the multicolored lights cast colorful glares and shadows on his face. He looked perfect, magical, even. Neil didn’t believe in fate, but he thought that, maybe, if he did, he would still end up here. In this badly decorated gym, with a group of misfits that he was learning to call family. With a roommate that who understood him unlike anyone ever had.

Over and over the only truth

Everything comes back to you

***

Things didn’t really change much between all of them once Allison and Renee started dating. Allison made a big deal of tapping on her glass with her fork at dinner to announce it, Renee blushing and smiling the whole time. Neil was happy for them, and Andrew had to begrudgingly agree. Much like when Dan and Matt started dating, it didn’t really change the group dynamics all that much. The only difference now was that they would curl up together more often while watching the trash TV at Wymack’s.

Wymack was rarely up in his apartment when Neil and Andrew came by, but every time he did, Wymack would take it upon himself to teach Neil more about tattooing. Every lesson was progressing closer and closer to actual tattooing and Andrew knew Neil’s fingers were itching to get ahold of the tattoo gun. He knew Neil loved watching as the ink bleed into their skin, the only type of bleeding he didn’t have some sort of traumatic memory to relate it to.

But this time they did go up to the apartment, there was an air of anxiety hovering around all of them. Allison and Renee’s honeymoon-esque bliss wasn’t enough of a buffer to protect all of the seniors from worrying about their college acceptance letters.

When they did come in, it was unlike anything Andrew had ever seen. They had been storing up their letters so that they could all open them together. Allison had just gotten her last one the day
before and they had decided that in the time before dinner they would open them all. They all sat in a
circle in the middle of Wymack’s crowded living room, Andrew seated with the others at the table
above them, watching and waiting. They had all been staring at the letters for a while now and he
was starting to wonder how long they were going to try and put it off.

Dan took a breath and reached forward towards her stack of letters. She looked them all in the eyes
and took a deep breath.

“Okay. On the count of three, we’ll all start, okay.”

They all nodded. Matt looked like he was going to be sick. They all reached for a letter and started to
open them. They hurried through the schools that were their backups, saving their real hope for the
last ones. Finally they reached them and they all opened them.

They sat eerily still.

Dan let out a shaky breath. “I- I got in. I got into UCLA.”

Matt looked at her. “So did I.”

Allison turned her head in their direction, a small smile on her face “I got into FIDM.”

“San Diego.” Renee added. A grin split over Allison’s face and she jumped up, screaming.

“Yes!”

Dan jumped up with her almost tackling them in a hug. Dan was laughing so hard she was crying.
“I got a scholarship. Full ride. I can go. I can really go.”

Allison pulled Renee to her feet and pressed a sloppy kiss on her cheek. Renee was smiling so hard it
must have hurt. Matt came up beside them and crushed them all in a huge bear hug.

Wymack walked in, drying his hands.

“I heard yelling. I’m assuming its good news.” Dan ran over to Wymack and flung her arms around
him, waving her letter at him.

“I got in! I got into UCLA.”

Wymack smiled and hugged her back.

“Good. You little punks deserve it.”

They watched the happy teens screaming and shouting and laughing and crying with excitement.
They circled the room giving and receiving hugs, even Kevin embracing them all.

He saw Neil smiling off to the side of the room, smiling so much his face was probably starting to
ache.

It struck Andrew, then and there, that this would be them next year, that there would be a next year.
He had never really let himself think that far ahead, but if he dared to he could see himself with
letters of his own, promises of a future, Neil smiling for him. Bee smiling at him in that way he
missed seeing from Cass.

The thoughts were terrifying, but it might not be the worst thing in the world.
Neil met his eyes across the room and if anything, his smile grew even wider.

*No, he decided, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.*

***

The last day of school dawned just like any other and Neil wished he could sleep for just one more hour, but then he was up and getting ready.

The election results were finally revealed and Kevin won by a landslide. He won, in part because of his conviction, and in part because he had no one running against him.

Fifth period was lunch and then there would only be two more until they could leave to go here Kevin talk about their success.

“Neil! Neil!” Neil looked up to where the sound was coming from, he could see the other kids hurrying up to him.

“Is it true?” Greg asked

“Is what true.”

“That Allison Reynolds ditched you at the dance for Renee.”

“I guess there’s always time for last-day-of-school gossip I guess,” Neil remarked drily. “And she didn’t ditch me.”

“You were her date.”

“We’re friends.”

“You’re going to have to explain how you ever became friends with Allison Reynolds in the first place, by the way. She is like way out of our league.”

“We’ve been friends for a few years. And she wanted to dance with Renee.”

“You didn’t stop her.”

“Why would I?” Neil felt irritation buzzing underneath his skin. “Like I would ever have the place to even attempt to do that.”

“But now it looks like she’s a lesbian or something, and that she’s dating Renee.”

“Her business is her own business. I’m not talking about it with you. If you want to know something you should ask her yourself.”

“Us, ask Allison Reynolds anything? Are you insane?” Adam exclaimed. ‘She could probably gut me with her perfect nails and I’d thank her for it.”

Neil nodded. It was true. She commanded that sort of presence.

“Dude,” Bryce tried to pat Neil’s shoulder, but Neil carefully evaded his touch, “I would have saved you but you were sitting over with Andrew.”

“Dude, I thought he hated you.”
“He does.”

“But you sat next to him.”

“We weren’t talking to each other.”

“That must have sucked for the both of you- your dates left.”

“Not that I was surprised that she left Andrew.”

“Wait, look over there. She’s still talking to him.”

“How hasn’t he killed her yet? I’d be so embarrassed.”

“No one kills Renee. She wouldn’t do anything to hurt anyone.”

Neil refrained from saying that Renee would probably kill anyone who tried to kill her. She was more than capable of taking care of herself.

Alicia laughed. “Allison Reynolds isn’t a lesbian, she dated Seth, for like, years. And Renee has, for some reason, been dating Andrew. Look she’s still talking to him. She’s like the only person he will talk to outside his group. They have to be fucking, or at least dating.”

“Maybe,” Neil tapped on the table, “it’s none of your fucking business.”

Alicia’s eyes grew wide. “What the fuck, Neil.”

Neil laughed. “I just realized I’m done with all this petty gossiping bullshit. Maybe you can work on making your own lives interesting so you won’t have to spend every second talking about things that have nothing to do with you.” He stood at and grabbed the rest of his lunch and offered them a mocking salute. “See you next year.”

And he left.

***

Neil had been staring at the piece of paper in his hand for what had to be hours now. And for once it wasn’t a countdown number. Instead it was a pamphlet for a set of cabins in the woods a couple hours away. Allison had suggested they all go on Friday, since school would be out, but Neil hadn’t been sure he wanted to go.

They would be getting back before the last day of the countdown, so that wasn’t a concern, but he hadn’t left town since he had been released by the FBI. But still.

“Let’s go.”

Andrew looked up at him, and over to the piece of paper Neil was sure was warped from how hard he had been holding it with his fingers.

“I thought you weren’t running anymore?”

“It’s not running if we come back.”

Andrew looked at him a long moment before he grabbed Neil’s duffle and tossed a few pieces of clothing into the bag as well as a few of Neil’s things while Neil grabbed a bit cash and get set the bag in the corner, waiting for Friday.
Friday morning they made it down to the bottom steps to and walked across the parking lot over to where Wymack’s rusty truck was parked. They settled into the car and Andrew got behind the wheel. He had to adjust the seat so he could fit, since Wymack was so much taller than himself. They took off after the other kids, following behind the others. Matt drove his car with Dan in the passenger seat, with Kevin sprawled out on the back of his car. Aaron was with them since they offered to drive Katelyn. 

Nicky had joined Renee and Allison in Allison’s convertible and they were all obnoxiously cheerful early-birds so he let them be.

Andrew started the car and made his way down the road. The stores began to lessen until their appearances were seldom. The flat roads slowly became surrounded by farmland and trees. He watched as Neil stared at the almond trees and orange trees that filled up acres and acres of land. The terrain soon grew flatter and the fields began to hold smaller crops.

The rows of greenery played tricks on his mind, the lines dividing each row of produce disappearing and reappearing faster than he could keep track.

It was still early so the crops glistened in the light, a faint coating of water and dew still settled on the leaves, cool before the hot morning sun could make it disappear. They drove while the streets were mostly quiet and it was almost as if they were two of the only people in the world. The dusty roads changed from tan to faded black to concrete grey over and over, without any sort of pattern.

They drove until the bright green fields turned to an electric, golden yellow of straw colored grass and the flat ground turned to hills all around them.

Their road never rose, but instead stayed nestled in the hills and mountains, leaving them in some world distant from the one they usually inhabited. The world around them was so still and the only way to know that they weren’t frozen was the slow turning of the giant windmills. The dead trees on the hills became more common and they also became more alive until Neil directed them into a forested area.

They turned in and Andrew could spot the bright pink of Allison’s convertible and the baby blue of Matt’s truck in the parking lot. There were several small cabins lined up a ways apart from each other and he could see that the others were already towing their suitcases into the ones they had called dibs on.

They climbed out of the car and slammed the doors shut and locked them before grabbing their duffels. They walked over to the other foxes. 

When Allison saw them approaching she tossed them a set of keys. 

“It's for the cabin on the end. You two are sharing. If you want to switch it up you'll have to figure that out for yourselves.”

They all settled into their cabins and sat around the campfire late into the night, playing card games until it got too dark, trading the games for cheap beer. Neil watched as the other foxes drank until they got buzzed, revealing tidbits of information about themselves.

Katelyn laughed, a little tipsy. “My parents don’t really care. They know all of you so it's not really a thing. They only care that I'm safer and use protection. They gave me, like, twelve condoms.” She laughed. Aaron started laughing too like it was the funniest thing he had ever heard in his life.
Neil watched them all as they all descended into laughter. It pained him to think he probably wouldn't get to see them like this again, so he drank up every laugh they made. He studied Andrew out of the corner of his eye. He wondered what he would sound like if he laughed. He thought he might be willing to die right now for a chance to hear that. Or even see a smile.

Sometimes he thought about drawing him with a smile but it never felt sincere, too fake. He never felt like he could do it justice and if there was one thing Andrew deserved, it was that. He thought that it was probably beautiful. Probably the most beautiful thing in the world, most likely.

He had seen several wonders of the world but he thought that they wouldn't hold a candle to that.

Andrew’s eyes grew distant in the way that they did whenever he was anywhere for too long. He hadn’t had a sip of alcohol, but now it seemed like he needed a different sort of fix. He pulled out his pack of cigarettes and tapped on it absently before he finally decided to get up.

Andrew’s eyes caught his and he inclined it in a follow me gesture. Neil cast one more glance at the foxes, who were growing drowsy around the campfire and got up to follow Andrew.

They walked past the immediate tree line until they came to the edge of the lake. It was a beautiful sight, made even more so by the reflection of the night sky on the surface of the lake. Andrew sat down on the shore and Neil sat beside him. Andrew reached into his pocket, pulling out a cigarette and his lighter. He lit it and brought it to him mouth, exhaling the pale smoke.

“Those things aren’t good for you.”

Andrew shrugged. “I’m bored.”

“Then do something else.”

Andrew’s eyes fell on him, cigarette still in his fingers.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes,” he breathed and then they were crashing into each other.

He kissed Andrew, their mouths pulsing, hearts beating against each other. Andrew let him touch his hair, so Neil fingers wove themselves in his silky locks.

When they pulled away Neil watched as Andrew stubbed out his cigarette and he felt his eyes snag on the heaviness of Andrew’s breathing, the dilation of his eyes, the cherry-red of his lips, and Neil couldn’t help but think that it was probably a good thing he was going to get murdered soon, because he didn’t know how long he could act like he wasn’t in love with Andrew.

He never thought he’d ever say he’d feel that, but the foxes had been softening his heart until it was like a semi-permeable membrane, only allowing love from and for them in and out. And if he was going to be honest, loving them was probably what was going to kill him in the end. Not Ichirou’s bullet, but ache in his heart knowing that he had hurt the foxes.

He loved them and he loved Andrew. Some nights he laid awake fantasizing about cradling Andrew’s face in his hands like someone precious, kissing him slowly, deliberately, passionately to the point where Andrew would not be able to deny what Neil felt. A kiss that told him Neil’d give him everything he could, even if Andrew didn’t want him. A kiss that told Andrew I love you no matter what you can give me. A kiss that said I want to stay here with you, you, you. And then the kiss would break and Andrew would meet his eyes and his hand would come up to caress Neil’s own. And Neil could press a kiss to the back of Andrew’s hand and hold it.
Andrew took his hand, not letting go, holding on to him, as they sat in the shallow water by the lake. Their wrists brushed and Neil could only think of every inch of exposed skin that was touching, about how much time from now, if they were die in this moment, it would take before sciences thought their bodies hearts and minds and soul were one.

“Yes or no?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

And he leaned forward, pressing kisses along Andrew’s jaw and neck, feeling his pulse pick up underneath his lips, feeling the way Andrew’s breath caught.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” Andrew’s whisper sounded hoarse. He nodded into Andrew’s neck and pushed forward, kissing every inch of skin reverently.

“What are you doing Neil?”

“I’m kissing you. Do you want me to stop?” he asked again.

“But why. This isn’t- I’m not-. Neil.”

“Yes.”

“Abram.”

Neil pulled away enough to look in Andrew’s eyes. He saw the question sitting there.

*Why, Neil? Why does this feel different?*

“I don’t think you want the answer to that question.”

“I don’t ask questions arbitrarily.”

“I’m not good with words.”

Andrew’s eyes bore into him own, trying to put it together, rapidly understanding.

“I’m not good with those words,” Neil clarified

Andrew’s breath shuttered.

“You’re impossible.”

“No, I’m nothing. I’m aware of this. But to me, we’re an us, not the net sum of nothing.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

So Neil obliged and Andrew kissed him with fervor.

“You don’t have to feel the same, I don’t expect it.”

“You say that but you said,” he trailed off.

“Because you asked. That’s my truth, the only real one I have left.” He pulled Andrew’s hand to his chest, over his heart. “When I’m around you chest aches because what I feel for you threatens to
break my bones. It’s all-consuming it devours my heart again and again but it never stops and I’m back wanting that all over again. And it’s not a desire for kisses or sex, but to be around you Andrew, to spend my time with you, to share my life, no matter how long or short or undeniably fucked up it is. I want to be at your side, to be your partner, to give you everything I am, even if you don’t feel the same. I want, more than anything, for you to be happy.”

Andrew stared at him before speaking slowly. “I don’t know if I’ll every be happy,” he said, “but these past few years, that’s closer than I’ve ever been. I’m not ready to give it up yet.”

Neil entwined their fingers. “Then don’t. Yes or no.”

“Yes.”

***

After the cabin, Neil was captivated by Andrew, enraptured by what they shared.

Neil found he liked kissing. A lot. As in, a lot more than he had in the first place and just in general. He was ready to kiss Andrew anytime he was up for it, which was more often than never. Andrew’s lips were nice. It just made him feel really happy and good. Sometimes Andrew was distant and he didn’t push it. Other times he was neutral and Neil would just ask if they could and sometimes it was a yes and sometimes it was a no. All that mattered was that Andrew was okay and comfortable with their arrangement.

They hadn’t really kissed like they had at the cabin, but that was okay. On nights like tonight, when all Neil could think about was the one had found stuffed in the doorframe, Andrew let them entwine their fingers and they’d lay beside each other in pleasant silence that drowned out his worries.

In the dim light of night he studied Andrew’s face, looking at the ways his face looked different as the light shifted.

“Staring.”

“Andrew?”

“What?”

“Yes or no?”

He stared at him a long while before slowly saying “Yes.”

He leaned forward beside him and pressed his lips to Andrew’s for a chaste kiss and gave him a smile. It was the first time he had ever asked to kiss Andrew like this and he was pleased he hadn’t royally screwed everything up or missed on accident and gotten his nose instead of his mouth. Andrew slowly opened his eyes as Neil pulled away, looking a little confused.

“Well goodnight,” he flipped over and stared at the opposite wall. He could feel Andrew’s eyes on him, but it didn’t bother him.

He had just kissed Andrew without royally fucking it up.

This was, hands-down, one of the best things he had ever done in his life.

He couldn’t help but think that if he ended up dying tomorrow he’d be at peace.

***
Neil Josten was weird.

Neil just asked for permission to kiss him. And then he just leaned forward, not touching him, and kissed him.

It was a nice kiss. It was sweet, like young lovers or chocolate cake. But then he pulled away, pleased with himself, and went to bed.

What. The. Fuck.

He tapped on Neil shoulder. Neil turned back to face him, confusion on his face.

“What was that?”

“Uh, a kiss?”

“No, why did you?”

“I thought it would be nice. Thought I’d try it out. Was it not okay with you?”

The fucking idiot had the gall to look concerned, as if he mortally offended Andrew with a peck on the lips.

“It was fine.” *It just felt really intimate, that’s all, and now kissing will never be same again, but whatever.*

“Well, okay. Cool. Night, Andrew.” He had this stupidly pleased smile in his face as he turned to go to sleep.

Andrew turned on his side and pulled the blanket up over his face.

Fuck.

***

He ran his fingers along his companion’s jagged skin, feeling every ridge and divot. Neil tensed for a moment but relaxed.

“What did you expect this to be?”

“I don't know. Whatever you want this to be.”

“I'm not going to take advantage of you.”

“I didn't think you would, Andrew. Did it ever occur to you that I might be saying yes because I actually trust you Andrew. You wouldn't hurt me.”

“I'd push you off the edge.”

“Yeah,” he said simply, as if that sort of thing was nothing. Though, to him, those types of things were normal. “And I'd pull you down with me. We've gone over this. Andrew you basically said it yourself. You wouldn't draw it out or torture me. You're not a sadist. You're not a monster.”

“The others wouldn't agree. They'd say you're naive.” He tapped on the ledge. “I've always been a monster.”
“And I'd say I don't think you ever were one.”

He walked over to the bed and sat beside Andrew. Andrew watched him lazily from where he laid. He was tired. Niels fingers hesitated at the edge of his shirt before he looked at Andrew. “Yes or no.”

He raised an eyebrow and Neil raised the edge of his t-shirt. He shrugged in what he thought was a very good impression of causal and the nodded when Neil hadn't made a move because Andrew hadn't given explicit consent. Fuck. This kid was going to be the death of him. Neil tugged the dark cotton over his head and tossed it beside himself.

He looked, for lack of a better word, good. He was starting to gain some muscle definition in his shoulders, arms, and chest. It was lean, corded muscle that couldn't be hidden underneath his millieu of scars.

Neil settled into bed beside him, keeping a few careful inches between their bodies.

“You can touch me, if you want.”

“Where?” he asked. He imagined gliding his fingers over the taut muscles of his shoulder, the divot of his spine, the hardened muscle of his stomach.

“Anywhere.”

He raised his hand and placed it on his chest, running his finger along to burn scar on his collarbone. He traced his finger lightly across his chest until his fingers came to rest over his heart. His heart was beating like a little rabbit's. He left his hand there a moment before he tapped on Neil's shoulder to get him to turn over.

Neil rolled until he was facing Andrew's. Andrew ran his hand along the length of Neil's arm until he reached his hand. He had callouses on his fingers. Old, rough ones from when he learned to master weapons, newer ones on his fingers from the guitar, and the most worn ones from where his arts supplies had toughened his skin.

And then he was leaning closer and then they were kissing.

It felt impossible what they were doing. The kissing, the intimacy, the everything.

They had moved into the cabin again they were lying next to each other, staring at each other pressing and kisses to the other’s lips. Neil kept his hands behind him as they laid next to each other.

“You weren’t supposed to be real,” Andrew said against his lips

“I am.” Neil nipped at his lips

“You’re a pipe dream.”

“I’m as real as they come.” Neil leaned close and pressed a kiss to Andrew’s neck and Andrew felt his body shutter. “And it’s because of you. You made me real.” He ran his lips along his neck, warm breath causing his hair to stand on end. He turned his head and recaptured his lips with his own. Neil kissed him back.

***

In all honesty, he wasn’t ready. He really never was. He thought he would be prepared for all that
lied in store for him, but it still threw him off kilter.

There was nothing special, really, about the day the zero day dawned. They had plans to eat with Wymack and the rest of the foxes, but that was it.

He made his way down the street towards the apartment when he was pulled into an alleyway. He tried to shout but found it impossible, due to the hand covering his mouth. It was dark there and he couldn’t see his captor, but he could smell them and all of a sudden he was hit with a wave of nausea as he remembered the sickening woman he associated it with.

He remembered how strong that perfume always had been, the way it masked the smell of blood and death. He tried to elbow her off of him but her grasp was firm. She wrenched his arm behind his back and he was jolted with pain. She quickly pulled out a cloth and smothered it over his face and all at once he was consumed by the smell of chloroform until everything faded into darkness.

He didn’t know how much later it was before he woke up, but the sun was just about to set and he was handcuffed to the railing of an RV. There was a driver in the front seat, who he recognized as Romero much faster than he should have been able to. Lola was sitting across from him. Neil yanked on the cuff, but all it did was rattle and clank against the iron safety rail.

Lola slowly opened her eyes, a predatory gleam in her shining eyes, a sick smile curling on her face. She stalked over and slid her hand along his arm, smile growing more corrupt and disturbed by the second. She called out and a moment later Jackson came into the room with a variety of tools in hand. She smiled as she turned back to him.

“We’re going on a little field trip, Junior. We didn’t really bring much to entertain us on the road, so we’ll have to settle with you.”

“Now I won’t be able to do this perfectly, as it seems the roads are quite bumpy. It’s a shame that the government can’t be as efficient with their money as we were in finding you.”

“You’re going to criticize the government when you wasted so many resources trying to find me? Hypocritical, don’t you think?”

And then he couldn’t remember saying anything else for a long time.

And then the pain started.

He tried to pull himself away from those things, to think about the foxes, their happiness, the last time he had seen them.

The last one he had seen was Dan after their training with Wymack. She wanted to show him the pictures she had taken. She had printed them out, when she had the time and she was planning to cover the walls with them, like she did at Wymack’s. She had pictures of Allison and Renee sitting on a log from when they went to the lake and he saw the one of Andrew, where he sat, one knee curled up, his chest resting on it as he read his book.

He had traced along the edges of the pictures before he dragged himself away.

He should have said a better goodbye,

For once he wished he had more time

***
The moment Andrew entered the apartment, he knew something was wrong.

It was too cold, too empty.

Everything was exactly the way he left it before he had left, all of Neil’s stuff was in its place, but he could feel the absence of Neil’s presence like he could feel the cool space on the bed when Neil left to run-gaping and oh, so cold.

It was different than the freezing rooms he had had to live in growing up or the snow he had only seen once. This cold was different, a sort of cold you could know only if you had felt warmth, even if only for short while, only to have it ripped away. He wanted to tell himself he wasn’t close enough to Neil for his absence to have this much of an impact, but he wasn’t a liar.

That was Neil.

Neil.

His eyes caught it and he almost couldn’t believe that he had almost missed it in the first place. But there was an envelope, up on the counter, leaning against the metal canister where they stored all their coffee. It was a plain envelope, like the one that the bills came in or letters from the courthouse.

There was only one thing that marred the unblemished paper. Six letters written in Neil’s unmistakable print.

Andrew.

His feet carried him over to the envelope and he was opening it almost on autopilot. It was just single sheet of paper, no doubt taken from Neil’s supply he kept for his sketches. The note wasn’t that long and part of him, the foolish part, the part that hadn’t been touched, the part that still desperately searched for his reasons to live, that tiny, tiny part that could still hope, wished that nothing was wrong, that Neil hadn’t left. But as he read the words, that last flicker of hope vanished, snuffed out by a cold wave of dread.

Andrew,

If you’re reading this, I must be gone. Probably that or I’m just really late coming home, but I really doubt it. I wasn’t sure if anything was going to happen but I wanted to write this just in case something did. You deserve to know what’s going on.

I didn’t tell you everything, that night on the roof. We just didn’t know each other well enough yet, and later I wanted to tell you but I didn’t want you to hurt.

My father and I are both involved with a big gang, more like the Japanese mafia really. And after my father was arrested and my mother died I spoke with the head of the group. He was going to determine whether I would be a liability to the organization. Now I guess we know.

A while back I started receiving a countdown, though to what I didn’t know. It could have been a prank but it could have also been something worse. And I knew that if it was worse, I probably wouldn’t be coming back. I explained this all in more detail in a letter I have locked in the safe. You know the passcode. I hope it answers all your questions.

He slammed the cabinet open and pulled out the safe, twirling the dial until it clicked, and wrenched it open. There was a fat envelope with his name on it and when he pulled it out he found stacks of dollar bills rubber banded together with Andrew’s name stuck on top of them with a sticky note. He tore his eyes from the money back to his letter and a CD with his name written in it and felt his heart
stutter when he saw it. It was obvious a lot of time had gone into all of this. His ears were ringing as he looked at the illustrated margins. He knew without reading it that the letter would tell him everything.

_I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t want you to think it was your fault. Nothing could have stopped this. You didn’t deserve to have this on your conscious. Tell the foxes I love them. Loved I guess. No, scratch that, love, present tense. I’d like to think that even after I’m gone that love will still be out there in the universe. Tell them that they were the family I never had and that I’ll always be grateful for that. Tell Wymack thank you for me, too, for never giving up on me and trying to give me future._

He couldn’t read it. He couldn’t. He fumbled with the cd, putting it into his player, looking at the other contents of the safe.

_I don’t want to be_

Anything other than someone you can leave

No I don’t understand

‘Cause everybody knows that something always goes wrong

Love is in my arms every now and again

But I don’t want to harm you like I know I can

And if it doesn’t show, it’s because it’s been so long

So don’t believe me, ‘cause I don’t believe myself

Step, step away from me

Stay by your guns and know that I am your enemy

‘Cause we could pretend for a minute or two,

But as soon as it’s real, I hope you know how to shoot

Oh just step away from me

And his eyes were drawn to the pieces of paper that had also been in the envelope, paper-clipped together.

The song clicked to the next.

There were crumpled numbers, smoothed out all in order, counting down and he felt ice plunge into his stomach.

_But I want you to move on_

So I’m already gone

He couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t breathe.
He had to breathe, but it felt like Neil had taken all of Andrew’s oxygen with him.

He could feel the panic rising. He tried to focus on his surroundings, but he only thing that he could notice was Neil’s absence.

*I know they’ll get over my death eventually. They all have such bright futures, despite everything. And you do, too. Andrew you can do so much. I’ll always believe in you. Don’t give up on yourself Andrew. You are worth so much and you deserve so much better.*

Andrew, I finally was able to live, for the first time in my life, with you. I may be going to die, but I don’t regret a second I spent with you. You gave me a home for the first time in my life, and I’ll always be thankful to you for that.

His back hit back against the wall, but he could barely feel it. He sank down on the floor, the letter of neil past in one hand, Neil’s last letter in the other.

He couldn’t move he couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t cry. He couldn’t do anything. For a whole moment he became like the room had been when he had first walked in- frozen. Eyes staring at Neil’s last words.

*Thank you Andrew. For everything.*

*You were amazing.*

*-Neil Abram Josten*

***

*When the night was full of terror, and your eyes were filled with tears.*

*When you had not touched me yet.*

*Oh, take me back to the night we met.*

*I had all and then most of you, some and now none of you.*

*Take me back to the night we met*

*I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, haunted by the ghost of you*

*Take me back to the night we met.*

***

*Remember your life*

Chapter End Notes

The movie Allison was referring to was Napoleon Dynamite, specifically the scene at the dance. There's probably something else I need to mention, but can't remember what it is. Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings- Hi. Sorry this chapter is so much shorter than all the others. Anyway, as you may have noticed, another tag has been added, this time for graphic violence. Please heed it. There are also instances of torture. Again, if there is anything I forgot to tag, or mention, please let me know and I’ll fix it. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If you must live, darling one

***

Well I’ve lost it all, I’m just a silhouette

A lifeless face that you’ll soon forget

My eyes are damp from the words you left

Ringing in my head, when you broke my chest

Ringing in my head when you broke my chest.

***

It was all too much.

It was all too fucking much.

Andrew was trying to piece it together, but the pieces weren’t fitting together.

Neil had always been a cryptic asshole, but this wasn’t making any sense. The letter, the songs, the money. It all seemed like-

It all seemed like Neil was saying goodbye.

But that in and of itself was impossible. There was no other way to describe it. Goodbyes had never been Neil’s MO. Andrew knew enough about him to know Neil preferred a silent exit, to slip away into nothing.

And now Andrew knew why he preferred that.

He wondered if it would have hurt any less if Neil just disappeared instead of doing this.

He found he didn’t want to answer that question. Not when Neil could be-

No.

Neil couldn’t die. Not because of some stupid mob ties.
Andrew needed to find him. And he was willing to do it through any means necessary.

He dug through the safe until his fingers came across a familiar business card. He held it tightly in his hands until the cardstock threatened to cut his fingers and then he was out the door, slamming and locking it behind him.

***

The thing about Lola was that her first impression was always misleading.

At first meeting, she presented herself was very business-oriented, very rational. Sane.

That was incorrect.

The manic gleam on Lola’s face at the prospect of slicing up his face did little to assure Neil of her sanity.

She was all too eager to unroll her tools on the small table. She ripped off a piece of tape and taped each edge of the unfurled bag in place as Romero made a rough turn. She ran her fingers along her knives in admiration before she stopped, selecting the one that seemed to appease her.

She walked over to him, sitting on his lap, preventing him from moving his legs. She ran the knife down the front of his shirt, cutting it away. She had a demonic gleam in her eye that showed she was all too thrilled to be doing this. She had always been a gruesome person. Her macabre taste, probably what had attracted his father to her in the first place, was on full display right now and she was loving it.

Neil, not so much.

Though maybe, he thought as she grazed her blade along his face- pricking his skin with its edge with every jolt and pothole, it was the unflinching ruthlessness she exuded that drew his father to her.

“I had heard you were all grown up, but now I look and I see it’s true! Though you still have that sweet little face.” She pinched his cheek with her fingers, yanking it back and forth like an aggressive grandmother.

The RV jostled again.

He was starting to think that Romero was hitting every divot in the road on purpose.

“You look so much like your father,” she continued, still tracing his face with her blade. “A miracle, I think, that you don’t look like your bitch of a mother. I never understood how he had the balls to fuck an old hag like her. But we all have our flaws, I suppose. Unfortunately, yours are a little too glaring.”

She clucked her tongue at him, waving her knife in front of his face. “Betraying your own father to the Feds? Disgraceful. Truly. How someone could do that? Show so little loyalty? Unfathomable. Disgusted your father. Who’s who we’re taking you to, by the way. As soon as he got out of prison, they shipped back to Baltimore. He’s waiting for you.

“But we can’t just turn you over to him looking like this.” She jabbed at his shoulder. “You look like him, which is unacceptable. You can have the face of the man you betrayed.” He squirmed trying to get away instinctively. “Now, now. Don’t worry. I know you’re worried about your precious friends, but I assure you won’t have to see the look on their faces when the see what happened to their little whore. You’ll be dead.” She tossed back her head, deranged cycling spewing from her
“Oh, I’m going to enjoy disposing of your body. Maybe I’ll leave a finger with your little roommate, hmm? Make him wonder what happened to you. Wonder if you’re still alive. Never knowing what happened to you.

“Enough of that, though. I’m looking forward to redoing your face. Hmm.” she flicked back to her sheath of knives, sliding her knife back and digging through them. “Maybe a tribute to your dead mother.”

She waved her fingers as Romero came forward from the front of the RV with a dashboard lighter in his hands. She extracted it from his fingers and before Neil could move, she pressed it onto his face, dragging it just barely. She pulled it away not after too long and handed it back to Romero. “This will take a while, but that’s fine. We have plenty of time.” She laughed like a giddy school girl.

“This will be fun.”

***

Andrew didn’t even realize where he was until he heard someone repeating his name and he found himself standing at the front door of Wymack’s apartment, the rest of the foxes staring at him.

He blinked, slowly pulling himself back from his mind.

Matt edged closer to the door beside Wymack, who was holding the door open, unreadable expression on his face. “Andrew don’t hurt me for this, but are you okay?”

He blinked. And then he blinked again.

He didn’t know how he could speak when his mouth felt numb.

“Neil’s gone.”

“What?” That was Dan.

“What do you mean he’s gone?” Allison insisted.

He looked around the room. All of the foxes were there. Bee was there, too. She looked concerned. In his rush over there he had forgotten that tonight was group dinner. Everyone was there.

Except for Neil.

“I mean,” he said feeling something, “I came home and he left a note saying he was gone. He said he was taken.”

Kevin’s face paled and his book clattered onto the floor.

Andrew’s eyes narrowed in on Kevin.

“What Kevin?”

He let out a strangled noise. He had a look in his face.

It was a look of guilt and shame and grief.

And knowing.
“You knew, didn’t you?”

Kevin didn’t say anything. He looked like he was desperately trying to get the words to leave him mouth, but his jaw was frozen shut.

Andrew’s feet took him across the room and he had his hand around Kevin’s throat and was slamming him into the wall within seconds

“What do you know Kevin?”

Kevin’s fingers scrambled against Andrews’s hand.

“Where is he?” he growled

The others tried to pull him off.

“He doesn’t know anything.”

“Andrew, stop.”

“You’re going to kill him.”

Matt came up and was trying to drag him away.

“Andrew, Andrew. He can’t answer if he can’t breathe.”

He reluctantly loosened his fingers and watched as Kevin slumped to his knees, desperately gasping for air.

“He knew it was probably going to happen.” Kevin gasped. “He said he thought the Moriyamas were probably going to take him before he finished high school. Ichirou was deciding whether to keep him around.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Riko’s brother, Ichirou?” Allison demanded. “Why was Neil involved with Ichirou?”

“His father was a very powerful person in the Moriyama gang. He ran almost half of the east coast. Neil turned him in and Ichirou said he would decide if Neil could earn his life.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Matt’s voice was distant. “You need to back up. Start from the beginning.”

Kevin gasped, hand raised to his throat.

“Neil’s family was involved with the Moriyamas. I met him once, when we were kids. I was with Riko. We saw Neil’s father cut a man to pieces.” He paused, the sight still rendered unpalatable even after all those years. Everyone grimaced.

“Neil’s father was Kengo’s right hand. He did everything for him. Then one day, Nathan’s wife and son went missing along with one million dollars of his own money. And that was the last anyone ever heard of it. I left before they were found again. Apparently Neil turned in his father at the instruction of Ichirou, the new head, so he did. He would still belongs to the Moriyama’s until Ichirou finally decided what he was going to have Neil do. He said that he would come up with something by the end of high school or he would have Neil executed. Neil agreed.”

“What? Why?”
A cold sinking feeling slithered down Andrews’s stomach as he knew what was coming.

“Because if he didn’t agree, he would have been killed right then.”

“Do you have plans for after high school Neil?” he had asked. They were trying to make spaghetti, but Neil was getting broken noodles all over the counter. “You were good at distracting Allison when she asked.”

“I don’t know. Probably tattoo art. I never really thought that far ahead. But it’s exciting, isn’t it, to have a future?”

“People like us are always surprised when we make it into adulthood,” Andrew muttered and Neil leaned closer to him so that their noses brushed.

“Yeah. It would be great to prove all those people wrong, though.” His breath was warm against Andrew’s lips and he could almost taste the mint of his toothpaste.

“You’re smart enough to go to college if you wanted to. You could do anything, really.”

“And if I go? What will you do? I don’t think I could leave you alone anywhere without you getting into trouble.”

“I could go with you, you know.” He leant closer. “There are tattoo parlors everywhere. I could stay with you. If you wanted me too.”

“I want nothing.”

“And I am nothing.” He had that cocky smirk on his face.

“Shut up,” he replied, and Neil met him halfway to kiss him.

“A while ago,” Andrew found himself saying, “he started to receive these notes, a countdown. He knew it was probably counting down to the end, but he didn’t want to ruin everything by bringing it up or running. He didn’t want to go witness protection or run anymore. He wanted to stay, even if that meant he would die.”

“Wait, how long did he know.”

Andrew’s eyes were open, but it felt like he wasn’t really seeing anything. “The notes seem to go back six months.”

Matt’s hands were in his hair. “Fuck, Neil.”

“We can’t just stand here.” Dan was standing beside Matt. “We have to do something!”

“What is this?” Neil had whispered against his lips late at night, in the hits between morning and night

“I didn't know you cared for labels.”
“I don’t.”

“Are we together?”

“I hate you.”

“I know.” And Neil did know it. This wasn’t anything to Andrew. They just were convenient for each other. Neither of them pressed the other for information they didn’t want to give. For Neil it was differed so strongly from what he was used to. All his life people had either been trying to pry information out of him or trying to get him to hide it. This was nice and Neil didn’t want to lose it.

And he had accepted what Andrew had told him without question.

“This is nothing,” he had repeated.

This is something, he should have said.

Andrew’s fist tightened, wanting desperately to find him, and his fingers were met with resistance.

He looked down at his hands, to the partially crumpled card in his hands. He lifted it up, smoothing over the words, over the glossy black number at the bottom.

He walked away as the foxes grew frantic and made his way to the phone.

“Andrew, what are you doing?” Aaron was beside him and he lifted the card to show him as he dialed the number.

“Agent Browning, speaking.”

“Neil is missing.”

***

Neil was having trouble staying conscious.

The pain was overwhelming. It wasn’t just what she was doing, but how long she dragged it out. She cut designs on his arms, burning circles in some areas, burning welts in others.

She cut up his hands and burned them. He was starting to lose track how long this had all been going on and where she was hurting him. Every second she stopped doing one thing, the pain seemed to be coming from a new place.

When she final decided to settle down for the night, he felt sore all over. She left his chest relatively clear, as she’d claimed she didn’t want to mar up his father’s art.

Romero led him to the bathroom a few times throughout their trip. They stopped only once or twice, in the middle of nowhere. They had their gas stored with the spare container tucked way. His whole body ached and he wanted nothing more than to lie down and go to sleep. He wanted this all to stop. Neil was tired, so tired. They seemed insistent on keeping him awake. On keeping him sleep deprived.

He was exhausted.

***
Aaron had given the card to Allison. After speaking to Browning, they had assured him that, yes, they knew Neil was missing, and that yes, they were looking for him. They told him they’d call to let them know what was going on.

Allison said fuck that and googled the address on the card and within minutes had a hotel booked in LA that they could stay in while they went to the LA FBI office.

They piled into the cars and Andrew spent the ride curled up in the backseat while everyone speculated about Neil’s fate. He wasn’t sure if the clenching of his stomach was due to the grizzly scenarios, or the or from the very real possibility that the moment that they got to LA there would be a message from the FBI saying that Neil was found in pieces.

When the finally made it the FBI office, Allison stormed into the building with that commanding poise she had, demanding to see agents Browning and Towns. After being directed to several different people and being shuffled into office after office, they were finally escorted to Browning and Towns.

There were too many of them to seat in the office, so they all gathered around the desks awkwardly.

Browning looked at them, as if he wished they would all sit down so he could stand and tower over them. “You all didn’t have to come down here.”

“And yet here we are,” Wymack remarked drily. “What can you tell us?”

“We’re in charge of Neil’s case.”

Aaron scoffed. “No shit.”

“Young man, I am a federal officer.”

“And I’m tired of your bullish-”

“What do you know?” Abby repeated, looking them all dead in the eyes in a way that assured them that they would not be putting up with anyone’s nonsense.

Towns slumped back into his desk chair.

“We have reason to believe he was taken by his father, the Butcher of Baltimore. Were still working on locating him. Some of the Butcher’s associates were spotted around where Neil went missing. They were in an RV.”

“Are you tracking it?”

“We didn’t get a license number, but we suspect they’re moving east.”

“Where?”

“Baltimore.”

“That’s across the fucking country!” Allison shot back. “Why are you still here?”

“I assure you, young lady that capturing the butcher is one of the nation’s top priorities. We have teams on the ground across the country looking for him.”

Andrew looked up. “What about Neil?”
“I just said-”

“You just said you guys were trying to find the butcher. You said nothing about Neil.” He stared straight at them, making sure to look at both of them deliberately. “Do you even care what happens to him, or do you only care about closing cases?”

Towns’ mouth was wired shut.

“Tell me, were you ever planning on telling Neil his father was out of prison? You knew they were after him and you used him as bait.”

“We were just trying to lure him out, we didn’t expect him to get away with him.”

“Good fucking luck that did. He could be dead.”

“Andrew-” Nicky’s voice was pleading

“But it’s not like you even care, do you? Just another casualty in the war against crime.”

Browning’s eyes were cold. “There’s a conference room a few doors down. If you insist on staying, that’s where you’ll be located.”

And with a hostile silence, they were all escorted out of the room.

***

When Neil woke up again he was in the back of a new car. He wasn’t sure what kind it was but it seemed like it was a van. All the seats were folded down and the windows were painted over. There were only two seats, up in the front, both of which were filled. He was handcuffed again and his wrists were already raw and bleeding from where they had rubbed up against the harsh metal, the tight grip scratching him up with every time the vehicle jostled due to poor road maintenance or Jackson’s sadistic desire to put him through more pain.

Honestly, it could be a tossup between the two.

Lola was sitting on the floor with him, watching him as he woke up. She looked over at him before pulling out a cloth and placing it over his mouth. He felt his eyes roll to the back of his head as everything faded to black.

***

Neil remembered last Christmas, just a few months back. How it felt like an eternity ago.

“Don’t really get the whole holiday thing. Wymack and Kevin are doing their own thing.” He looked at Andrew. “Should we have our own thing?”

Andrew messed with the crust of his bread and shrugged. He ate the last bits of his toast and pulled out a box from inside his jacket.

“Here. I don’t want you to be waxing poetic about whatever the fuck. Here take them.” When Neil made no move, Andrew shook the box under his nose. “It’s a Christmas present. You weren’t so far removed from society that you haven’t heard of Christmas, were you?”

“I have asshole.” He took the shoddily-wrapped gift. “It’s just been a long time since I had gotten anything. Thank you.”
Andrew made a disgusted sound. “Don’t make it weird.”

He opened it up and his heart suddenly felt full.

It was better than anything he had ever gotten before. They were cheap, the stuff that a child got in elementary school but he looked at those colored pencils with his eyes wide. The box boasted of 36 colors and he didn’t even know what he would do with all of them. He wrapped around them was a pair of new socks. Cross-country had caused him to wear through the few pairs he had remarkably fast, and, no matter how many times he patched them up, they still seemed to gain holes.

“Thank you Andrew,” he whispered but Andrew was already gone.

***

As the days grew longer, the more time they spent together in the daylight. They both knew bad things happened during the day, but there was something somehow safer about being able to see themselves, to see each other. Even when the sun was down, the night sky’s had a lingering glow and their eyes could adjust.

And with all the time to themselves now without homework, they could spend it however they wanted.

So they spent that time kissing.

Andrew was surprised how much Neil wanted to take part in this activity with him, even going so far as to set his art or music aside to kiss him. It was confusing how a guy who never cared about such things now always seemed up for it. But Neil had always been confusing, had always been an enigma, and Andrew resigned himself to the fact that it would always be like that.

“Do you want to be closer?” Neil asked when they kissed.

“What do you mean?”

Neil pulled away, eyes heady with desire. “Do you ever want to touch my skin when we kiss?”

“Do you?”

Neil leaned close, his lips below his ear. “I want to feel you heartbeat. And Neil reached forward, bringing Andrew’s hand against Neil’s T-shirt, right over his heart. “I want to feel your heart beat against mine. I want to feel your rib cage expand against mine every time you breathe.”

“You’re crazy.”

“This is crazy.”

And he knew what Neil meant and in some weird way what Neil said made sense. This made him feel more alive than he had in a long time. The idea he’d be so close to someone else, being so intimately aware of their existence sounded like a chaos spelled out by the cosmos. It was incredibly stupid and foolhardy and insane, but he found himself inclined to do it anyway.

And if he were to self-destruct by these means, surely they would be the best.

“Just shirts,” he said between kisses. “Not pants.”

“Okay, yeah, yes.”
Andrew’s hands lingered at the hem of his shirt, body suddenly unsure how to take off this piece of clothing. Neil was already in the process of pulling his shirt off over his head and Andrew allowed himself to be distracted by the uncovered skin in front of him.

Neil eyed him. “You don’t have to take off your shirt.”

“Shut up,” and he pulled it over his head and tossed it over to the side of the bed. He leaned closer to Neil and he could hear the heavy heaving of Neil’s chest, see the flush across his cheeks, the darkness of his blown out pupils in the waning light.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Neil breathed and Andrew pulled him closer, hands on either side of his jaw, until they were kissing, their lips sliding past one another’s, their breath mingling into one. Their shoulders touched every other moment and the sensation of flesh on flesh was intoxicating.

The blankets and sheets were swirled around their bodies like a nest and he wanted- he wanted- he didn’t know, but the feeling was terrifying and exhilarating.

Neil’s hands wound up into his hair, tangling it, holding him close but not too close, leaning back and back and back until he was laying back with Andrew above him.

Andrew bracketed has legs around Neil’s hips holding himself up by his arms, thanking his lucks stars he took weightlifting and could hold himself up. Their chests brushed so lightly and he felt Neil’s entire body shutter beneath him. “Can I?”

“Yes,” Neil gasped, voice wrecked.

Andrew lowered himself until his chest was pressed flush against Neil’s own. He could feel the staccato pattern of Neil’s marred skin against his own, each marking a hold on the present and reality. He rolled to his side and they were still kissing, Neil’s lips trailed past his jaw, across his neck, on his shoulders.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes.” His voice sounded strangled. And Neil kissed his skin like he was made precious metal, invaluable treasure at his fingertips. It felt so good, so unlike anything he had ever felt before and he wasn’t inclined for it to stop.

But as the night wore on the kissing grew sleepy and slow until Neil’s head dipped on his shoulder, gentle breath ticking the tiny hairs at the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

“You’re amazing Andrew, you know that right? Absolutely amazing.”

He didn’t say anything about that, instead choosing to focus on staring at the soft head of hair resting in his chest.

“You don’t say anything.”

“You’ve always been a liar.”

Neil pulled himself just enough to look him in the eye. “Not about this. And someday you’ll see it too.”

If he had been a laughing man, he would have right then and there, but as it were, he lifted his hand
to Neil’s hair and tousled his fingers through the silky strands of Neil’s hair.

Neil hummed and the sound vibrated against his chest. Neil reached down, arm fumbling in the dark until he found the edge of the blanket and pulled it around them, encasing them in warmth.

It wasn’t much, just a simple gesture, but it was comforting, in a strange way, like they were tucking themselves into bed, like they were finally home.

The gesture was unspeakable nice. Completely unattainable, and yet, he had it, the thing he never thought he’d ever have in his life- a simplicity, a peace they had never before been felt my his soul.

And now he was sitting in the waiting room of the FBI office on the floor, back against a wall of square lockers while the other foxes tried to calm themselves down. Allison was pacing, Renee walking beside her, calming hand on her arm. Kevin was sitting silently in the corner, not far from Wymack, eyes empty and haunted. Nicky, Dan, and Matt were all sitting together, talking underneath their breath, probably about what they had learned, that they thought about Neil’s fate. Aaron alternated between sitting a few feet from Andrew and getting up to text Kaitlyn the details.

Andrew had started out leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and then that had devolved into sitting, to wrapping his arms around his legs, like he thought that if he made himself small enough the heavy despair wouldn’t be able to find him and crush him.

He felt more than saw Bee come up to sit beside him, a good foot and a half between them- enough to be there as support, far enough away that he didn’t feel boxed in.

He wanted to sit beside her, have her wrap her arms around him like Cass used to, but he couldn’t let himself be vulnerable. He had let himself be with Cass, he couldn’t do that with Neil. He couldn’t let himself get hurt with Neil. It was a foolish lie to tell himself, a foolish thing to pretend he wasn’t already gone for him.

He couldn’t bring himself to look at her. “I don't really want to talk right now.”

“Okay.” Another silence. “Do you want a hug?

He lifted his arms and lifted them around her.

She held him close like Cass used to, once upon a time. This time there were no strings attached. He didn't have to do anything for bee to because she was there for him the second she thought something was wrong. She didn't just listen to him- she believed him.

He held her close and didn’t let go for a long time.

***

The next time Neil woke up he was in a basement. One that he had known all too well.

Despite the fact that his father like to use this room for his business deals and information extraction, Neil had been down there many times. He had learned to handle a knife down here, learned to slice and cut someone in ways that made them feel more pain than they had ever felt in their life. How to kill someone effectively, efficiently. He remembered training with Lola and her nasty smirk filled with the sadistic glee she found in cutting someone up. He had seen some of his first dead bodies down in this room and he wasn’t looking forward to joining the list of people killed down there.

Nathan walked into the room, broad and imposing.
“Well, well, well, Junior. It’s been too long since we last saw each other.”

Neil didn’t look up at him, feeling bile rise in his throat.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you.” He smacked Neil hard across the face.

“We called your uncle in for a family reunion. Too bad he won’t get to see you alive, or well, ever. Lola has a special night planned for you.”

“Just as I’m sure you have a special spot in hell.”

“It’s not really fair that you got to see Lola more recently than me. I mean, I am your own father.”

“We did see you.” He grit out. “In Seattle.”

“Oh, right. Yes.” He stared him down. “Speaking of ‘we,’ where is that dear mother of yours?”

“You killed her.”

“Pity. I would have liked to have seen it.” He leaned closer until Neil could smell the waft if his expensive cologne. “Tell me, did she bleed?”

“Fuck you.”

Nathan snapped his fingers behind him and DiMacco brought forward a roll of knives. He ran his fingers along the edge of one of them, merely blinking at the blood that rose from the gentle caress.

“You should feel special, junior. I sharpened them just for you. I wanted to be able to get your new decorations correct.

“Now I heard,” his eyes flickered over the knives and Neil almost wished his father was facing him so that he could be prepared. “That you and your mother had this nasty habit of disappearing. Lying, running around, changing your name. It’s despicable behavior, Nathaniel, and frankly I’m a little appalled at myself for letting this nonsense carry on for as long as it did.

“No, no, no. Neil is it you’re going by these days? Neil?” he scoffed in disgust. “That isn’t your name.” he turned back to Neil, wielding a butcher’s knife in his hands. “Your name is Nathaniel Wesninski. The Butcher’s son. You would do well to remember your name.” He turned to Lola. “Lola, is there anywhere you left blank?”

“Some of his arms.”

“Good.” He yanked Neil’s arm forward flipping them over so that his forearms were exposed to him.

Neil winced. Lola had spent the ride carving up the upper side of his forearms, but in doing so had left the underside unmarred. Nathan’s tight grip caused the injuries to burn.

He watched helplessly and emotionlessly as his father carved his birth name onto his flesh. One name per arm. Nathaniel on his left, Wesninski on his right. Neil was delirious with pain. Nathan had left out Abram, but that was probably because it hadn’t been Nathan’s name; it had been Mary’s.

When he finished, Nathan stepped back to admire his handiwork.

“This is much better. Now that that is done, I think it’s time to start killing you. Don’t worry, I’ll save your arms for last. I want you to remember who you are until you finally join your mother.” He waved his hand forward as DiMaccio stepped forward with the large ax that had haunted Neil’s
nightmares since he was a child. Why his father had a preoccupation with fireplaces and firewood, Neil didn’t know. First there was the fire poker, then the ax used to cut wood with the fire place. His father would have probably burned his body in the fireplace if the smell wouldn’t have carried.

“Say goodbye to your legs, Nathaniel. The runner won’t be running anymore.”

He tosses the end of a hot iron in the burning metal barrel beside him, and Neil knew with sickening dread that he was going to cauterize the wounds with the hot iron.

He swung and Neil couldn’t move from where he was handcuffed to the chair.

Suddenly there was the sound of pounding feet on the ceiling above and the sound of people hurrying down the stairs. Before he could even register what was happening, a bullet went through his father’s head. Through the flying bullets he saw Lola collapse with a bullet to her heart, Jackson and DiMaccio falling, too.

His father’s body fell forward, his body slumping on the ground by Neil’s feet. He couldn’t help it, but he couldn’t stop staring at the blood that was oozing out from where his father laid at his feet. The bloodied forms of his father’s henchmen stirred something inside him and he was suddenly laughing. His Uncle Stuart rushed forward and worked to unlock Neil’s from the metal chair and pulled him him out of the chair so suddenly Neil slumped forward, knees weak, almost dropping down into the blood.

“Bloody hell, kid. You need to get up. We’re going to have to leave, we need to get you out.”

His laughter wouldn’t stop and he felt his legs were giving out beneath him with every step. His stomach hurt and was cramping. Stuart half carried him out of the room, Neil’s body jolting and shaking from the laughter.

Stuart turned to him, covering him mouth, trying to get him to follow his breathing. It was hard to change the pattern, but soon Neil was starting to breathe in shuttering gasps and Stuart removed his hand.

“Kid, the FBI will be here. They know we were here. But we can’t be here.” He stared at him, concerned look on his face before giving him a firm pat on the shoulder. “You know my number.” Neil managed to nod, the last remaining laughter starting to subside, his body shaking.

And then the support at his side was gone, Stuart and his men vanishing like ghosts in the hazy dawn. He was on the leaves and passing out as soon as he saw Federal agents swarming around.

Neil smirked. “It’s about time,” he said, before he slipped to the ground from his knees, passing out on the cool grass.

***

Andrew was waiting around the office when the call came in. He knew what it was for even though none of the other agents came by to tell them. He wanted to push himself to be alongside them but he knew he couldn’t. He couldn’t afford to get locked up right now.

So he sat with the other foxes and waited impatiently for the news. After a few hours, people started trickling back into the office. He looked at each one of them expectantly.

“He’s alive,” Towns told them, “but barely. They’ve got him stabilized and they’re airlifting him over to UCLA.”
Andrew stayed silent and didn’t respond. He would believe it when he saw it, but it was reassuring
to a degree, for the moment.

Browning came in. “He’s in the hospital. We have to interview him when he gets out.”

“I need to see him.” Andrew spoke, voice somehow working.

“He’s under police protection until he gets out. You’ll have to wait.” Andrew made to go after them
and find him, but he heard the telltale click of handcuffs around his wrist locking him to the chair.

It would be a long few hours.

***

Neil woke up in a very white room, and for a split second he wasn’t sure if he was still alive.

It was sterile, artificial, and utterly uncomfortable. His whole body ached and when he looked at his
arms he found they were covered in bandages and gauze. He tilted his head to the side and saw
agents Browning and Towns sitting there, waiting.

“How long was I out?” his voice was hoarse.

“About twelve hours.”

“You could have woken me up.”

“You needed to sleep, kid.”

“When can I go home?” he asked on impulse before he mentally recoiled. How bold of him to
assume the foxes even wanted to see him again.

“Are you kidding? After everything, you want to go back? Why don’t you go into witness protect-”

“No. I didn’t go three years ago and I’m not now.” His voice was somehow unwavering even
though it was broken. “When can I leave?” he repeated

Towns leaned back in his seat, resigned look on his face. “We need to get your statement. Which we
need to do at the station.”

“I want to talk to Andrew.”

“Your past almost could’ve gotten him killed. Do you think he even wants to see your face again?”

Neil shook internally, but he didn’t let it show. “I don’t know. But I left without him knowing where
I went. I want him to know I’m alive. He’s going to want to get closure.” Even if it was just to kick
Neil out of his life.

Brown sighed. “We can swing it.”

Neil nodded and got ready to leave the hospital. Once they discharged him, they made their way
down a series of streets until he finally made it to the FBI station. They led him through the doors
until they made it to an empty room where witnesses stayed.

“Wait here.”

And as soon as they left he sat down on the bed and waited.
After several hours of waiting, a woman came in to the office and looked at Andrew warily.

“He wants to see you. They’re bringing him down to the rooms downstairs as they file his statement. He won’t stay unless he sees you.”

That figured. Andrew honestly wasn’t all that surprised. He had known Neil for years. He knew what he was like, though apparently he didn’t know him as well as he thought.

Three hours ago Andrew had made up his mind that he was going to kill Neil as soon as he saw him, the FBI be damned.

He made his way down stairs until he came outside a room. He walked to the door and walked in.

Neil’s head was bent over and he had a hoodie on. His arms were clenched around his stomach and he was staring at the ground. He turned when he heard the door open, and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Andrew.” He said, voice barely more than a whisper, faded from abuse and wear. “You’re here.”


Andrew moved forward suddenly, and the FBI ran forward to restraint him.

“Stop.” Neil said to the FBI, though he didn’t look away from Andrew’s eyes.

“I want to speak to him. Either you leave or we will.”

They backed away.

“How did you get here?”

“We drove.”

“We?”

“The foxes are here.”

“Why? I’m fine.”

Andrew snarled at him. “You’re really going to go with that?” He stepped forward and held his hand out to Neil’s hood. Neil nodded and Andrew pulled it off.

Neil’s face was covered with bandages. He systematically began pulling them off. Neil’s face was an assortment of bleeding cuts and stitches. Then he moved to the other side of this face he saw burned skin. It was horrible and distorted and he knew that it had to hurt like nothing else. He stopped.

“How long are they keeping you here for?”

Neil swallowed, leaning forward until their foreheads were resting against each other’s.

“Until I give my statement.”

“And then what will you do?”
“I’ll go. Wherever.”

“Do you want to go?”

“I want to go home, if you’ll have me.”

“Idiot.”

And Neil Josten was undeniably an idiot, but he was he was also in a lot of pain and Andrew wanted nothing more than to get him out of this hellhole.

When he saw him, he looked horrible. And in a lot of pain. They had him hooked up to painkillers.

“Andrew could you-” he gestured to the wires, but Andrew could see the way Neil’s eyes flickered to the agents by the door. “I don’t like them.”

“It’s because if your father. He’s not going to get you here.”

“I know. He’s dead.”

“And if he wasn’t, I’d kill him.”

Neil wheezed. “You’d have to give me first shot.”

Andrew stared at Neil face, drinking in the sight of him like he was a drowning man.

They released your father from jail. That’s why he was able to get to Baltimore.” Neil’s eyes hardened and with what appeared to be great pain and difficulty, wrapped his and around Andrew’s.

I’m going to testify and then we’re getting the hell out of here.”

***

“Please state you name for the microphone.”

“Neil Abram Josten.”

“Please state what happened.” Neil looked up to the two-way mirror, to where he knew Andrew was standing, waiting for him.

And then he opened up his mouth for the second time in three years and recounted the horrible things father and his men had done to him.

He recounted the horrors of the RV, the switching cars, the basement.

“And why do you suspect your father went after you?”

“Uh, because he’s a piece of shit? Though the fact that he attached right now may have something to do with the fact that he was released days prior. But you guys already knew that, didn’t you?”

Towns and Browning shifted uncomfortably.

“Nathaniel, we understand that this has been a very traumatic experience for you-”

Neil scoffed. “Do you? Do you really?” He shook his head. “You have the audacity to sit there and look like that? All pitying and concerned? You say you are the good guys but you aren’t. You didn’t save me. I was saved by other people, not you. You used me as bait.” The managed to look a little
bit ashamed. “You’re just as bad as them.”

“-Kid you don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“I think the fuck I do.” He pulled himself more upright to level them with his glare. “You used a kid as bait for a man who should have been in prison, in order to lure his followers.” He dropped his arms to the table and ignored the pain as he leaned closer to them. “You reduced the sentence of an incarcerated mobster because you couldn’t track his employees. You could have gotten more than me killed doing that. In fact, you probably did. You have done nothing for me. You despise me because of what my father did and you punish me for my parents’ crimes, but you need to take along look in the mirror if you think I’m grateful for your help. All you did was give me paperwork to change my identity.

“I’ve lived through all of this and I won’t, I repeat, I won’t deal with all of you and your condescension. How you can even attempt to look down on me is unfathomable, you fucking cockroach.” He looked around the room, the agents silent, no words left to say. “Am I done here? Can I leave?”

Towns blinked and shuffled his papers. “Ah- right. Yes.” Neil nodded and stalked over to the door, yanking it open. He held the door open a moment before he turned to them one last time.

“And it’s Neil. Nathaniel died in Baltimore.”

***

None of them had brought much of anything, so they made pretty fast work of packing up the cars to head back to Palmetto. Neil’s was sitting on at the edge of the parking lot staring out at the cars, at the playful bickering of their friends. Andrew walked over to him, lowering himself until he was sitting next to him on the curb.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette for each other, offered one to Neil.

He took it and Andrew lit them both of them.

They sat there in comfortable silence until the rest of the foxes were ready to go, after their cigarettes had burned down to their filters. He stood up and crushed the butt under his shoe.

“Let’s go home.”

Neil stared up at him.

“Yeah. Let’s go home.”

***

The drive back wasn’t especially long and before Neil knew it, he began to see familiar sights that he connected with Palmetto. It scared him that knowing those landmarks went against everything his mother had ever taught him.

It scared him even more that he didn’t care.

Walking up the stairs to Wymack’s apartment was probably the most excruciatingly painful thing Neil had ever experienced in his life.

Well, it probably wasn't, the honor of that experience would probably fall on the last 72 hours, but
this was a close second. He felt Andrew’s presence at his side and his firm grip on his arm as he helped him silently make his way up the stairs.

His legs stung from where his father's knife had sliced through his jeans.

He blinked.

Damn. He had liked those jeans.

They made it up to the top of the stairs and Wymack unlocked the door. He made his way into the living room. The comfort of the room sent some sort of feeling rushing through him and his throat felt like it was closing and like he was choking.

He never thought he'd see this place again. He never thought he'd see the worn plaid pillows on Wymack’s couch or the faded newspaper clippings that adorned his walls.

The other foxes had left promising they would be right back, leaving just Kevin and Andrew in the apartment. Kevin couldn't meet his eyes; he hadn't really been able to since they first reunited in the FBI station in Baltimore.

Kevin disappeared into his room to get something.

Andrew pulled something out of his pocket and held it out to Neil.

“You left these.” Andrew looked like he wanted to chuck them at Neil’s chest, but he thankfully didn't. Neil's eyes zeroed in on the item dangling from his fingers and held out his hand for it.

Andrew dropped it into his palm.

The sudden impact made his hand ache, but the weight was familiar even after what had felt like an eternity. He brought it closer and traced his bandaged fingers over the keys he had memorized by heart. Wymack’s key, the key to his locker at work, the key to his and Andrew's apartment. All of them were still there.

He clenched his hand around the metal so hard he was sure his cuts and burns would split but he didn't care. He didn't want to ever let them go.

“Neil.” Andrew knelt in front of him, hand placed behind his neck. He hadn't realized when he had stopped standing. He was on his knees and had been staring at the wall.

“Can put them in your pocket?” he asked.

Andrew nodded his head and he reached for Andrew’s free hand. He took the keys out and pressed them into Andrew’s hand, curling his fingers around the familiar metal.

“Keep them safe for me, okay?”

Andrew swallowed and gave a shaky nod. He kept staring at him like he wanted to say something, do something, but then Kevin's door opened and he came walking in carrying a couple blankets and pillows and began piling them all over the floor. A few minutes later the rest of the foxes came back with their own blankets and pillows. Everyone began dumping them on the floor and they all curled up around one another.

Neil was informed that this was a sleepover, yet another thing he had never experienced before the foxes.
Neil felt safe around them, with Wymack, Abby, and Bee in the kitchen.

He was surrounded by friends and he slept so that he could see Andrew's face.

His father was dead and he was safe, at least for right now.

He could worry about everything else in the morning.

***

And if you’re still bleeding, you’re the lucky ones

‘Cause most of our feelings, they are dead and they are gone

We’re setting fire to our insides for fun

Collecting pictures from the flood that wrecked our home

It was a flood that wrecked this.

Chapter End Notes

And here is chapter number 13! I hope you feel like it goes with the flow of the rest of the story. I know its a little splice-y, with the flashbacks, but hey! everyday's a brand new day to try something different.
Neil was hit by a wave of nostalgia as he stared out the window groggly. They were taking the bus back to apartment in the early hours of the morning, and the route was a sight for sore eyes.

He never thought he'd see this place again, and now he was here. He saw the wasted patrons of Eden’s filing out of the club sloppily onto the street. He saw early morning commuters heading out to the bus. He even saw a bright, cobalt blue dick spray painted on the side of the police station.

A smile ghosted over his lips and he leaned closer to where Andrew held him at his side, staring stone-faced out the window. His arm was wrapped around his shoulder and Neil and his head buried in the soft cotton of Andrew’s t-shirt. He held onto the edge as much as his shredded fingers would allow him.

The burns and the cuts on his face and hands were in the beginning stages of healing, but it would be a long time coming. Even after they did heal up they would still sensitive, but he was used to the scar tissue.

The other foxes had learned not to say anything about the markings; they all knew the story. He had told it to them when he had gotten back, in what was one of the longest afternoons of his life.

But that had been last night and today was a new day.

They made it back to their apartment before long and Neil almost couldn’t breathe at the sight of it. He didn’t have any trouble making it up the steps but he knew he wouldn’t be able to open the door. Andrew had the key and he waited impatiently for him to unlock it and walked in after Andrew unlocked the door.

They sat down on the floor and Andrew waited expectantly. Neil lifted his arms for Andrew’s help.
and Andrew helped pull the sweat shirt over his head.

His arms were covered in bandages. They had gotten some cream to put on them but it wouldn’t be pleasant. Andrew unwrapped the bandages and stared at his arms. They were scarred beyond belief, burns and cuts littering his arms. But what made it worse was the words he saw on them.

“I didn’t think that was real,” Neil whispered, not realizing he had even opened his mouth. Andrew looked at his arms and his eyes became deadly.

He said nothing as he cleaned off his arms and helped him over to the shower and climb inside. Neil was so tried but Andrew helped him climb inside the shower and wash him. It was quick and efficient and simple. After he was done he helped Neil out of the tub and out of the room. Neil managed to pull on his pants and sat on the bed in the living room. Andrew came out a few minutes later, he began to apply the cream to Neil’s arms, rewrapping them.

Andrew finished up with the bandages and then set the first aid box off to the side of the bed. Neil’s body felt heavy and the early hour made his mind hazy. He barely registered climbing under the covers, Andrew not far behind him, and within minutes, they had both fallen back to sleep.

***

When the morning came, Neil looked even worse than he did the night before. The bruises he had were starting to change different colors, the discoloration looking eerie and strange.

His body looked like how his hands did after an afternoon of painting and they looked absolutely gruesome. Andrew could see the way his eyes scrunched up when he got up and he could see the slight hesitation between his movements.

Abby had given him the ointment to put on his wounds and he had seen her use it already, but he hadn’t been prepared for how it would feel to touch the actual wounds on Neil’s body- the ridges of the cuts that would undoubtedly scar, the perpendicular sutures sewing his skin back together, like he was some sort of rag doll, one what was torn apart too many times but never thrown away.

Andrew remembered what it felt like to feel these markings on his own body; in his mind he thought they couldn’t have felt this bad. They were a sign he was alive, a reminder that he was breathing, feeling. Feeling the pain that consumed his mind, body, and soul.

Feeling had become something harder to wrap his mind around. Sometimes he swore he remembered what it was like to feel; sometimes he couldn’t remember if he had ever been able to feel at all. Logically he knew he had, at some point. But the waves of trauma and depression had buried that all so deep that he could rarely access it.

But anger, oh anger, he still could feel that. He could feel it rip through his body, and the power he felt in controlling it. Sometime he could let it out with a fist or a punch, but sometimes it just sat there like a stone in his chest until he became accustomed to the weight.

But it wasn’t easy. The anger sat there and burned, just waiting to boil over. But it was like boiling water; it didn’t splash everywhere if the lid was on. But the water also got hotter when it was kept inside, scalding the first person to come along and touch it.

And that anger lapped against the sides of his ribs as he stared at Neil’s face. He wanted to do something, but he couldn’t. He’d kill Nathan, Lola, the whole lot of them with his bare hands if he could have. The anger shook his fingers and they buzzed with fury.

He helped Neil, but there were time when every thought of what must have happened crowded into
his mind.

He called Renee.

***

The summer began to blur by in a barrage of sunscreen and scar cream. Neil’s face was healing, and, with the help of Kevin’s occupational therapist, Wymack’s intense training, and Neil’s ridiculous self determination to play guitar again, Neil’s hands were, too.

Neil couldn’t hide the wince that snuck up on him when he first woke up early in the morning, after his fingers had been idle all night long, but it was getting less and less with each passing day, so much so that Andrew didn’t feel bad for pretending to ignore it.

Something Andrew couldn’t ignore, though, was the sight of the cardboard boxes filling up in the hallway of Renee’s house.

They had all pushed off the times they had to get to school, but the departure of the upperclassmen was immanent and fast-approaching.

Andrew wasn’t going to say it out loud, but he was going to miss spending time with Renee, sparring with her and watching documentaries with her. He was going to miss the companionable silence and the sheer gay wonder at the fact that both had people they liked liked them back.

Renee had already thought about these things, and in the weeks leading up to the school year she had set up Andrew and Neil’s laptop with applications that allowed them to watch things together and talk.

They had already been practicing it and sometimes they would both flip their laptops on and Skype each other without saying anything at all.

It didn’t quite feel the same, but it was good. It was still good.

***

“Allison,” Allison said to him across Wymack’s table one afternoon, five revisions into Allison’s packing list. “You have to promise me you’ll do something.”

He pulled his eyes away from his work to look at her. “What?”

“Go to a party, go to the prom, do something this year.”

“I did those things already.”

“You did then because we dragged you out. We won’t all be there and I don’t want you to spend all your time working or in school, Neil. You’ve been through hell. Live.”

And wasn’t that a request?

*Live, Neil.*

*Live.*

***

“They took so many words from me.” Andrew found himself saying one night, lying flat on his back
against the cooling stucco of their apartment’s roof. “There are so many I can’t hear again,” he trailed off, unsure how to say the rest of he was trying to say.

*I don’t want to be scared of sounds, of letters, of words.*

*I don’t want to fear my memories.*

*I don’t want them to control me anymore.*

Neil nodded in understanding. He always seemed to get what he meant. It should have been frustrating, to not have to explain himself so much. Everybody always seemed to want that.

Aaron wanted to know why he was the way he was, like he didn’t have a clue.

Neil got it, he knew.

Kevin wanted to know why he wasted his potential.

Wymack didn’t ask anything.

The older teens wanted to know why he was so cruel, why he was a monster. Well, it wasn’t so much that they wanted to know, but that they had wondered, and so much time had passed they took their assumptions as irrefutable truth- as infallible fact.

Bee asked what she needed to ask and he actually told her. He told himself it was because she was legally bound to confidentiality and not because she cared. He didn’t want to get his hopes up.

But the truth came up unprompted around Neil. It made sense that a pole of lies would be a magnet for the truth.

The song had been bouncing around his head, always on the radio, even years and years since it had first come out. Cass had loved it. She used to play it all of the time.

He found himself saying the name of the song out loud, catching Neil’s eyes as he did.

“Do you know it?”

Neil nodded, humming lyrics.

“It could be our debut,” Neil said after a while, staring up at the sky.

“We already have debuted.”

“Can we really make ourselves known when we’re trapped inside ourselves?”

He shrugged and let it rest.

Except the thought wouldn’t leave him, the idea of taking something once so toxic and reinventing it was too enticing.

He couldn’t have done it on his own, but he wasn’t. He wrote the music arrangement and Renee gave the instrumental pieces out to the appropriate upperclassman and convinced them to participate.

From what she had told him, it hadn’t been difficult; all of them wanted to do one last piece all together before they were forced to create music remotely. Andrew heard Neil playing his part, probably playing without any hesitation or questioning, all too eager to get his fingers working
against the strings of his guitar.

Kevin was coaching him, trying to keep Neil from diving into playing too hard, too fast and doing irreparable damage to his hands, and, for once in Neil’s entire life, he listened.

In the meantime, Andrew poured over the google drive they all shared, where they all uploaded backup footage they didn’t use.

There was a Dropbox that they used to consolidate all the videos and clips that they needed. If they needed a scenic shot of the road or whatever they would just look at the footage they had already shot.

The upperclassmen also used it as a sort of place to upload all their trips and adventures so that one person wouldn’t have all the pictures or videos.

Nicky was using it a lot, uploading pictures and short videos of Germany and Erik and everything he was seeing.

Andrew opened on of the folders and found video after video of the other foxes talking to Neil, videos of Neil smiling and laughing like he had been doing it his whole life. It hurt his chest to see that. He copied his files and laid them out before him.

***

“Neil have you seen the video yet?”

“Uh no. not yet.” He pulled his headphones out of his ears, looking over at Nicky. “Calculus was being a bitch.”

“Pull it up.”

He clicked on it and found it was trending. “Holy shit,” he breathed and clicked on it.

He could hear the sounds of Renee’s voice, Andrew’s voice, his own voice through his headphones and he watched as the video played. They were clips of them all playing out in the field, him hanging out with Matt and Dan, or all of them playing tag with the other foxes. He felt his heart hurt at the happiness of it all, of how he never expected to feel that way. There were moments of him looking at Andrew when Andrew wasn’t looking and a scene where he and Andrew were holding each other’s hands, all identifying characteristics obscured.

He looked at the song and the details and found Renee’s name listed as the singer and Andrew’s under the songwriter and video maker and his heart clenched.

He and known Andrew was going to make this, but he hadn’t expected all of this. It felt intimate to him that for half a moment Neil wondered if his heart was being ripped out of his chest.

*And I’ve seen your flag on the marble arch*

*And love is not a victory march*

*It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah*

He was packing up his things shout a goodbye behind him and taking the bus back home before he even knew what he was doing.

Andrew was standing at the counter measuring out flour into their mixing bowl. Neil dropped his
backpack on the floor and walked around the counter to him.

“Yes or no.”

Andrew looked at him and put down the colander. “Yes.”

And then Neil surged forward and kissed him. He kissed him and kissed him, and Andrew kissed him back, flour dusting the counter and the pancake mix forgotten.

***

Kevin watched the view count almost religiously. He had been like that the past few days and Neil was surprised Kevin’s phone was still working, considering how often he slammed the refresh button.

“We have nearly three million views.” Kevin told them all as they lounged around Wymack’s living room.

Neil stilled.

“Total?” Matt asked in disbelief

Kevin shook his head slowly, turning his phone to face them, hand shaking in a way Neil knew had nothing to do with his hand injury.

“Three million for this video alone.”

Three million views over the course of three days. The math was simple but it was enough to get Neil’s head to reel.

Kevin sat anxiously in Wymack’s living room while the rest of the upperclassman were whooping.

“What’s wrong Kev, why are you such a Debbie downer?” Allison hollered, draping herself over the back of Kevin’s seat.

His eyes were frozen on his screen and his body looked like a corpse post rigor mortis. “We have more views than Riko’s most popular video.”

“Well then, it sucks for that bitch,” Allison shot back.

Kevin shook his head. “No, no, no. He gets angry.”

Renee was somehow by Kevin’s side in an instant. “What do you mean, angry Kevin?” And her voice was tense, insistent.

Kevin tried to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out, likely lost to memories of thrashed vocal chords. He groped and loosened his left hand subconsciously and that was all they need to know.

“Kevin you’re not there,” Renee whispered, calming hand wrapping itself around Kevin’s mangled one.

“No,” and he pulled his eyes away from his phone to look at them, and in that second Neil understood exactly what Kevin was trying to say.

“He has Jean,” Neil said, voice barely above a whisper.
In the end it wasn’t Kevin or Wymack or Bee or Abby who went and to get Jean- it was Renee.

Renee hadn’t even blinked, hadn’t even hesitated, before her phone was out and she was calling Stephanie, explaining everything that was going on.

In the end it wasn’t as surprising as he initially thought it was. Renee was like the sea- peaceful and calm on most days, containing hidden darkness and depths that lurked below the surface. She was a force to be reckoned with and in those few seconds it took for her to figure out a plan, Neil couldn’t imagine how anyone could have faced her down and expected to survive.

The next time they saw her, she looked like she had just escaped hell.

And she wasn’t alone.

From what Neil and heard, it took Renee, Stephanie, and Abby just to get him out of the car- Jean virtually dead weight and fragile from his injuries.

“He’s in bad condition, they had to take him to the hospital. He’s out now, thank goodness. But he’s not doing well.” Renee told them at Wymack’s.

“He wants to go back but he doesn’t have to,” Stephanie informed them. “He’s eighteen. Tetsuji can’t claim he is his guardian because selling people isn’t exactly recognized as an official form of relation here,” she said humorlessly.

They were told to give Jean his space, but the waiting was making Kevin, and Neil for that matter, anxious.

The second Jean was open to visitors, Kevin and Neil booked it over there.

Jean had been staying at Abby’s as he recovered. They had decided he could stay with her until he graduated and went off to college.

It only took once glance at Jean for Neil to know that it had been a miracle that he had made it out alive. Seeing him lying in Abby’s guest bed brought back memories of Evermore and the nights in the RV with Lola to the forefront of his mind with a sickening speed.

Jean just looked at them blankly, eyes devoid of anything, broken down even more than they had been when they had last seen each other. He was scared to think about how much worse things had gotten for Jean over the past years.

Jean watched them enter and wordlessly waved Kevin closer to him and pulled a piece of paper out of his bag and Kevin’s face warred between disbelief and confusion.

He hesitantly took the paper and unfolded it. “It’s the letter.”

Jean nodded.

“You got it.”

“One of us has to make it out of there,” he replied, voice so broken it was barely audible.

Kevin looked like he was going to break down.
“I- Thank you, Jean,” he choked on the words halfway.

Jean nodded and looked away from him back out of the window.

“Riko is careless. He relied on his uncle’s power to get him out of trouble. And his uncle does these things to protect the family name.” He glance back at them, both of them. “Riko is running out of time.”

***

The day before they were going to leave, Matt took Dan and Neil out to the fields in his truck, parking under the open skies truck and they all laid back in the bed of the truck and stared at the pairs of shoes tied off of the isolated telephone poles. They brought a lantern and blankets and they played Uno and poker and laughed and told stories and joked. Dan told them about the types of art she was going to be studying at the university and when they didn’t get it, she promised she’d bring them samples.

In the morning they all rode back to Wymack’s for the going away breakfast- pancakes, orange juice, eggs, and a shit-ton of coffee and tea before they were all giving each other hugs and heading out to their cars to drive away.

There was a yearning sort of ache in Neil’s chest as he watched them leave, and it was strange, because Neil had never been in a situation where someone could leave and then come back.

But, he supposed, this was something he could learn to live with

***

Renee smiled at him. “You keep it up and you could be with me next year.”

Andrew scoffed. “Like hell you’ll ever catch me near a beach.” But despite the unaffected front, he reached forward and pulled her into a tight embrace, her arms, hesitantly then surely encircling him.

“I’m going to miss you,” she said quietly.

He pulled her tighter in response.

They pulled apart, arms still loosely/haphazardly wrapped around each other.

“Skype me, okay? I’ve got to know what the haps are, as Nicky would say.”

“You know I’ve never said that in my life-”

He nodded. “I won’t forget.”

And then she turned and walked down the driveway and pulled herself into the passenger side of Allison’s convertible.

And then she smiled and she waved, like this goodbye was only temporary, that they would see each other again.

And even long after they had left, when only the memory of the hot pink against the hot asphalt remained, Andrew didn’t feel the heaviness he had always felt before when someone left- when he left the Spears, when Neil went missing. There was an ache, but it wasn’t unbearable.

Renee was right. They’d see each other again. And Andrew wouldn’t miss it for the world.
For the first time ever, Neil wasn’t worried about the first day of school.

When he was younger, before he went on the run, he was always nervous because he always worried someone would realize he was hiding secrets, that he’d come home to his father sitting at the kitchen table, waiting to beat the shit out of him. And in every year since he had been on the run, he had always been worried he would stand out, attract attention or do something else that would bring his father to his doorstep, cleaver in hand.

Now his father was dead, and though he looked like he had been through a meat grinder, a look that was sure to garner several looks, he couldn’t really bring himself to care. The only problem he had with his appearance was his similarity to his father and the traumatic memories that came back to him every time he saw his mangled flesh.

He heard the murmuring the moment he walked through the front doors into the school. He had contemplated covering up the marks on his face with makeup, but he didn’t want to have to waste the time or the money on making other people more comfortable. If he had to live with it, so could they. He ignored the whispers and walked his way over to the homeroom class.

The bell rang and the students came pouring in, gushing about their fun summer breaks and all the vacations they had been on. If he really thought about it, he went on his first vacation that summer. He guessed that old saying was right- you take the good with the bad.

“Hey Neil!” Greg shouted as he clambered in, but his excited tone quickly turned to one of shock. His mouth fell open, stunned. “Holy fuck. What happened to your face?”

He wasn’t yelling exactly, but he was quite loud- loud enough to cause a sudden silence to fall over everyone in the room. Mr. Howard looked over at them- probably to reprimand Greg for yelling- only for him to freeze when he caught sight of Neil’s face.


“I’m fine.”

“What happened?”

“Fell into an aquarium.”

“Really?”

He gave him a look and went back to his binder.

“Really, though what happened?” Marcie butt in.

“Ran into a killer clown.”

“Really, Neil. I’m just worried about you.”

“I went to Africa, got trampled by a herd of zebra.”

Andrew scoffed.

Marcie whirled around. “How could you be so cruel, Minyard? I know you hate his guts, but could you cool it? Can’t you see he’s in pain?”
“I’m not in pain,” Neil objected. “I’m fine.”

“You’re injured,” she insisted as she turned back to Andrew. “Aren’t you the least bit curious what happened? Sympathetic even?”

“No.”

Mr. Howard cleared his throat before Marcie could let out another squeal of outrage, but that didn’t stop Marcie from muttering something that suspiciously sounded like *sociopath*. It made Neil’s blood boil. “Uh, so I guess we’ll move on to talking about our summers. Greg, will you start us off.”

Greg glanced around the room hesitantly before rattling off all the details of his summer, no doubt more than happy to break up the tension that was slowly starting to build. Neil blocked out the excited bumble for Greg’s words as the slowly burred together. He focused on his breathing, trying to grasp reality. Things were swirling. He counted until his temper went down.

“Neil, your vacation?”

His attention snapped back to the front of the room.

“Internship, work, the usual,” he shrugged, forcing a smile. The dissatisfied look Mr. Howard had at his answer helped it to grow a bit more real, though. Mr. Howard stared at him a moment before he cleared his voice and continued.

“Now I expect all of you to continue with your rigorous schedules next year. Just because it’s your last year doesn’t mean that colleges won’t notice you slacking off.”

Neil heard what he said, he really did, but the invasiveness of the past thirty minutes had pissed him off and made it hard to focus. He sunk back in his chair and pulled out his book, reading that instead.

“Mr. Josten!”

He glanced up over the top of the book coolly.

“Yes?”

“Give me that book.”

He barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes, but he handed it over nonetheless.

Mr. Howard nodded. “You can pick it up after class.”

He nodded apathetically and leaned back in his chair. This was ridiculous. He didn’t want to listen to what he had to say because he didn’t care. He really, really didn’t-

And then the bell was ringing and Neil looked over his shoulder at the clock, startled that so much time had passed and he hadn’t realized it. It made his stomach twist uncomfortably and he hurried over to Mr. Howard’s desk, desperate to leave as soon as he could.

Mr. Howard didn’t look up at him, though he held out his book.

He reached forward to grab it, only for Mr. Howard to pull it away at the last second.

“Neil, what are your classes?”

“I’m doing half days. I have work experience after lunch.”
“Why?”

“So I can finish my apprenticeship and get certified.”

“You’re not going to college?”

“No.”

Mr. Howard finally looked up at him. “Aren’t you a bit young to decide something like this? Did you talk about this with your parents?”

“No. I’ve been working on this apprenticeship for two years. I’ll finish it up next year and then I’ll get a job. College isn’t everything.”

“And what are your working as? A hairdresser?”

“A court stenographer.”

“What? Are you- never mind.” He shook his head. “Is this about money, Neil? Because you’re fast kid. Really fast. I wish I could have been as fast as you. You could probably get a scholarship if you wanted to.”

“I’m doing this for me.”

“What?”

“I’m doing it for me,” Neil repeated, dragging out each word for a phased. “I want to do this. This is what I want to do. I’ve had people controlling every aspect of my life for as long as I can remember. This is something that I want to do. I’m done living my life for other people. I’m not going to just survive. I’m going to live. And I’m going to do it how I damn well please.” He snatched his book out of Mr. Howard’s hands. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a class to get to.”

And then he turned heel and left, the stunned expression in Mr. Howard’s face fresh in his mind.

***

Neil wanted to be left alone.

He didn’t know what it was about him, but something must have come across as inviting, because people kept inviting themselves over into his personal space and his business.

After second period Adam walked over beside Neil’s desk and Neil hoped that if he didn’t say anything, Alan wouldn’t try to talk to him and he could leave.

Adam however, did not.

“Neil, we couldn’t contact you all summer.”

Neil tried turning his binder at an angle, trying to see if that would help it fit better among all his notebooks. It did not. “You never talked to me any other summers before,” he answered, not even bother to look up from his level 100 Tetris game.

“But obviously something happened this summer. I get why you didn’t want to say anything to the front of the class. It’s obviously private.”

“It is.”
“So tell us.”

Neil just barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes. “You just said it’s private.”

“But not from us. But you wouldn’t keep it from your closest friends, would you?”

“Wrestled an alligator.”

“Neil,” he sounded frustrated. Neil didn’t really give a shit.

“What? Just because you think it’s your business doesn’t mean it is.”

“Well, I just assumed-“

“Well, you know what they say about people who assume, so drop it.” He opened her mouth to say something else, but Neil waved his hand to silence him. “If I don’t want to talk about it and I’m not going to talk about it. It is my own private business. If and when I decide to talk about it will be on my terms, not so people can have a little more gossip. I value my privacy and I’m not going to give it up just to make you happy.”

He didn’t have to worry about people finding out about what really happened. It had been hard to see his father’s picture on the news and in the papers, but it did give him some measure of relief to know that they were reporting his death and the dismantling of his gang. He was mentioned once or twice, as “the son of the Baltimore Butcher” but they didn’t have any pictures of him and he was protected from the reporting because he was still a minor. His new identity was a secret and would remain that way.

He didn’t have much faith in the law and he doubted he ever would; the strong distrust his mother had instilled in him for years would remain irreversible. But the minor laws and protected both him and Andrew from getting their trauma published in the papers. The crimes against them left them anonymous, and for that he was grateful.

His past was where it would stay- in the past. It was dead and buried six feet under with his father’s body and cast away his mother’s ashes. Neil Josten was here to stay.

And he’d be damned if he let the high school rumor mill ruin his chance for peace.

***

“Okay everyone, it’s almost time for Senior Science Day Camp.”

“What?” Neil asked indignantly under his breath.

“Camp is required,” Katelyn whispered to him. “It’s a nature thing. What did you think we were doing all of these fundraisers for?”

“I don’t know. Paper?”

“Well, that too.”

“-It’s out in the beautiful space that is nature.”

Neil shot his hand up in the air. “I can’t go. I have work.”

“First of all, like I said, it’s day camp. It takes place during the school day. Secondly, you don’t really have a choice- if you don’t go, then you can’t graduate.” Mr. Howard pulled out the brightest fake-
ass smile and handed out flyers to all the students, sending a particularly shit-eating grin in Neil’s direction as he slapped the paper down on Neil’s desk.

Neil was still staring at it when he got home, alternating between glaring at the paper and going off about how ridiculous the whole thing was.

Neil stared down at the SSDC flyer on the counter and leaned forward, pressing his forehead against the cool tile.

“Is it too late to sign up for independent study?” he mumbled, words obscured by the countertop.

“Yes,’ Andrew didn’t even look up from his book to answer.

“Fuck.”

Which was why Neil and Andrew had to take a bus at ass-o’clock in the morning on Monday in order to get to school in time for the field trip.

He had never been at the school that early before and he could honestly say he never hoped he would again. The other students were milling around looking like they were about to pass out. They had opted for taking the bus to the school and keep Andrew’s car in the parking lot of their apartment complex.

Most of the days the camp would take place in designated abandoned classrooms around campus that had been designated to a particular area of study, but the first day was always nature day.

After fifteen minutes of milling around the parking lot, the teenagers were herded into lines in front of the buses.

They climbed onto the crowded bus and he got pushed towards the middle with all the other people in cross-country. He saw Andrew walk to the back and get a seat by himself. There weren’t very many people who were able to sit by themselves, but nobody wanted to get in his space.

“Neil. Over here.”

He reluctantly sat down but he didn’t like it. It felt like he was somewhere he couldn’t escape.

He found himself yearning for the time when his wrists ached from where they were handcuffed to the RV railing.

Then he remembered the blades and knives and decided that maybe the bus was better.

“So Neil who do you think is hotter- Janelle or Marissa?”

“Dude, like anyone could say!”

He turned to face forward and leaned back against his leather seat. He was torn. At least Lola didn’t talk about this irritating shit.

“Neil did you hear?” Adam interrupted.

Neil side-eyes him, too exhausted to keep up any pretense that he cared. “Hear what?”

“That colleges pay attention to that class president shit.”

“Uh, yeah. Kevin wouldn’t shut about it all year. He’s been thinking it’s the perfect thing for his
applications. He thinks he keeps up like this, he could end up making it into Juilliard.”

“What? I didn’t know you knew him.”

“I do. His girlfriend’s doing the same thing as him and she’s basically a shoe-in.”

“He has a girlfriend?” Greg yelped.

Bryce spat out his water over the bus seat in front of him. “Wait, Kevin has a girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, how do you know?”

“He told me and then I met her. She’s like him.”

“ Weird?”

“Driven, determined.”

“I’m sorry, but since when have you been spending time with Kevin Day?” Alicia butt in. “Last I checked, he hangs out with Andrew.”

“He does.” He took a bite out of his sandwich. “We’ve known each other since I moved here.”

“And Andrew was okay with that?”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Not everything is so dramatic.”

Adam scoffed. “Says the kid who comes back to school one year with his appearance completely different and the next year with scars all over his face.” He shook his head. “I still can’t believe you won’t tell anyone about that.”

“I can’t believe you won’t leave it alone.”

“You know what?” Alicia cut in. “I’ll just call your mother. I’ll tell her I’m your friend from school and she’ll tell me everything.”

Neil laughed. “You don’t know my mother at all. That is the last thing in the world she would ever do.”

“Or I could have Mr. Howard call. He could make her tell because he could say it was an inquiry to child abuse. Then she would have to speak to him about it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

She frowned but dropped it.

For a second.

“Mr. Howard,” Alicia shouted down the bus, hand raised into the air, a haughty look on her face.

“Yes, Ashley.”

“Call Neil’s parents and ask them about how he got those scars on his face.”

“What?”
“You can say you’ll call child services or whatever if she doesn’t say anything.”

“Why do you want me to ask her?”

“Because Neil won’t say.”

“It’s none of your business,” Neil repeated.

“You know what, Neil. You need to stop being so secretive. Secrets never did anyone any good.” Mr. Howard muttered. He pulled out the roll sheet and pulled out his phone and dialed the number. He paused a moment and Neil tensed as he realized what number Mr. Howard was calling.

Mr. Howard frowned slowly before retyping the number. When he got the same thing he dialed in the number Neil had put for his father. He repeated it, and then snapped his phone shut and turned to Neil frowning.

“Would you like to tell me why your parents have the same number as the pizza restaurant?”


Mr. Howard set down the phone and put hands on either side of his clipboard and looked over at Neil in a way that was supposed to command serious attention and instill fear, but ultimately were nothing to Neil. “I need to meet with your parents, Neil. This is ridiculous.”

“No, you don’t. I’m an adult, you can take up any problems with me.”

“Well, no. We can talk to your guardian if you’re in trouble.”

“Don’t have one.”

“Yes, you do,” Mr. Howard snapped. “Everyone does.”

“Don’t live with them.”

“What do you mean you don’t live with them? Who do you live with?”

“My roommate. In our apartment.”

“What about your grandmother?”

“Never met my grandparents.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. These numbers haven’t changed, ever.” Realization dawned on Mr. Howard’s face and he shot an accusatory finger in Neil direction. “You never wrote down your parents actual numbers.”

He shrugged. “Don’t know them. I’d rather not talk about them, to be honest.”

“You’re going to have a really hard time making friends if you keep up with all this secrecy. The world doesn’t work that way.”

He shrugged, ears ringing and in the back of his mind he was searching his memory for the German numbers one through ten, but it was futile. “Look, I know that this may be a difficult concept to grasp, but you really don’t know everything, or even most anything, if I’m going to be honest with you.
“You act like you’re letting us in on the way the actual world works, but it’s not like you say. People don’t care about a bunch of trivial high school stuff out there. Just because you’re stuck in high school, doesn’t mean that everybody else is or everybody else will. I know what goes on out there and I have had to deal with things you wouldn’t even be able to imagine. You have been nothing but close-minded and small since you started teaching us and you’ll stay that way unless you open your eyes. You always say our eyes are closed and that we don’t see things how they actually are, but really you’re the one who’s blind. So I suggest that before you make another assumption about me or somebody else, you wake the fuck up first.” He turned to his seat mates, barely acknowledged their stunned faces. “I’m taking a nap. Wake me up when we get there.”

He pulled out a pair of headphones and put them in, paying close attention to make sure the others couldn’t see how the end wasn’t connected to anything. He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. They didn’t really quite down. He was hesitant to close his eyes but he knew none of the people on the bus except Andrew could even be half a threat. And he knew that if Andrew wanted to kill him, he’d have the forethought to do it in private.

With his eyes closed no one would be able to know he was awake. One of his talents he had perfected from his childhood was the ability to pretend to be asleep. People went about their own conversations and he was able to pick up on interesting tidbits of information with no one the wiser of his eavesdropping.

“Yes.” He became drawn to that conversation, careful not to stir.

“No, no he’s asleep. He hasn’t moved in like an hour. What about him.”

“So you know how his whole date with Alicia just failed and everything.”

“Yeah. Alicia said he didn’t know they were dating. I wouldn’t be surprised. He never made it seem like they were dating.”

“Look, I don’t need you all on my case. I get now that it wasn’t obvious, like at all.”

“Yeah, so what were you saying?”

“So what if he had a crush on somebody else?

“Who?”

“Katelyn.”

Neil almost choked on his spit.

“No, no hear me out. It makes sense, right?” Adam insisted. “He talks to her a lot and he fights all the time with Andrew. It may be why they don’t get along at all.”

“It might just be because Andrew is an ass.”

“But he wouldn’t want Neil to try and steal his brother’s girlfriend. Neil’s way better than Aaron.”

Neil was tempted to “wake up” and correct them but he bit his tongue. Katelyn was a person, not something that could be stolen. And he didn’t understand why she liked Aaron, but he himself wasn’t sure why most people were attracted to each other, so it didn’t really matter. And if he tried to deny his interest in Katelyn that would only cause them to believe that he was in love with her.

He almost forgot how foreign the twins were to outsiders, how Andrew was more than just an
asshole and how strained his relationship was with Aaron. Hell, most of the time he forgot that most
of the people at the school didn’t realized that Andrew and Aaron didn’t live together, let alone that
they hadn’t even met each other until a few years ago.

“You’d think Andrew would have mellowed out with Renee.”

“Nah, he’s frustrated. No way his mood is changing any time soon. And he’s probably not with
Renee anymore since she went off to college. So to get Neil laid we need to get Andrew laid.”

“No one wants to date him.”

“Except Jessica.”

“I can get her.”

Shit he’d have to tell Andrew about this.

They were grabbing their bags out of the car and making their way over to the cabin buildings. And
then the campers were allowed to wander around and explore. He inched over to Andrew and roped
his voice. “So I heard you’re going to have a new little admirer.”

“Really.” Andrew said drily.

“Jessica. They seem to have gotten it into their minds that I’m madly in love with Katelyn and the
only thing keeping me from stealing her heart is you.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“They think if you got laid then I’d have a shot.”

“I don’t need to get laid.”

“I know.”

They followed the rest of the group out to a fire pit and they all took up seats on the logs around the
stone circle where a fire would usually be.

“So we’re doing group bonding!” A cheery woman in bright colored camping gear told them, as if
team bonding was the best thing a human being could ever experience. “The grade is pretty small,
with only about thirty of you, so we should all get to know one another. So we’re in a circle and well
say something about ourselves and elaborate on it. And no basic things. Something that really lets us
know about you. I don’t want to hear a whole round of everybody’s favorite colors.”

Shit. He hated these things. Usually he just glared at people until they passed by him but the camp
woman had this creepily forceful smile that let him know she wasn’t doing to move on until they all
said something.

“Your turn.”

Neil felt like he was going to die.

***

“Ms. Bran is supervising the girls and taking them to the female facilities,” mr. Howard explained,
showing off the boys bunk-room this they would have had to stay in if they actually spent the night.

“If they really wanted all of us to bond, they should have had all of us room together.”

“They didn’t want that type of bonding.” Me Howard rolled his eyes.

Charles just laughed.

Andrew didn’t like it. He didn’t like the long rows of beds and he didn’t like the fact that so many people were going to be in the same room as him.

Even though they weren’t actually going to be sleeping here, it bothered him that there was still this part of him that was affected by all he had gone through.

After he had left the Spear’s he hadn’t shared a room with anyone except his brother (shortly), Leroy, and Neil. Leroy was a harmless kid smaller than himself, and Neil was- Neil, he supposed. He didn’t like how he regarded Neil as different from everybody else. It was strange that there would ever be another category like that. But Neil had a way of making his mind do weird things.

When he thought of the future it didn’t like to notice how it had changed. A part of him still thought like he wouldn’t make it that far, but the other small part of his began to think about that. The future wasn’t clear, but in every imagining he conjured of that time there was always one constant.

Neil was always in these fantasies. Stirring tea, cooking, sleeping. Every thought he had was dangerous and indulgent and quite self-destructive. There was no tell that Neil wouldn’t just run after high school was over. He probably would. But Andrew had always been self-destructive and he might as well enjoy these daydreams while he could.

He thought about Neil a lot. He was sure most of the others thought he spent his time brooding, but he was most remembering Neil. The way his hair curled on his head, how soft it had been in the rare times that his fingers had accidentally brushed up against it. He wasn’t really sure how his hair could have been so soft. On days when he was having a bad day, he would use Neil’s shampoo, but his hair didn’t quite feel the same way. But Neil would always notice and he would get the smallest smile on his face which was almost better.

He hadn’t known Neil would smile so much. He still didn’t most of the time in public, except for the cheesy, fake smile he offered to others. But he didn’t seem to have such problems around Andrew. People like him should have never learned to smile. But Neil had always been a fast learner.

But even then, a smile was pretty rare.

They were allowed a half hour to wander before they had more lessons and Andrew and Neil snuck off together to the bunk house. They climbed out of the building and up onto the roof of the dorms. When they made it to the top Neil let out a sigh of relief and toppled back against the surface of the roof.

Neil turned his head to Andrew and gave him a huge, bright smile.

Damn him.

“Finally. I thought we’d have to be around them forever. There’s nowhere to escape here. For privacy.”

“I’m sure you already have an escape route to leave if you need to.”
“Of course.”

“Tell me.”

Neil’s face lit up. His plans were unsurprisingly thorough and he got this excited glint in his eye when he told about how he would steal the bus.

“And who would be doing the driving while you reorganized the seating.”

“You. I wouldn’t just leave you here.”

“Didn’t know you cared so much.”

“Maybe I care about everybody else’s safety. I know if I left you here with them forever you’d kill them.”

If he had been a smiling man, Andrew would have then. “That’s fair.”

***

The field trip hadn’t been anything life-changing, but Neil’s life had changed. It wasn’t in any major way, but he was starting to learn that small things made big differences, too.

He stopped sitting with the other kids for good. He hadn’t been their friend and they hadn’t been his. Their whole relationship had been founded on pretenses and surface level socializing. And even more than that, Neil wasn’t himself when he was around them. He was Nathaniel, the terrified kid trying to be someone he wasn’t in order to stay alive. But he wasn’t that person anymore.

So the day after the field trip he packed up his books and walked over to Andrew’s table.

Aaron sat solemnly as he looked at Neil where he sat beside Andrew. Andrew paid him no mind as he poured over the book in his hands. Aaron studied him before nodding, just as Katelyn came over by his side. She took up her seat beside Aaron, across from Neil. It was silent a few minutes, no one quite sure how to break the silence. Neil finally piped up.

“So did you do that biology homework?”

Katelyn looked relieved and replied back to him and they began a volley of conversation, sometimes Aaron jumping in when the topic interested him.

She was kind and shy, but there was something undeniably fierce in her when it came to Aaron. It was what made her stay, this commitment to him that Neil didn’t quite understand but respected anyway.

Alicia came by their table, tapping her acrylic nails on the edge of the table.

“Katelyn, Neil are you coming over to the table? Or do you have some sort of project that you need to do over,” she cast a disdainful look at the table’s occupants, “here?”

Katelyn looked up from her bio textbook and her eyes appeared almost cold.

“No. I’m staying here. I want to be here with Aaron. And-” she held up a hand to stop Alicia from interrupting her, “before you say anything else, I don’t care what you think about him. I really don’t. Shut up about it or leave. That’s your choice.”

Neil smirked and cast her and approving grin and he met it just as fiercely.
When the bell rang for the next period they packed up their things and she fell in step beside him.

“Good job back there with Alicia.”

“Alicia talks too much shit. Besides you’re one to talk. You roasted first period.”

“They were prying. Asking annoying questions.”

“Ah, yes, the school questions.” She shot him a playful smile. “And where were you planning on going to school Neil Josten?”

He shrugged. “I’m not going. School’s not really my thing. I’m training as a tattoo artist.”

“With, um,” she snapped her fingers trying to recall the name, “Wymack?”

“Yeah. You?”

“I want to get in to the bio-med program at UC Davis. The dream really.”

“You think you’ll get in?”

She shrugged, nervously toying her lip between her teeth. “I want to. Not so sure yet. It’s very competitive there.” She looked down at her napkin, a faint smile on her face and then looked back up at him. “Aaron and I were hoping to get into the same school.”

“You think you’ll still be together then?”

“I know it sounds stupid, I know. I’ve heard all about how high school relationships don’t last. But this just feels different. I’ve thought I’ve been in love before, but this feel somehow doesn’t feel the same.” She contemplated it. “It feels deeper, I guess. Like I get him, and he gets me. I don’t have to pretend when I’m around him. Like he’ll take me as I am.”

He mulled over her words. “I think everybody needs someone like that.”

She studied him and Neil felt like she was peeling past his exterior. “Is that what it’s like? For you and Andrew?”

“We’re not together,” he answered automatically and he realized, belatedly, that she never suggested they were.

Despite that, she accepted his words with a nod.

He felt compelled to go on, to make the effort to connect. “But I get what you’re saying. It feels like that with Andrew. I don’t have to be anyone other than who I am.”

She smiled. “Yeah.” She stirred her smoothie with her straw. “It’s strange, when you think about it. We spend so long trying to make ourselves seem one way or another, but what we really want is someone who sees past all of that and loves us anyway. Makes you sort of wonder why we spend all this time trying to be someone we’re not for people we don’t care about.”

“You’re talking about your old lunch table.”

“It was yours too, Neil. But yeah. I guess I am.”

“Are you ever going to sit with them again?”
“I don’t know. I thought we were all so similar, but the further we got into high school, the more I realized I had nothing in common with them. I didn’t like who I was around them. They said such horrible things about so many people and I just sat there and listened to them saying all that shit. And I think I realized I don’t want to be that person.”

“Same. I just want to be who I am.”

***

There had been a gift shop at the day camp. It wasn’t much, really, just a couple of t-shirts, baseball caps and magnets. But in the back under the clearance section, there had been a map of the stars.

Neil had bought it with some of the leftover money he had from his time on the run.

He brought it up with him as they climbed to the roof, laying down with the map unfurled between them.

The moment, inexplicably brought back a memory with his mother.

When they had been on the west coast in the warmer months and they were low on immediate funds, his mother would drive them out to the desert and they’d sleep on the car to save money.

They didn’t have blankets so they’d use towels under their backs. And if it was early enough to not be tired yet, but late enough that the sun was down, she’d point up at the sky fingers tracing the stars.

It was the youngest she had ever looked, the most carefree, as if, for just that moment, they were inconsequential specks of dust in the middle of the universe.

Yet he knew that if he had bought his map while she was alive, she would have smacked him for being so wasteful.

And all at once it hit him. That those times with her were gone. They were gone forever and they were not coming back.

It felt like this throat was seizing and his eyes burned

“She’s gone,” he whispered. “She’s gone.”

And he felt it, finally, after all of these years. He had known it. It was indisputable, undeniable, irrefutable. He had always known, from the moment her body stilled, the moment her heartbeat ceased, the moment her heat she had begun to fade away, only to be replaced minutes later with the all-consuming heat of the flames. The vicious flames that ensnared themselves around his mother’s corpse, the dagger sharp teeth composed of fire, its carnivorous jaw wide open before the hinges snapped shut and devoured her whole.

He would remember the fire, he thought, for the rest of his life. He could see his father in it, the way he killed her, and as he burned her body he felt like he was giving his father another chance at killing her.

But how could he live with the fire when that was all he had ever known?

Neil had only been alive like fire. His parents were both like a flame. His father burned those who crossed him, his mother burned everything that she left behind, leaving nothing but smoke and ash in her wake. It only made sense that it would catch up with her in the end, leaving her nothing but charred bone and melted vinyl.
What was Neil supposed to do, the boy set on fire, about to combust? His father fueled him, the Moriyamas tried to contain him, the FBI tried to smother him.

But Andrew saw him—just a glimmer, a flicker—and he took it without hesitation. He had the eyes of someone who had seen the aftermath of fire, of every natural disaster and lived it through. He was a forest, razed to the ground, only to be reborn, small bits of life, pressing through the smoldered earth.

But now he felt cold, like ice, and so, so empty. It felt like he was trapped alone in space, floating along into nothingness, and aching in his chest so devastating it felt like an imploding supernova.

He felt Andrew’s fingers twist with his own, a lone source of warmth, a lone anchor in his grief.

And he wept.

***

*If you’re lost you can look*

*And you will find me*

*Time after time*

*If you fall I will catch you*

*I’ll be waiting*

*Time after time.*

Chapter End Notes

Happy Summer! Hope you enjoy it!
SENIOR YEAR- WINTER

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Mentions of past abuse- domestic, physical, sexual, and otherwise. Discussions of kidnapping and aftermath.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My hands, they’re strong
But my knees were far too weak
To stand in your arms without falling to your feet
But there’s a side to you
That I never knew, never knew
All the things you’d say
They were never true, never true
And the games you play
You would always win, always win

***

August had always been a weird month for Neil.

Even when he had been on the run, he still had school. For some reason, his mind was synced with that calendar as opposed to the yearly one that started in January and ended in December. He didn’t really think much of it and it seemed strange to think that that might someday shift for him. But until that day, Neil was doomed to start and end his years in the summer.

It wasn’t so bad really, the sharp heavy weight of the summer months, the deliberate shift in feeling as they transitioned from July to September.

But August, August was a month that didn’t really fit in. It wasn’t quite summer and it wasn’t quite school. It was like the February for the end of the year, a liminal month that somehow allowed for the transition from one year to the next.

It passed as it always did, in a hazy blur, until it was September and things became jarringly real again.

The upperclassmen had packed and gone and it wasn’t until that moment that it truly struck Neil how much had changed, how alone he felt.

Sure he still had Nicky, Aaron, Andrew, Wymack, Kevin, Abby, and Bee, but now there was an unexpected gap in his life where the upperclassmen lived. He had anticipated missing them, but not this much. Their absence hurt, but in that absence was a bit of hope, the fact that he’d still see them
and talk to them still tucked away in his mind.

They hadn’t disappeared completely from his life- not by a long shot. They had flooded a Google drive file with pictures and videos of their dorms and apartments and Neil couldn’t help but smile at their antics. They deserved their happiness. Sure it would get dampened when exams started rolling around, but nothing was perfect.

And it struck him, as he was sitting at the computer in Womack’s living room scrolling through his most recent messages from Dan, that this could be him too. Not the college part- he would rather face his father down one more time than have to do another year’s worth of homework- but the happiness. Happiness had never seems quite real to him, but now it was tangible, just within his grasp.

A part of him was scared to hold onto something like that, because he was scared to lose it.

A part of him wanted to run.

But a bigger part of him was tired of running.

“Neil come over here.” Kevin yelled across the apartment from where he sat hunched over his own laptop.

Neil closed the one he was using.

He was done running away. He was strong and he had a future. He’d spend his time running towards something.

And that would be more than enough.

“Neil,” Kevin’s voice was deliberate and insistent, “look at this.”

He turned the laptop to face him until Neil could see the paused video on the Trojans’ YouTube page.

Kevin’s hands were flying around him as he gestured, mouth moving a mile a minute, but Neil couldn’t hear a word he was saying, eyes transfixed on Trojans’ most recent video, a cover of one of one of the Foxes’ own.

Nicky was as ecstatic, and even Neil felt the buzz of excitement thrumming under his skin, but when he looked at Jean, the frenchman was despondent.

The hardest part of recovery, Neil had discovered in the seventeen years of his life, wasn’t making it through the original trauma, but learning to live with the aftermath.

The idea seemed somewhat backwards- surely being cut apart by kitchen knives or watching a brutal and grizzly murder should have been the worst part.

It should have been. After all, what could top that?

But it was the memory of everything, the way these things played through his mind over and over and over again. He knew he had PTSD, much like several of the other foxes. He and probably had it for as long as he could remember.

And it sucked, but he was working on it. Being around the foxes helped, because they helped to provide stability and safety, something he had never had before.
But he had never known what it had looked like from the outside, not really, until he saw Jean. Until
saw how devastating the results were, how helpless he would feel.

Jean was a shell, and more than that he was silent.

When they had both been in Evermore, Jean had been silent to avoid punishment, but in the
downtime he always found words, a way to speak.

Now he was silent because he didn’t have anything to say.

Neil wondered if the words had been ripped from his throat, like a bird of prey swooping down and
tearing out his larynx. He wondered what it was Renee had rescued him from, because though he
was no longer near Riko physically, he was still trapped by him.

Neil played that night over in his mind, trying to see if he could find some clue that it had been that
bad, but he couldn’t.

*Jean had called for help.*

*He had called Renee.*

Neil wasn’t sure how their friendship had developed, what had started it, but he did know that they
were close.

He remembered how Renee had strode into the room, phone clutched tightly in her palms. For the
first time Neil could see the dark, determined look in her eyes. When he saw her, he didn’t doubt for
a second that she had killed someone, that she had the power to do it again.

“Our.” She had said, eyes as cold, strong, and unwavering as steel. “I’m going to pick him
up.”

Kevin sputtered, his face growing sickeningly pale.

“He was very badly injured. He’s scared. I have to go get him.”

“You- you can’t. Riko-”

“Fuck Riko.” She spat with venom. Then she had met Andrew’s eyes and they gave each other a
nod before she was out the door.

Neil didn’t know what Jean had told her before, only that he had reached, desperately and Renee
had caught him.

*She saved him, but Neil didn’t know how much she had saved.*

Jean sat curled up on the couch, messaging the Trojans, as he had been doing nonstop since Kevin
had gotten him their number. But other than the tapping on his phone’s screen, he was as silent as
the grave.

He wasn’t always like that- he had been getting better over the past few weeks, especially after he
skin began to heal and he could start to move again without pain.

Sometimes Jean sat with them and practiced music again, but all the while like a phantom, barely
even there. They didn’t really have much they could think to say, Jean only communicating in meter
and musical notes. Renee was the only one he talked to and she was in San Diego. The only other
person besides Neil who he was close to (and it was definitely a stretch to say he and Neil were more
than two people who had been imprisoned and tortured by the same man) was Kevin, and they weren’t talking. There wasn’t really anything they could talk about, the wounds from the Nest still too raw after all this time.

But despite the fact that they weren’t close, Neil was drawn to Jean, and Jean to him.

There were times when the two of them would be alone and the silence would settle around them, heavy with the words not spoken, the truths kept secret.

The fact that it could have been Neil sitting where Jean was, how close their fates had been.

***

“We’ve got to talk to them, Andrew.”

“Why do we need to tell middle schoolers what high school is like? They’re going to be here and find out for themselves.”

“For the love of fucking- Andrew I really don’t want to be doing this either. I don’t give a shit about all this pseudo-political crap.”

“You know there are people who actually like student body. And what would your constituents think?”

“They would think jack shit, because, as you know, I was the only one who ran and I guarantee that if someone wanted to do this, they would have been running against me. Now get in the car.”

He rolled his eyes but he pulled himself up into the school van. They had just loaded a shit ton of props into the back of the car.

He decided to make the ride as difficult as possible by staring out the window as broodily as possible, ignoring Kevin’s weak attempts to make talking to thirteen year olds sound exciting.

They got out of the van when the pulled up at the school and Andrew limbed ut and began to unload the boxes. He set down the last box, ready to yell for Kevin obnoxiously when his eyes caught on a middle schooler, probably no older than twelve.

Leroy.

“Andrew.” He didn’t shy away from him staring him down, Leroy’s gaze not unfriendly, but not exactly amicable either.

He wasn’t like the Leroy Andrew knew.

“You doing well, Andrew? Out?”

“Yeah. You? Are you safe?”

Leroy nodded. “Yeah. I mean, it’s shit, but it’s not too bad. Keep going between my mom’s and Maybury. Could be worse though.”

He nodded. “Could be.”

“They sacked her.”

He stared at him.
“Your old social worker. I mean, I didn’t know how much good it did, but she’s no longer out there getting paid not to give a rat’s ass about us.”

“When did you become so cynical?”

Leroy actually looked surprised at that. “I’m not. I think I just see things better now. We know what happened spring break two years ago. I don’t get it at first, but then.” He trailed off, ending in a shrug. Andrew felt the silence before Leroy stared speaking again. “I used to be scared of you,” he said, staring down at his hands.

“And now you’re not?”

“I don’t think so. Not when I realized that you weren’t trying to be scary. You were just trying to get people to leave you alone.”

“So?”

“So, I think that the people who should be scared of you are the people who’ve hurt you, ‘cause you made it out and you’re still kicking.”

“Observant.”

“I told you, I see things now. The bad stuff, the secret stuff. But I also see the good things too. I think people forget to look for that stuff sometimes.”

He nodded and wiped his hands off on his jeans.

“I’ll be seeing you, Leroy.”

Leroy smiled. “I’ll be seeing you too.”

***

It took weeks for them to talk. Andrew and Kevin had both been gone-off on their week wooing junior highers with the “excitement” of high school and convincing freshmen not to drop out.

Jean had clicked off his phone and had been staring at the wall beside Neil’s head for the past half-hour. It wasn’t anything new, Jean was just like that sometimes, and Neil focused on his art.

But then Jean was talking.

“My parents sold me. Like your father was going to do with you.”

Neil lowered his pencil, staring at him as Jean went on, the words that had been eating at him for who knows how long finally breaking to the surface.

“Or maybe,” he went on, “he would have just handed you over. Who knows? Your father was very loyal, you know.” Neil was keenly aware of the past tense Jean was using, and Neil was thrilled Jean was using it because Nathan was dead, not because he was in prison. “My father on the other hand, was a deadbeat. Or enough of one. He couldn’t push enough product. My mother ended up doing most of the work. He sold me to get out of debt. Being in debt to the Moriyamas was never a very good thing. He was a pathetic man, if anyone were ever bold enough to call him one. He was a cockroach.” Jean paused, broken fingers twitching. “We could have been each other. You could have been stuck with me.” Jean gave a humorless smile.

Jean scoffed, playing with his hands.

Jean looked up at him. “I had- have- a sister. I just hope he didn’t do the same thing to her. I can only hope.” He shook his head. “My sister- she and my mother were both involved with all of this stuff. I know how to make money. I could go back to my father’s territory if Ichirou needs me to. It’s only a matter of time before he sends me away. If he thinks my skills are valuable.”

“He’ll keep you.”

“I’m not worth enough, Neil. My family wasn’t like yours, Neil they didn’t cover the whole torture-murder thing. They weren’t enforcers. They were suppliers, distributors. My father wasn’t even good at his part, though. Amassed all that debt. Made Kengo very upset.”

“Did you know? What was going on, what your family did?”

“No,” he shook his head, “but Riko loved to tell me how he came about owning me.”

“He doesn’t own you.”

Jean scoffed. “Sure he doesn’t.” He looked at Neil. “I belong to the Moriyamas. Always have always will. Just like you.”

“It’s not the end.”

“No, but it feels that way sometimes, doesn’t it?”

Neil didn’t know what to say to that, and he felt himself getting to his feet, gathering his things. He made his way to the doorway of the room before he stopped, old words he hadn’t hear since the night of his freshman dance choking in his throat.

“Your life isn’t worth less just because someone says it is.”

***

Kevin was busy standing in the front of the auditorium filled with freshman. He and a couple of the other student council members were acting out a skit on tips for surviving high school or something as equally ridiculous.

Andrew wasn’t up there with the hastily formed troupe, everyone preferring to stay alive rather than try to force Andrew to take part. He walked to the edge of the room and edged out the door to the concrete corridor, a secluded, outdoor part of the school and lit up a cigarette.

“Can I have one?”

He turned to the side and caught sight of a scrappy looking girl in an oversized sweatshirt.

“Aren’t you too young to smoke,” he asked mockingly, because he really couldn’t give a shit.

“Aren’t you?”

He huffed out half a laugh around his cigarette and tossed a spare to her. She caught it nimbly between her fingers and pulled a lighter out of her pocket.

“Aren’t you one of the freshmen that’s supposed to be at that bullshit rally?”

“Couldn’t have named it better myself,” she muttered nearly under her breath. “They don’t teach you
“shit. Life fucking worse than that.”

“What’s the really reason you’re sitting out here,” he glanced at her nametag, “Robin.”

“Maybe I thrive on delinquency.”

“I think you’re one of those kids that would sit inside but refuse to do anything the pep rally dude said.”

“Maybe.”

She didn’t deny it.

“Jack and Sheena are punk ass bitches,” she blurt out.

He racked his memory until he came across those two. They had taken to sitting with Neil’s old squad, and they had taken him leaving much harder than any of the seniors had. As clueless as they were, the seniors weren’t stupid enough not to realize that Neil had been growing distant from them for a long time. Didn’t stop Jack and Sheena from being annoying pieces of shit, though.

“And yet?”

“They make my life hell. They know nothing about me.” Ah, and it seems like Jack was more than just another annoying freshman. Apparently he was also a jackass.

“Told on them?”

“I’m not a snitch.”

“Then fight them.”

“Who even does that?”

He shrugged. “When I came here, an older kid took me underwing and taught me to fight.”

“What was his name?”

“Her name was Renee.”

“She could fight.” It wasn’t a question.

“She could kill.”

“Then teach me.”

***

He learned bits and pieces from Robin about her past, parts of it slipping out on the mats at Boyd’s.

She was new this year, and she had been homeschooled before then. She and her parents used to live in Northern California in some smallish town, population of just over 100,000 people. When she had been younger, she had been kidnapped by one of her neighbors. It took them years to find her, none of them ever expecting the villain to be the next-door neighbor with the khaki pants and pastel polos. She wasn’t the first girl, and it had taken them a long time to get her out of there.

The press had hounded the Cross’ until they deemed they had sucked the story dry and then they had
moved on to some other tragedy or trauma survivor. Robin’s family had changed their last name to avoid attention and then they had moved south before finally ending up here.

He didn’t offer any condolences for what she went through because he knew she didn’t need any—had probably heard more than she ever wanted.

He doubted it was easy for her to talk about it, likely because things like that never would be. But he mentioned his foster families, their wandering hands and her eyes flashed in anger for him in such a way it reminded him a little of Neil.

“Did it help?” she asked him one afternoon as she swung a clumsy punch in his direction.

“Did what help?”

“This,” she gestured when he attacked again.

He stopped and she mirrored him.

“No,” he said because he wasn’t a liar. “He come for me. I was older, stronger, but I didn’t see it coming. But I think I would have been worse to do nothing. Not prepare. If I lived my life feeling like I was just waiting to be attacked again. Because I don’t know if it will happen again, but I don’t want to be a victim.”

“Yeah.” She said, tightening her wrapping on her hands. “I want to live again.”

He nodded. “Then let’s live.”

***

Neil stood outside the police station and stared up at the doors in front of him. The brick building was so familiar, something he had grown so used to seeing over the years he had worked there, the same building he feared for so many more. He had always entered through the backdoor, always too afraid to be seen to be known, to be exposed, to be known. It wasn’t so much a fear of the place, but a fear of his father that lingered and followed him wherever he went.

He hated that feeling. He had spent his whole life feeling helpless and scared because of the people and the things he could not control.

But things had changed. His mother was gone, his father was finally gone, and Lola, Romero, DiMacco, and the rest were fucking gone. But in the end he was not alone. He had been so nervous about standing on his own, about carrying the weight of the past and the things he had done and seen on his shoulders. But he wasn’t alone. He had Wymack and the foxes and they helped him to stand.

He tucked his backpack closer to his side and he walked inside though the front door. No one looked up, no one acted like it was anything out of the ordinary, because to them it wasn’t a big step, but to Neil it was. He strode across the precinct to get to the filing room and get to work.

Something had shifted between him and the other workers at the precinct. He thought it was because of the scars— they didn’t know anything about the case, having not been involved in the federal manhunt, but they did know he had come back after a week with his face half carved off and they had been unable to think of anything to say.

He clocked out and he headed towards the bar and let himself in through the back door of the club, tossing a nod to the other workers as he went to the back room where Roland let him stay while he waited for Andrew to get off shift.
He walked in to find Grif leaning back in Roland’s chair, messing around with a Rubik’s cube.

“Catch.”

Grif looked up just in time to catch the canister Neil tossed in his direction.

He turned it around to look at the label.

“What?”

“You’ve never drawn a dick in the color before. Thought it might liven things up.”

Grif smiled at the can. “Should have guessed you’d figure it out- you were always a pretty smart kid. Most people who get fucked up like that,” he gestured to Neil’s face, “don’t make it out alive unless they’re smart. Or lucky.”

“Some might argue that stupidity is what earned me these in the first place.”

Grif shrugged. “Maybe.” He turned the can round him his hands.

“This is a good color. Might use it for my last hurrah.”

“You’re going to stop?”

“I might, or I’ll pass the job onto some new Padiwan, continue the chain and all that.”

“You didn’t start this?”

“No. Well kind of.” He stared off some distant look passing over his face. “This guy and I- we were both pissed off, corrupt police and shit so we went out and got this like, magenta shit, from some Barney play or something and we sprayed the sides of the cop shop. The cops were so pissed and so he kept doing it. But he was going to move, go off to college and all that, so I offered to take over.”

“Who was it?”

“Always a curious one, Nancy Drew. You might have met him, he was at Marbury. Seth. Huge asshole, but damn did he know how to have a good time.”

“Didn’t imagine him doing this.”

“Didn’t picture him doing a lot of things. But he had dreams and aspirations and shit. Told me he was going to make something of himself. He was going to throw it back in his mother’s face for turning her back on him. He would always go on about how he was going to come back with a four year degree and he was going to show it to everybody who ever said he’d amount to shit. And you want to know something? I think he might have actually been able to do it. He gave up alcohol, drugs, all of it. And it was really hard for him. It took him years to finally even manage to get clean. The fact that he died before he ever had the chance- that isn’t fair, you know?”

Neil stared at the bright yellow can of spray paint. “Yeah. It really isn’t.”

***

They were invited over to the Ivanovich’s to celebrate Anna getting promoted to manager at Sephora.

They had invited Andrew and Neil as well as their friends.
“There will be plenty of food,” Vanya has insisted. “This is a celebration after all.”

So they had all come. It was the closest anyone except Wymack had ever been to their apartment, and it was strange to see.

Neil was flitting around the kitchen making cinnamon rolls as a thank you and Andrew was supervising.

It was a very important job.

At a quarter past three they left their apartment with a foil wrapped tray and made their way next door, the remaining foxes, Katelyn, and Jean trailing behind them.

Jean looked tired but he was able to walk, which was much better than it had been the previous weeks.

Vanya opened the door and looked at their companions. “Hello, and welcome neighbors and friends. I must get your names before you come in.”

They walked in shaking her hand and Andrew could hear them even as they walked to the kitchen with Sasha to put the cinnamon rolls on the counter

“Kevin.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you Kevin. You have quite a no-nonsense sort of face.”

“I am a no-nonsense sort of person.”

Andrew almost scoffed at that, quite aware of all the petty fights he and Neil had engaged in over the past week alone.

Anna adjusted the two party hats on her head and gestured to the friendly looking woman beside her. “This is Polonia. She was Sasha’s social worker.”

“Hello, my name is Nicky, ma’am.”

“Oh, so polite. What a gentleman.”

“Aaron.”

“You wouldn’t happen to be related to Andrew, would you?”

“It’s a common mix-up.”

Vanya was still laughing as they made their way back into the living room.

She turned to Andrew. “Your brothers quite the comedian.”

“He tries to be.”

Aaron shot him a look that said if there wasn’t a six year old in the room right now, I’d be flipping you off.

“And you are?”

Katelyn smiled brightly. “Katelyn. Aaron’s girlfriend.”
“My, I can see why. You’re so beautiful. And intelligent as well, I’m sure.”

Katelyn blushed.

“And you, young man? You are much too tall for me not to see you trying to avoid this.”

Jean gave up his futile attempts to appear smaller and nodded to her, bandaged hands buried deep in his pockets. “Jean.”

“Well hello, Jean. Come in.”

Sahsa’s eyes went wide when he saw the new tall man.

Her eyes grew wide. “How did you get so tall?”

“I ate my vegetables.”

“You hear that, Sasha, you would do well to follow Mr. Jean’s example,” Anna said as she swept into the room with plates of food in hand, Polonia trailing behind her.

Sasha held out her hand to hear and tugged on his arm until Jean carefully lowered himself to the ground and sat criss-cross-applesauce. “Wait a second.” She ran off.

“Where is she going—”

She walked back over to them with a large ball of fluff in her arms and she dumped it unceremoniously onto Jean’s lap.

“Sasha, it’s almost time to eat—”

“This is Luna. She’s a cat.”

Jean stared at the cat in his lap. “I see.” He tentatively extended a finger and stroked the top of its head. Luna nuzzled closer to his body and he began to pet her more, eliciting a pleased purring from the white and grey cat.

“If she’s purring, that means she like you,” Sasha said with confidence. “Do you like her?”

“Yes, she is a very nice cat.”

“Do you have a cat?”

“No.”

“You can share her, while you’re here,” Sasha decided. “You have an accent like Grandma. But it sounds different.”

“Where is your grandma from?”

“Russia.”

“I’m from France.

“Where is France?”

“It’s near England.”
Sasha furrowed her brows. “Is that where the pilgrims came from?”

“Yes, mostly.”

Her eyes grew large. “That was very far away. Did you have to take a boat?”

He shook his head. “No, I took a plane.”

“That’s what me and Grandma and Mama all did, but I don’t remember because I was a very small baby. Grandma says we came from far, too. She said it was very dangerous.”

She put hand on his arm in a comforting manner reminiscent of adult.

“What?”

“I’m glad you survived.”

A strange look passed over his face.

“How old were you?” She asked

“About ten.”

“Did your mom hold your hand?”

He paused and then shook his head. “I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“Was your dad a bad person? Is that why you had to leave?”

“Sasha-”

“My dad is a bad person,” Sasha continued heedless of her mother’s warning, “and that’s why we don’t see him anymore. Mom says that it’s better if we stay away from bad people like that.”

“Sasha. Why don’t you go help Grandma bring in the cinnamon rolls?”

Her eyes perked up at that and she ran out of the room.

“I’m so sorry about that. She means well, she just doesn’t have a filter.”

“How’d you leave?” Jean blurt out and then his face turned red and he tried to back track. “I apologize. That is invasive. You don’t have to answer that.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s okay. I guess the truth is I don’t really know how. I didn’t want to leave him, we had been together for so long and I couldn’t forget all those times he was nice to me, when he would get me flowers and take me dancing. Then one day, he broke my jaw and I went to my mom. She booked us the first flight out of there. She had been saving up her money for years. It was rough when we first got over here- he was in jail, all of his associates were under suspicion, missing, involved in murder or drugs or guns. Knowing him it could have been anything. But were here alone.

“He used to call me begging me to come back. A part of me wanted to go back to him, the stupid part that believed that he really had changed.

“I was a mess and in a few years Polonia got assigned to Sasha, and I just couldn’t lose her. So she helped me. She helped teach me to be a mother. She’s one of true good ones. We’re friends now.”
She smiled at her.

“Cinnamon rolls!” Sasha announced and they all began to gather around to eat.

The Ivanovich’s all settled around the table, engaging in friendly banter as the debated who would be the one it cut into the potato pie first.

Andrew wandered over to the side of the room and Polonia settled up beside him.

“I recognize you. You were one of Jamie’s old kids, weren’t you?”

“I’ve been out of the foster system for years,” he replied coolly, not looking her in the eye. “She’s no longer relevant to me.”

“She did a shitty job,” she said and that was the first time he had ever heard someone beside Bee say that. “I’d like to think she was tired. I’d like to say that she probably came into work thirty, fourth years ago filled with optimism and purpose only for it all it get burned out, but I don’t know that. Doesn’t excuse what she’s done. Those last years it was obvious she was only coming in for her check. Lost her faith in the kids, doubted them, left them to fend for themselves.”

“And you don’t do that.” it wasn’t a question, but it was doubt.

“I try not to.”

“And why not? Stronger conviction?”

“Because, like you, I needed someone. And I knew when I grew up that some other kid was going to need someone, too.”

“I had someone else.”

“You’re one of the lucky ones.”

He scoffed. “Lucky.”

“Probably not the right word.”

“Probably not.” He took as sip of his water. “The whole system is fucked up. There aren’t people out there for most of those kids.”

“Then change that. You could be one.”

“Why would I?”

“Why wouldn’t you? I get it, if working with kids isn’t really your thing, but you’ve got conviction, and that’s more than what a lot of people got.” She handed him a piece of potato pie as it got passed their direction.

“Just think about it,” she said and then she went across the room to toast to her friend and Andrew took in the smiling faces of Vanya, Anna, and Sasha.

He had to look away.

***

Neil caught Jean coming by to visit the Ivanovichs several times over the next few days, and when
he and Andrew came by to babysit Sasha, she told them that Jean had spent a lot of time talking to her mother. She said that they didn’t really tell her what they were talking about, but she knew it was about her dad.

One week later Jean took the Greyhound to LA to stay with the Trojans, leaving nothing but a thank you note behind.

***

Andrew’s finger hovered over the mouse, the cursor blinking—there one second and gone the next, where rest in the last text box he had filled out.

_Do you wish to submit?_ was written in plain English across the bottom of the application, and even though this wasn’t the first one he had submitted, he still was hesitant to do it. It wasn’t that he was scared, because he wasn’t (maybe he was, but fear had never stopped him from doing anything before), but it was because of how fruitless and fanciful doing this even was.

He knew that nothing would come out of it, and yet, here he was doing the one thing he had promised himself he would never do.

College always sound so much like hope, so much like a future. He knew college wasn’t a guarantee for anything, nothing ever was a guarantee, but it sounded a little like hope. He supposed that was the allure of it, what drew the population en masse to fork up dozens to hundreds of dollars in application fees to schools they ahd no chance at getting into.

Maybe it was Kevin, with his three-ring binder of his college checklist, or maybe it was Aaron and Katelyn and the way they huddled close to each other talking about a future they had never dreamed of having before. Hell, maybe it was even Moreau, the broody Frenchman whose eyes still saw ghosts months after he left Riko, who would continue to see them for the rest of his life, who was taking first semester gen ed at the community college before he transferred to UCLA after winter break. The man who had come to them on Renee’s shoulders, broken and bleeding and wanting to die, but who took the chances in front of him as some last, desperate grasp at freedom, a final fuck you to Riko.

Or maybe it was Neil, who was teaching his to be so reckless with his heart.

It was his final application.

He clicked submit.

***

When Andrew came into Wymack’s apartment in early October, it was to the sight of Kevin was freaking out.

This, in and of itself, was not uncommon this year—the requirements of the student body much more extensive than either of them had anticipated.

But this was different. This reaction only came when it involved something Kevin was really passionate about.

“Kevin. Kevin. Kevin,” Neil was off to the side trying to get Kevin to calm down, but it, unsurprisingly, wasn’t working.

“Kevin,” Andrew said because if Kevin didn’t calm down, Wymack was going to be able to hear
him hyperventilating through the floorboards. Kevin’s eyes shot over to him and Andrew raised his hands, counting out seconds and Kevin began to match it until he managed to slow his breathing.

Kevin’s hands were still shaking as he motioned Neil closer and turned his computer towards Neil.

“I was provisionally accepted into Juilliard.”

“ Provisionally?”

“They want to see me perform.”

“Didn’t you send them videos of your music?”

Kevin ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, obviously, but it’s saying something about needing to see how I perform under pressure?” His breathing was starting to pick up again.

“I’m calling everyone of Skype,” Neil said, flipping open his own laptop.

Andrew shoved a paper bag into Kevin’s hands. “Breathe into this.”

Neil pulled up the other foxes and brought them up to speed on everything that he knew so far.

“That’s not bad, Kevin,” Dan said carefully.

“They want us to be in stage. To perform a show.”

“Like in High School Musical 3?” Matt asked.

“This isn’t a basketball game, Matt.”

“He’s referring to the third movie where the Juilliard scouts come to watch the play to give out their final spots,” Nicky muttered.

“Holy fuck,” and he gasped into the paper bag even harder. It took him almost a full minute to calm down. “It’s me and another candidate,” he continued when he had his breath again. “We have to organize a performance, both of ourselves and with other people.”

“That’s- well that’s a lot, but it’s manageable-” Dan was trying to keep him calm.

“It’s Riko. It’s fucking Riko.”

They all were consumed by screaming silence.

“He’s choosing the venue,” Kevin continued. “He’s got Edgar Allen to perform with him.”

“And you have us.”

Kevin shot up. “I can’t ask you guys to-”

“Kevin,” Allison cut in, “for once in your life, shut up. We’re going to be by your side and we’re going to drag that smug little prick into the ground.”

“Yeah,” Nicky added, “he may have money and power and prestige and both working hands-”

“Nicky, I swear if you aren’t going somewhere with this-” Aaron threatened.

“But you have friends. And I know we don’t see eye to eye all the time, but we’re family, and family
sticks together. They don’t abandon you,” he said, and then he looked at all of them “or try to kill you or hurt you or maim you. When they do that, they’re chose not to be your family. You’ve got us.”

Andrew looked over at Kevin and he saw Kevin’s face, still, stoic, and deep in his eyes, he could see determination burning to the surface.

“Well then, I don’t know why we’re just sitting around. We have a lot of work to do.”

***

Kevin was surrounded by dozens of musical pieces, trying to piece together the perfect show. Wymack was helping him, pulling from his time as a stage manager years ago when he first met Kayleigh.

Kevin spent nearly every waking hour pouring over programs and songs they could perform. He wanted it to be as seamless as possible, something so marvelously, undeniably fantastic that people left feeling connected to something more than themselves.

He wanted to prove himself, to show he was better. To prove that he was more than Riko’s second or his shadow, that he could stand and make something great.

“They don’t just want a performer, they want everything,” Kevin told Neil, running his hands through his hair so many times it was starting to permanently stand on end.

“There are a few requirements. They emailed them.” He pointed to the printout that was already covered with notes and dozens of ideas. “Seven songs, one of them had to be an orchestral piece. The other songs I can do. We have enough songs between all of us, but it’s the orchestral piece. We don’t have enough classically trained players. I can play the violin, but it won’t be enough to pass it off as orchestrally themed.”

“I can play cello.”

Kevin’s eyes shot up and over to him and Neil could see the dark circles around them. “You haven’t played in years.”

“I played every single day for several years. Riko doesn’t even have any idea. It’s muscle memory.”

“It’s a risk.”

“We’re foxes. It’s what we do.”

***

Andrew came into the apartment like a whirlwind. It was getting cooler- cold enough for them to start wearing their jackets again, but not enough that they needed to zip them up. So when he burst through the front door, hair tousled by the early fall wind, his jacket billowed out around him like a cape, making him seem like some sort of dramatic messenger in one of those action movies.

“You have an extracurricular Neil?”

Neil furrowed his brow a bit at that. He did not have an extracurricular, as everybody, including Andrew, already knew. There had certainly been a big fallout after Mr. Howard realized that their star runner was no longer on the team.
It wasn’t like Neil didn’t want to be on the team, but it took so much time he didn’t really have, to do an activity he would have rather done at times of his own choosing anyway.

His departure from the team had spurned a new rule that every student now had to be a part of an extracurricular program. It was a pathetic and manipulative attempt for Mr. Howard to get what he wanted that absolutely reeked with desperation.

Everyone had signed up pretty quickly, but Neil had stubbornly been avoiding sign-ups for as long as possible.

Andrew dropped a stack of fliers down on the table and leaned back against the counter.

Neil was familiar with the neon ads for the prom committee that decked the entire campus, just as he was aware that sign-ups ended today and that no one had joined.

“No way.”

“Yes, way.” Andrew nudged the flier closer with his foot. “If we going to do anything, it’s just going to be Kevin and me.”

“You two are part of the prom committee?”

“Apparently all senior student council members are. And since were the only two—”

Neil barked out a laugh and tossed himself backwards into his chair. “Fuck.” He laughed harder. “You’re serious.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“You look like you’ve been sentenced to death row.”

Andrew grunted and tossed himself into the chair across from Neil.

Neil’s laughter slowed and he looked at Andrew.

“But seriously, why should I do it?”

“Lenient hours. Access to school all hours, the chance to get that sort of petty revenge on everyone who thought you were clueless. You like to be successful as revenge.”

Neil mulled it over. It was true. After spending his whole life being taught he would be nothing, he loved nothing more than proving people wrong about him, about his friends.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Andrew pushed the sign-up sheet across the table.

Neil signed his name.

***

Neil surprisingly enough, actually really liked planning the prom, deciding on a theme, all of that, much to Andrew’s surprise. Neil went down to the office supplies store and splurged twenty-five cents on a poster board and wrote down his ideas. He was very secretive, somehow managing to keep Andrew from gathering a single clue about his theme, despite that fact that they lived together.
The prom committee was meeting at Wymack’s house, and by meeting, Andrew meant that they were going to have dinner and Kevin was going to bring it up the whole time. Those discussions on dinners helped to distract from the empty seats at the table.

“Okay, we’re going to start,” Kevin announced.

Neil went to the front of the room, poster in hand, and taped up the poster with spare bits of painters tape that was lying around and then taped a towel over it.

“Okay, we’re giving our possible prom themes. Wow us,” Kevin said, gesturing to Nicky, Katelyn, and Aaron, who were acting as guest judges since they were the only ones not on the committee. Aaron didn’t even look up from his phone while Nicky was bursting at the seams. “This is so cool. The prom we had was so boring, it was beach party themed or something else generic like that. Also Erik wasn’t there, so the theme probably wouldn’t have even mattered then.”

Kevin waited for him to stop rambling and turned forward. “Andrew your theme.”

“Antarctic research station. We just wear parkas.”

“Andrew, we live in California, people don’t even have snow pants here. No.” He shook his head.

“Neil your turn.”

He bolted out of his seat and went to his display. “Ready?”

Kevin looked confused. “Neil seriously, that’s the whole point of this meeting—”

Neil pulled away the towel to reveal the pictures he had drawn, the poster-board finally on display.

“I like to call it, Missing the Last Train. Everyone is all at a train station and they missed the last train. It’s kind of like that Journey song, you know that one with the midnight train.”

“Are you serious?” Andrew cut in.

Neil rolled his eyes. “Just because you’re partial to that runaway train song for some reason doesn’t invalidate other people’s appreciation for other train-themed songs.”

“Do you hear yourself when you’re talking? If you’re so obsessed with trains, why not theme the prom after the Thomas the Tank music.”

“You know I have no idea what that is!”

“Count yourself as one of the lucky ones,” Aaron muttered into his water glass.

“Anyway,” Neil continued, pointedly rolling his eyes, obviously enjoying himself and the banter. He had a fire inside that had grown subdued as of late, and it was nice to see it sparking back to life. “I’m thinking something like Grand Central Station, and in the picture taking area we can blow up big pictures of the beach or Paris or something, destinations, you know?

‘We can tell people the theme is something along the lines of, it’s about the Journey, not the destination.’

Aaron’s eyes snapped forward.

“No. No. No shitty puns.”

Katelyn was clutching his arm and laughing uproariously.
Aaron looked at her, betrayal evident on his face. He turned to Kevin.

“You can’t seriously be considering-”

Kevin held up a hand to stop him. “No, wait a second, I’m thinking about it.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Kevin steepled his fingers and pressed his lips against them in deep concentration. “Minimalistic enough to be within budget, if not under; sentimentality factor that will give a long lasting feeling of nostalgia; simplistic enough to be timeless.” He nodded. “Okay, let’s go with it.”

“Yes!” Neil shouted, flinging his hands in the air.

“Wait, we should ask someone who actually wants to go to the prom.” He turned to Aaron. Aaron looked up when he felt everybody staring at him and yanked his headphones out of his ears. “Okay, first of all, I don’t necessarily want to go to prom, I want to go with Katelyn. Important distinction. And you should ask her.”


Neil pumped his fist in the air and Andrew couldn’t help but think that maybe being on the prom committee might not be that bad after all.

***

Neil, surprisingly enough, had been the first one to see Jean’s video. It probably should have been Kevin, considering the fact that he basically had the Trojans’ YouTube page set at his default.

But he hadn’t been. It had been Neil.

The video was much like Jean- no frills, not excessive words, just him sitting down in front of the camera and playing his music.

Jean’s head was ducked over, so the viewer couldn’t really see his face, but from his body language it was obvious that his eyes were focused on his fingers and the guitar in his hand. Neil could see the awkward fix of his fingers, the ones that had been broken and hadn’t healed like they should have. Jean had told him about those breaks, about the times that Riko had hurt him, the times he had forced him to hurt himself. He would heal like those bones, crooked but whole someday.

You hold me without touch
You keep me without chains
I never wanted anything so much than to drown in your love
And not feel your reign
Set me free, leave me be
I don’t want to fall another moment into your gravity
Here I am, and I stand
So tall, just the way I’m supposed to be
His words were aching and beautiful and full of pain. He played the song over and over, trying to figure out how it made him feel.

He searched the description box to find Jean’s thoughts and only found four words.

Jean Moreau, Trojan

*Ex-Raven.*

***

The problem with being part of a three person prom committee was just that- there were only three people. But with Kevin trying to organize an entire show, albeit with the help of Dan, organizer extraordinaire, that meant most of the manual labor and preparation fell on Andrew and Neil.

Andrew and Neil, being the only ones left to make decorations, were therefore in charge of choosing when they’d make them.

The came by the school in the middle of the night after their shift when the hallways were silent and the moonlight cast an eerie glow against the auditorium linoleum and then they got to painting. They didn’t have a lot in the budget, but they had a can or two of paint that Neil was convinced he could use to somehow make a bunch of cardboard boxes that the school accumulated, that they snagged before they could be thrown away, look like train station bricks.

Besides the general walls, they also worked on several more complicated pieces- the ticket window was where the guests walked into the gym and the clock.

The clock was the centerpiece of the dance and it was supposed to look like as if time had frozen, where the disco ball would be rotating overhead.

They took a balloon that could be blown large and perfectly round and then they had gotten to work papier-mâché-ing it. They went slow to allow each layer to dry.

It would take hours at night and Andrew would spend the time in between watching the tired, yet satisfied look on Neil’s face, the way his hair would fall over his face and the sleepy, lazy smile that would touch his lips.

It was strange and domestic and Andrew was struck those nights with the realization that what he had with Neil was something (and yes, it was something) that was real, that it touched their lives and stretched out beyond the confines of their apartment or Wymack’s. It touched every aspect of his life, of his heart and it terrified him in ways that words could not describe.

He got to his feet and held out his and to Neil.

Neil took his hand, his palm warm against his own, rough with dried glue and newspaper, and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. The timepiece was drying, and would be for the next thirty minutes before they could add another layer.

He walked over to the speaker and turned up the music just enough to hear enough to dance to.

*Let it go*

*Let it roll right off your shoulders*

*Don’t you know?*
The hardest part is over

Let it in.

Let your clarity define you

In the end

We will only just remember how it feels

He offered his hand again and Neil took it without question, a soft look falling over his face, made even softer by emerging light of the new dawn. They pulled each other close and Andrew marveled at how close they were, how far they had come from those two timid teenagers who were scared to hold each other under the shroud of the night, to hold each other as they swayed to the music.

It was gentle on his heart, but he felt it all the same.

Time falls away

These small hours, these small hours

Still remain

***

The upperclassmen came down in Matt’s truck, all of their instruments stashed away in the bed of the truck. Allison rode behind with their suitcases and stuff packed away in her convertible.

It was Monday and the performance would be the Saturday. They had the whole week off for Thanksgiving and they spent nearly every second preparing for the biggest performance of their lives.

They were all packing up the equipment that was strewn about the floor. Nicky was in charge of inventory since he was the one who knew about everything they had, tech-wise, and he seemed like he was becoming more frazzled by the minute.

There was a knock at the door and Neil went to go see who it was, Andrew silently trailing behind him. He opened the door to reveal a tall, muscular man in his early twenties. Neil opened his mouth to ask who he was, but the man shook head, raising a finger to his own lips and looked at Andrew who nodded his head off towards Wymack’s living room.

Neil followed behind him, shooting Andrew a questioning look, Andrew simply gave him a mocking finger to his lips just as the mystery man had done and Neil just rolled his eyes.

“Can someone grab the microphones,” Nicky asked frantically. “I swear I just saw them.”

“Here let me grab those for you.”

“Thank you. Finally someone who’s help-” and Nicky’s eyes grew wide as he looked over and saw who was helping him, and the man barely had enough time to put the box to the side before Nicky was leaping at him, pulling him into a bone-crushing hug.

They kissed like they were reunited loves in a romance movie, the only thing missing were some aptly timed fireworks and then they were pulling apart and Nicky was speaking rapidly to the man in German and, oh-
He nudged Andrew. “That’s Erik.”

“Great sleuthing, Encyclopedia Brown.”

Neil elbowed him in the side again. “I’ve never seen him before, you ass. Almost every picture Nicky has of the two of them is outside wrapped up in hiking gear and parkas.”

Allison glided into the room. “Speaking of attire not appropriate for daywear in California, I need help with the costumes. They’re still in my car and it looks,” she cast a glance over at Nicky and Erik, “like they might be a while.”

“You made costumes?” Kevin asked in disbelief as they followed her out to her car.

Allison rolled her eyes, pulling garment bags out of her car.

“Oh course I did. You’re lucky none of you are growing. I still have my measurements. I’ll have to a final fitting, but that should be nothing.”

Matt shook his head in disbelief. “How did you fit all of that in there?”

Allison studied her nails with an air of elegance. “Don’t you know, Matthew, a lady never reveals her secrets,” and she laughed Renee smiling beside her.

Neil looked between them all, drinking up their banter and laughter like a man dying of thirst.

He had missed this.

He smiled until his face hurt.

***

They all rode down to LA together. It took them five cars to bring everyone and all their gear and costumes. If they were being technical, it could have only taken four cars, but Nicky had insisted on going with Erik. They planned on romantic excursions, which basically mean time to make heart-eyes and be disgustingly in love with each other.

It was something Andrew couldn’t put into words to see two men together like, that- unabashedly happy. He never thought he’d get to see something like that, not when his childhood was filled with terrifying same-sex acts. Hell, he knew Nicky didn’t even expect to be where he was, but there he was, in love with his caring, German hiker-man.

They brought their stuff to a hotel and they stored everything away and then they all went on a walk to where they would be performing.

A golden, beautiful man stood by the backdoor of the building, hands in his pockets, effortless presence that filled up the space around him for miles.

“You all must be the foxes.” He nodded at Kevin. “Kevin.”

He turned back to the rest of them. “I’m Jeremy Knox. Head of the Trojans.”

“You’ve been a huge supporter of us online.”

“Yeah. Because you guys are good.” He turned back to Kevin. “I’m assuming you all want to see the venue. They nodded and Jeremy led the way, telling them about LA, telling Kevin and Neil about how Jean was adapting to the city and new people.
They went in through the backstage until they walked out to the front of the stage and walked through the curtains.

It was unlike anything Andrew had ever seen and he felt Neil shutter beside him. His eyes were wide and he looked up and around the place with awe. Andrew had known places like that were actually real. He had seen enough reality TV to know it, but it was another thing to actually be there, to see that it was actually real and tangible. The space beyond the edge of the stage was like a bottomless pit, the lightless spots dark and empty, like the abyss. Dozens of dozens, and hundreds and hundreds and thousands of people hidden in the darkness, ready to judge their fate.

***

Saturday night came and there was a heavy tension that coiled around them, smothering and suffocating them at every turn. They took to the town, their outfits composed of white and gaudy shades of orange, something that should have been a disaster, but that Allison somehow managed to make look good.

They all took to the stage, setting up their equipment beside the Ravens as they all prepared for the final showdown.

They could hear people gathering on the other side of the curtain, the muttering and murmurings of people trying to find their seats.

Kevin was shaking, not obviously, but they all knew him well enough to see the unsteadiness of his hand.

Riko strode over to them, and for the first time since Neil had ever seen him, Riko was standing alone.

“This is your final chance, Day. Forfeit.”

And Kevin turned to look at him and there was something in Kevin’s eyes, in the shift of his face. It was if, in that moment, Kevin was finally seeing Riko for the first time. As if he could finally see how small and pathetic Riko was, how he always had been.

“Never.”

The Emcee tapped on his microphone and they found their places and Kevin took up his violin.

His hands had stopped shaking.

They were introduced and after a coin toss it was determined that the Ravens would perform first, followed by the Foxes, and so on until the last song was played.

Back and forth they went, each side playing their hearts out. Then the final song came and Riko came to the front of the Ravens, a picture of arrogance. The music started up and they played.

Faster and faster they went and Riko’s smile faltered as he fought to keep up.

But his fingers weren’t fast enough, and his hands weren’t skilled enough, and he sent his bow across the bridge the wrong way causing it to screech in a way reminiscent of a beginner violinist.

The thing about the Ravens, Neil had realized long ago, was that they weren’t taught teamwork, not like everybody else. They learned it the shallowest and self-serving way possible. Thy had been trained it look out for themselves, to do whatever it takes to get what they want, no matter how many
people they have to step on to get it.

And that was the problem with the Ravens- they were cohesive so long as everyone was together. None of them was willing to carry the extra weight or burden.

And the thing about Riko was that he thought that was the best, that he was on top of the world of his own accord. He didn’t realize he was where he was because he was standing on Kevin and Jean’s back to do it.

And now he no longer had Jean as his anchor and he could likely feel the empty, empty gaze in Jean’s eyes as he watched Riko play. Neil couldn’t help but wonder how Riko felt up there, failing to be the person he had spent so much time convincing people he was.

Riko tried to right his mistake but it was too late and he fell farther and farther behind.

He had failed and everyone knew it.

There was a spattering of applause and the Foxes went up to the front to play their last song. Neil took up the neck of his cello and Kevin walked to the front and positioned his violin with the opposite hand, giving control to dominant hand.

He heard Dan gasp beside him and he felt his own grin split across his lips.

Kevin held up his bow and struck the first note, and then it had begun. They were all playing ferociously and desperately, passionately, pouring every ounce of themselves into these song, like the poured themselves into everything they did.

Neil’s fingers ached from the speed and the pressure, but he never let up, until all too quickly the final note sounded and they were plunged into silence.

It was eerily quiet and a part of him was worried that everyone had left and they had just never seen it.

And then there was an explosion, a roar of thunderous applause, the excitement so vibrant it reverberated through the beams of wood until Neil’s feet were vibrating and shaking.

Adrenaline ran through his fingers, through his body, a proud, vicious smile curling his lips. He shot his violent grin in Riko’s direction, watched as the other boy’s face shuttered off.

They basked in the praise, victorious. Riko had lost his crown. The excitement compelled him look around one more time, to drink in everything so he could remember this moment forever.

He stared out until the curtains fell and the foxes were jumping around tackling each other with hugs. Until he felt someone come up beside him, stare out with him at the curtains.

Because Neil didn’t just see velvet drapes. He saw a future and he was exactly right where he was supposed to be.

***

*I set fire to the rain

Watched it pour as I touched your face

Well it burned while I cried*
‘Cause I heard it screaming out your name, your name

I set fire to the rain

And I threw us into the flames

Where it felt something die

‘Cause I knew that that was the last time, the last time, oh, oh

Oh no

Let it burn.

Chapter End Notes

So, hey. This is almost done. I don’t really know how I feel about that, since I’ve been working on this since 2016. Hard to believe this has been almost two years in the making.

I hope you all have been enjoying this story so far. As far as this particular chapter goes, I tried to capture/convey the complicated relationship between survivors and their abusers after a long-term abusive relationship. I tried to handle this as respectfully as I could but if there are any inaccuracies or it has been not handled in that way, please let me know.

Also, I know that there is a Disney song in this, and I do not even care.

Also, the seven year old Adele music- no excuses.

Also, Riko can eat shit.

Sorry for the strong opinion, but also, not sorry at all.
The last moments of their set were some of the most unforgettable Andrew had ever experienced in his life, and that was saying something, considering he had had quite a few of them.

Their final song was one they had all poured over for months, perfecting and practicing every second until their fingers were tapping out the notes even in their down time, and now it was growing to a close.

The music crescendo-ed and as the last straining notes echoed through the halls the audience fell silent with each graceful movement and every perfectly extended arm until the last note played and the music ended, no sound except the panting of their breaths on the stage.

They had stopped their song, but still Andrew heard it, the excitement and passion bouncing off the walls in tenacious waves, threatening to pull him under. He vaguely recalled something from science class talking about the dispersion of sound waves, but this moment felt anything but real.

The silence rang out almost painful and they were frozen where they stood with bated breath. And then they heard it.

The clapping from the corner of the auditorium with Wymack, Abby, Bee, and the other families before they were drowned out by thunderous applause, person after person standing and cheering, with the exception of Riko sitting across the stage, frowning.

Neil was smiling like the sun where he sat, the mere expression propelling Andrew forward until he stood by Neil’s side, feeling the excitement buzzing through his body at the point where their
shoulders were touching.

There was the sound of sliding metal and falling cloth as the curtain was being closed before them and when Neil turned to face him, Andrew, for the life of him, couldn’t remember why.

“Yes or no?” Neil asked, voice giddy and high on adrenaline.

“Yes.”

Neil leaned forward and gave him a hug so hard he almost toppled them to the floor, but he couldn’t really find it in himself to pretend to be annoyed. Not when Neil was laughing and smiling and not when the world could have ended right there and Andrew may have actually known what heaven was like.

In the background he could hear the announcer saying something or another but he could find it in himself to care; they were so engrossed in each other and caught up in a wave of noise as the celebratory cheers carried across the room.

And then he felt Neil get wrenched from his grasp so hard Neil went sprawling across the floor. Andrew made his way forward only for Riko to send a sturdy shove to the center of his chest, pushing back against the wall.

Neil tried to leverage himself off the floor but Riko delivers a rough boot to his chest, sending him back on his back. And then Riko grabbed him by the collar, pulling him close until Neil found himself face to face with Riko, face burning in fury.

“You think you can fucking take this from me, you worthless piece of shit? You think you’re better than me?”

Neil spat at his feet. “It wasn’t just me Riko. This is a team effort. The team is only as strong as its weakest link. How does it feel now that it’s obvious to everyone that’s here that the Raven’s is you?”

Riko raised his fist and Neil barely had time to brace for its contact before Andrew’s hand swept in and grabbed his arm. “That’s enough Riko. If you ever touch him or anyone else I will come for you and I will break your arm.”

Riko yanked his arm away.

“You’re bluffing.”

“I don’t break my promises.”

Riko looked around, waiting for his cronies to back him up, but when he looked over to them where they were huddled around talking to Renee, the didn’t even move towards him, if they even bothered to look at him at all. Riko’s eyes went wide in shock and he stumbled backwards away- just away- until he was gone.

The other foxes were on Neil in a heartbeat, asking him a million questions about his health. He sent Neil a long look and Neil nodded to communicate that he would be okay and then Andrew walked over to where Renee was sitting, the Raven admirers no longer there. She was tapping on her phone and scanning in some pieces of paper that the ravens had signed.

“Your fan club gone?”

Renee looked up, sending off her last email before clicking her phone off. “I wouldn’t call them
that."

"Seems like a lot of broken Ravens go to you to fix their wings."

Renee shook her head. "I'm not the one saving them; they’re starting to save themselves."

"You’re getting more cryptic."

She smiled that mysterious, good-girl smile that made Allison like putty in her hands.

"Check the news tomorrow. Stephanie’s covering a story." She looked around as the foxes began gathering up the rest of their equipment. "I think it's about time for us to go."

They gathered up their gear and made their way to the door only to be stopped just short of leaving.

"What is it?" Aaron asked, still too short to see what was going on. The media was swarming in the lobby of the auditorium and they had to spend their time talking to them before they could leave. They had to wait for the Ravens and the Trojans to complete their interviews before they could go though.

Jeremy was just rapping up the Trojans speech, shooting the reporter winning smiles. "Yes, well, we didn’t do as well this year, but we have bright hopes for next year."

"Oh, and why would that be, Mr. Knox?" a man with a flimsy toupee that flipped under even mild air conditioning. He was cheesy in appearance, but he stayed on message and he had become one of the few people they were willing to talk to.

"Next year we will be happy to have a new addition to the Trojans- Jean Moreau. I’m sure many of you have seen him publish on our page."

"Ex-Raven Jean Moreau?" he caught on quickly.

Jeremy gave a bright smile. "The one and the same. We were lucky that he wanted to join us after he left the Ravens and we are sure he will be a great addition to our team."

A million questions were thrown their way.

"Do you know why Mr. Moreau left the Ravens?"

"Do you know where he is?"

"So you’ve spoken to Mr. Moreau even though no one has been able to get his comment on this whole debacle?"

Jeremy’s smile never budged and it didn’t falter either. "That is really not my place to say. But I do know that you will see him next year when we come to win next season. Now I’m sure you all want to talk to the winners over there, the Foxes," he gestured to them before slipping out of the stadium after Sara and Laila, giving the foxes a short salute before the door closed behind him, the sun glowing behind them.

***

The interview passed in a blur and, if Neil was honest, he wasn’t really paying much attention to any of it. He was still high on the excitement of the win and Wymack had forbidden him from saying anything to the reporters after the last few blow-ups.
Finally the last of the reporters were escorted away and the foxes began to make their way to the old locker rooms to pick up all the gear they had locked away before the concert.

They trekked their way back to the hotel and as soon as they walked in the room Neil was hit with a wave of exhaustion. He put his instruments on the ground and wandered over to the bed.

He was asleep in an instant.

***

The thing about Renee was that she tended to speak in understatements. Andrew wasn’t quite sure why she did that, but he knew that was just her MO. She pretended like straight just about as long as Andrew did- hell, still does. She downplayed her crush on Allison to tuck away the soul-crushing, all consuming attraction she had for a one, Ms. Allison Reynolds.

So when she said that Stephanie’s article was going to be on the news, she meant all the news, everywhere.

Stephanie and Renee, sometime while they were rescuing Jean, found evidence of the torture the students as Edgar Allen, particularly the ones directly involved with Riko.

There were pictures of the bruises and transcriptions and the audio versions of everything they said.

They had seen Riko melting down, and the Ravens were in a tither, their once strong and powerful leader being reduced to a child that raged and threw a fit when he didn’t get what he wanted. He was unstable and that scared him. The unpredictability was scarier than his deliberate abuse- each day they lived lived in fear of when he’d turn against all of them.

They were scare so they sought sanctuary, and Renee was their Ellis island. Neil was eating his cereal on the bed, eyes glued to the TV.

The news didn’t disappear over night and it was all anyone could talk about. Although the music student competitions weren’t on the radar of most people, Riko’s prolific abuse and torture was unprecedented, especially including his age and fancy status. Those things were meaning less every single day.

The whole thing was a shitstorm of the greatest proportions, but Andrew could tell that Neil was drinking it in, fanning the fire where he could. Kevin had been horrified at first, but soon his demeanor changed. In private he still feared him, but the stage no longer belonged to Riko anymore. It was all of theirs. He held his head straight up and he took it.

From what Andrew could gather, it looked like Jean was taking it just as bad as Kevin, if not worse, considering he was the one in many of the videos. His face was obscured but his build was unmistakable. If this had been school, teachers would confiscated phones when they heard one of the notes of the crude video and audio. But this wasn’t school and they all saw enough that Andrew was unable to remove the sickening images from Andrew’s mind.

There were snippets of Riko carving Neil’s skin and he could swear Neil often looked seconds away from a full blown panic attach, the smell of his burning flesh hammering at his olfactory senses.

The identities of the victims had been protected and Stephanie’s lips were tightly sealed, not willing to expose the people who had already been abused so much to the onslaught of prying reporters.

Everywhere people were demanding for a Tetsuji’s resignation, and for Riko’s arrest. Groups were getting together and demanding justice.
It was a hurricane of chaos and they were right in the middle of it.

***

They still had the entirety of Saturday left in LA and they were free to spend it however they wanted. They had started the day touring the secret hotspots of LA with the Trojans while Jean and Kevin tried to tenuously repair their relationship, the exposure of Riko’s transgressions and crimes leaving the both of them feeling lost.

Neil stayed out of their conversations, watching as they edged closer to each other, Jeremy acting as a buffer.

They walked the streets, enjoying the nightlife and the bright neon lights. He was lagging towards the back with Andrew, playing the alphabet game as they pointed out signs that began with the next letter of the alphabet. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the glint of black chrome beneath the streetlights, the car moving at a careful pace, just behind him.

The car reached his side and the driver rolled down the window just enough for Neil to catch a glimpse of slicked back hair and sunglasses even though it was nighttime and the man was driving in a tinted car. His eyes were a command and Neil felt himself loosening his hold on Andrew’s hand.

“I’ll be right back.”

Andrew studied his face and his eyes slowly traveled to the yakuza gang member.

“Andrew, I’ll be back at the hotel just before check in with the rest of the foxes and then we’ll all go out to dinner.”

Andrew’s eyes moved back to the man.

“Andrew, he’s not going to kill me. If they were they wouldn’t be picking me up in such a public place.”

Andrew was reluctant. “Nine.”

Neil nodded. “Nine.” And with one final squeeze he let go, heeding towards the black sedan.

The let him open the door for himself and he settled comfortably into the back seat.

After a moment they were driving at regular speed, making their way deeper and deeper into the Los Angeles metropolis. It was getting dark but Neil was surprised to find that he recognized some of the places they passed until they stopped in front of the theater they had performed at just the night before.

The driver pulled the car into park and got out, Neil quickly following his lead.

They bypassed the main entrance and went to the backdoor Neil had been through just the other day with the foxes. They skirted around the backstage and the front lobby, heading straight for the stairs to the reserved section.

He led him up to one of the private boxes that overlooked the theater. Usually these boxes were reserved for the theater’s wealthier patrons, though Neil supposed Ichirou could be considered one of them. The box was familiar looking, and he wouldn’t have been surprised if he had been there before. He wouldn’t have put it past his father to take him there on one of his deals. He almost expected to see old, faded stains from where the leftover blood had splattered every time Nathan
raised his cleaver to make another hack.

But the walls were stainless. He remembered that they had been covered in sheer plastic, a thick durable kind that made him feel as though he was in a Ziploc bag. The plastic on the walls had been taped in such a way that it connected to the floor and the ceiling sheets of plastic.

Now the plastic was nowhere to be seen and his father had been dead for 56 days. Now the only people in the room were Ichirou, Tetsuji, Riko, the man that had escorted him in and another man that must have been part of Ichirou’s private guard.

He wondered if it was hot for them to be wearing those suits all the time. He doubted they would even answer him if he asked.

Across for him was, again, Ichirou Moriyama. Despite the years that had passed and the considerable strain that had probably befallen him during that time, he still retained some of his youthful glow.

“Mr. Josten. You are still going by that these days, correct?”

“Yes, lord Moriyama.”

Ichirou appraised him and regarded him with the slightest bit of satisfaction.

“I see you remember your place.”

“One cannot forget a position so graciously given by your lordship,” Neil replied, head still inclined slightly.

Ichirou nodded and gestured for him to right himself. He complied.

“You have been a very tricky person to get ahold of, Mr. Josten.”

“I apologize.”

“Your father is no longer part of the problem that we have to face. The FBI, however, have caused quite a bit of difficulty.”

“Believe me when I say that I was not thrilled by their involvement, either.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t, seeing as they used you as bait to capture your father’s inner circle and file larger charges against him.” He let out a s off of disdain. “They were too weak to do their work on their own so they had to use a child. It is truly pathetic.”

“I agree.”

“Nevertheless, despite their incompetence, they still are a hindrance.”

“I agree. I wish to no longer have any ties with them, and I will continue to express it to them as long as is necessary.”

“According to my sources, they have been playing less attention to you now that your father’s dead, as well as his closest employees. In a few years, they will most mostly have forgotten you. That is when that you will be of use to me.”

“Whatever you wish.”

“It has come to my attention that you have been training to become a tattoo artist. Is that correct?”
“Yes, my lord.”

“You will be in charge of detailing/branding my circle as well as the ones below them. We need someone who can keep their mouth shut and has had a proven track record of this. You seem to be that person.

“You have dealt with the police, established yourself as a young adult who just wants to start over, and you have no ties to your father. You have also proven yourself able to withstand immense amounts of torture and interrogation without giving up information, and you were able to keep secrets when in immense pain and under the influence of pain medication. These are the types of people I wish to ally myself with.”

“I will tie myself solely to the Moriyama family, my lord, to you.”

“Good. You will be informed of your duties as they arise.”

“What about Jean and Kevin?”

“They will know. They know they belong to the family. I know they have been concerned with how they will be of service to the family in the coming years. If they make it professionally, they will be giving a significant portion of their earnings to the business.”

Neil nodded.


Neil walked over to where Ichirou stood by the window and looked down at the theater below them. Neither of them looked at each other when Ichirou began to speak.

“You and your team performed respectability,” Ichirou told him, without even turning from where he faced out the window at the now nearly empty stage below, occupied only by a janitor dancing to whatever music was pounding through his headphones. “I have some business to take care of,” he said as he left Neil by the window. Neil heard the smooth slide of metal against metal and a slight click.

The janitor was now dancing with his mop. He was pretty good. Neil didn’t know how he’d fare with an actual partner, but he might have had a chance.

Then there was the sound of a silenced gunshot and the sound of a slumping body.

“Neil.”

Neil turned from the window and walked over to where Ichirou beckoned him, stepping around Riko’s dead body.

“I am not someone to be trifled with.”

“Yes, my lord. I know.”

“Good. You may go. You have some celebrating to do.”

Neil bowed. “Yes, my lord.”

“You are dismissed.” Neil bowed before backing out of the room. He almost tripped as he pushed the door open and left the building. He made his way dumbly over to the shiny black car and climbed back inside, staring blankly ahead. Andrew probably knew what kind of car it was. Maybe
he would ask.

The trip back seemed much faster that the first leg, though he supposed that was due to the lack of tension. They let him out near his hotel and he walked back to the room he and Andrew shared, dazed.

He unlocked the door and walked in. Andrew looked up at him, raising an eyebrow.

“You were almost late.”

Neil didn’t know what to say but as he opened his mouth peals of laughter spilled out. Andrew eyed him warily. Andrew walked forward and lifted his hand up by Neil’s neck and he nodded. Andrew pressed down until Neil could finally grasp his control and started to breathe. When he was finally able to breathe again he looked up over at Andrew, who’s eyes were on him.

“Andrew. Andrew, everything is going to be fine.’

***

It had been about a month since their win, the Ravens exposure, and a Riko’s death and things were going about as smoothly as one might think.

The news of Riko’s death was succeeded by a wave of controversy, and Andrew decided not to let the debate over whether Riko should be pitied or reviled even enter in his mind. It was enough for him to know that bastard was dead and see that secret, sneaky smile of Neil’s that meant he remembered Riko’s “suicide.”

It was a strange thing to see cut across Neil’s face in the middle or class or while he was making pancakes, but then again, Andrew was put really one to promote appropriate behavior.

Neil was in the middle of sorting his backpack, which entailed dumping all of his crap out on the floor and going through each item, each individual piece of paper, one at a time.

It was a very involved process, one that required Andrew to do some knock-off version of twister to move around the apartment, but it would be worth it because Neil had promised to clean the floors when he was done.

There was knock at the door and Neil looked up at him where Andrew was sitting crisscrossed on the counter.

“Would you mind getting that?”

“I’m not the one who left a mine field in the living room.”

Neil huffed but dragged himself to his feet, picking his way through the trash and reaching for the door with silver and grime covered fingers.

He pulled open the door to reveal a tall man in a posh coat and scarf.

“Nathaniel.”

“It’s Neil,” Neil replied, closing the door, allowing the man to remain inside.

There was and uncomfortable air between them, though it seemed to be due more to unfamiliarity than fear.
Neil turned to him.

“Andrew this is my uncle Stuart.”

He stared at him.

Stuart studied him. “Interesting friend, Neil.”

“Yeah.” Neil said slowly, eyeing Stewart warily. “Not that I don’t enjoy seeing you in very different circumstances than last time, but why are you here?”

“Ichirou has put us in charge of cleaning out the leftovers. Nathan’s gang and the likes. People his brother was involved with.”

They stilled.

“Why is this of any relevance to us?” Andrew asked coolly. “The Wesninskis are dead.”

“There were other people Riko was involved with. He used a doctor that went to the prisons. Proust.”

“And.” his voice was cold. He refused to think of the card, of the implications, the memories Proust was going to try and invoke. He refused.

“And he also like to talk to an inmate there. Drake.”

Andrew was sure Neil could feel him tense beside him. Neil stayed determinedly calm.

“Yes,” Stuart nodded, as if responding something that had not said. “Well Proust is under trial with the Moriyama’s but I know he won’t make it out. Drake though, we got rid of. Somehow his fellow inmates found out he was a pedophile.”

“They did.” He felt hollow.

“Yeah. He was shanked forty-five times.”

He wished his hand had been on the hilt of that knife.

“Did he stay alive the whole time?” He heard Neil ask on the far reaches if his mind.

“It seems like it. They left him to bleed out in the hall. By the time the guards found him he was dead. Painfully.”

It felt like the world was swimming in and out of focus at a dizzying speed. Things were simultaneously slow and fast and it felt like he was slipping out of consciousness with his eyes wide open. He didn’t hear Stuart leave and he didn’t hear the door close. When he finally staggered back to reality the sun was going down and Neil was sitting across from him on the floor, waiting.

Drake was dead and his body and his mind were filled with incomprehensible and tumultuous thoughts and an aching emptiness in his torso, in his chest, in his ribs.

He should have been happy or relieved but what he felt was indescribable.

He lowered himself to the floor until he was sitting across from Neil. And when he looked up he saw the eyes of someone who had sat where he sat, who knew what it was like for his long time abuser to be dead at the hands of another, trying to wrap his mind around it.
“Drake’s dead,” he said.
And that was all he could say.

***

Neil was nervous. His hands were starting to sweat and waves of anxiety seemed to lap up against the lining of his esophagus. He should have been more prepared for this moment, he was more prepared for this moment, but right then it seemed like everything he had learned over the past three years was slipping from his mind like water held in cupped palms.

“Here you go. Your first customer.” Wymack called over to him across the parlor.

He pushed himself off the counter and made his way over to Wymack. There was a part of his that wanted to bolt and run before he could fail, before Ichirou could know the mistake he had made and kill Neil for not having any potential. Neil bit back his nervousness and turned to look at the broad man in front of him.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Wymack said. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

Neil nodded and turned to his customer as he slipped on his gloves.

“I’m Neil.”

“James,” the man muttered, eyes going warily to the tattoo gun seconds away from being used. Neil watched him.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

The man was still before he nodded, slow but determined. He rolled up his sleeve to reveal a large patch of mottled skin caused by something Neil was all too familiar with.

“I’m a firefighter,” James explained, not looking at Neil, “the building was coming down. I made it out. That should be all that matters, you know? But people stare.”

Neil hesitated before he reached down to his own sleeve, rolling it up to reveal his scars etched there courtesy of Lola and the beginnings of the tattoos Dan was marking on his arms.

“Scars invite a lot of questions about things I don’t want to discuss yet,” Neil started, not really sure what he was trying to say. “I don’t know if I’ll ever stop covering them up. Not yet. I saw them as a reminder of why to keep running, why I couldn’t look back,” he turned his arm, showing how the white lines and burns transformed with black lines and script, “these remind me of why I’m staying.”

He looked up and met the man’s eyes. “Tattoos are the scars we choose.”

James swallowed and nodded. “I’m ready.”

Neil studied the design he wanted and went through the preparation he had practiced over and over before he pulled out his machine and began. It was invigorating, freeing even, to watch as the dark lines appeared on the man’s skin. They were exact, and practiced. These people were controlling their own life, their own bodies.

Neil had been raised to deal out pain, but now he was able to take the skills that were deemed caustic and ugly by society and use them to make something touching and beautiful in real life. He wielded a different weapon with Wymack, using pain and ink to create something beautiful on other people.
He and his father had followed so closely in each other’s paths, each using flesh as a canvas, and the similarities always used to terrify him. But now he could see how different they were. Their similarities did not make them the same people. Neil was his own, and for the first time in his life he was actually free.

***

January and February passed in a blur until they were thrown into the middle of March, their own personal, temporary spring.

The days were getting longer and there were times when Andrew and Neil would actually get to auditorium to prep for the prom and it would still be light out.

By this point they each had a designated set of painting clothes so covered in paint they were almost stiff.

Andrew was almost surprised by how fast they were working through all of this, especially when it was only Neil and himself, with the occasional help of Kevin and Robin.

Kevin was in charge of finding tables and chairs for the dance, which was proving to be quite difficult seeing as not a single employee at the school put things back in the same spot, which meant that Kevin was running around asking every teacher where the tables were like he was on a wild goose chase.

Kevin hit his head back against the gym wall, right underneath the colorful countdown he had made until the prom.

You’re going to get brain damage if you do that.” Neil tossed over his shoulder unhelpfully .

“Shut the fuck up.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I’m trying to be a nice person. I thought you might appreciate the effort.”

“Consider your effort not appreciated.”

“Oh! Do you feel that Andrew? It’s so cold in here. Zero degrees Kevin? I mean Kelvin?”

Kevin groaned so loudly that it might have actually been a cry for help and pulled himself to his feet. “I’m going to go look for the folding chairs. Try not to kill off the last few remaining brain cells you have left with those paint fumes.”

“Love you too, Kevin,” Neil called after Kevin’s departing figure.

Kevin flipped him the bird.

Neil chuckled to himself. “Hey you want to head back? We’ve done a lot today.”

He shrugged. “Whatever.” They cleaned up their spot and supplies and made it back toward their apartment in record time.

He went straight to putting his stuff away while Neil sifted through the mail.

“Mail, Andrew.”

Fuck. He hated the mail. There were only two things that came in the mail: crap and bills.
“Andrew, mail.”

“I don’t want to look at it.”

“Andrew.” Neil’s voice sounded odd and when Andrew looked over at him he say Neil’s eyes glued to the envelopes. “They’re from colleges.”

“What.”

“They’re from colleges. You applied?”

“I figured why not.”

He had a stack of them out in front of him. “Are you going to open them?”

He glared at the offending letters and pulling out his knife to cut them open, one after the other, carelessly.

To Mr. Minyard.

We are pleased to inform you-

He tossed it aside and picked up the next one.

Mr. Andrew Minyard

Congratulations! All of your hard work has paid off.

He picked up the next.

Dear Andrew,

You will be happy to know-

He went through letter after letter. All of them saying the same thing.

We have seen your performance-

Excel in your academics-

It didn’t make any sense. He wasn’t any of the things they were saying. They had to have confused him with someone else.

Aaron. They had him confused with Aaron.

He would have thought that colleges would have been more organized than that. He shouldn’t have thought so highly of them. They were just organizations made up of people. Kevin would have a field day with a screw up this big. He’d probably send email after email. This is just unprofessional. I expected more from you.

“-drew. Andrew. Can you hear me?”

“What?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He crumpled the letter in his hand and picked up the other letters, wadding them up in to a
large ball and chucked it against the wall. “I’m fine, Neil,” he added mockingly.

“Can I look at them?” Neil asked, gesturing at the wad.

“Knock yourself out. I don’t give a shit.” He grabbed his coat from where it was resting on the counter and pulled it on and went out the door. He didn’t even hear it as the door slammed behind him. He pulled his coat tighter as he walked over to the park and pulled out his cigarettes and lighter. He smoked through half of the pack before he made his way back to the apartment.

When he came back the letters were all smoothed out, but not enough to completely erase the crinkles that had formed.

“You made it into all of them Andrew,” Neil murmured, eyes never straying from the crumpled paper in front of him.

He shrugged and walked over to the fridge and shut it.

“We’re out of ice cream.”

“Why did you do this?”

“It was a mistake.” He opened the drawer and pulled out spoon and shut the drawer with a squeal. He’d have to ask Wymack if he had anything for that.

“It’s not a mistake.”

“They got me mixed up with Aaron,” he shrugged.

“No, they didn’t.”

“It’s not that much of a mistake people kid up twins all the time.”

“That didn’t happen, Andrew.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. I know what schools Aaron applied to. Katelyn told me. He didn’t apply to any of these. You did.” He eyes flashed over to Andrew, sparking with that passion that made him so intoxicating in the first place.

“Why wouldn’t they take you, Andrew? You were vice president last year and president this year. You’re part of an established band. You have a perfect GPA. You have a job, you’re an emancipated minor, you’re independent. Your SATs are almost perfect, too. Andrew this may be many things but this was not a mistake. Some of these colleges are offering you full rides.”

“Shut up.”

“Andrew you’re worth so much. Kevin saw it. Wymack saw it. I know Bee sees it. I see it. And now everybody else is finally starting to see it too. Don’t get angry because everybody can see it except you.”

Neil put the smoothed out letters on the counter and pushed them over in Andrew’s direction. “Choose one or don’t, it’s up to you. Whatever you choose I’ll still be here. Just, “ he played with the edges of the paper, “just don’t give up before you’ve given yourself a chance.” He walked around the counter and grabbed his keys and wallet. “I’m going to the grocery store to pick up some ice cream. I’ll be back.” And with that he walked out of the apartment, leaving Andrew with a pile of
paper heavier than anything he had ever known.

He had never expected to actually get in, but now he had and his future was filled with options.

He hadn’t really allowed himself to hope when he applied and now-

“I’m back,” Neil said and he placed the ice cream on the counter and sat down beside him and pulled out two spoons.

They took turned with the ice cream, steadily scraping away the soft top layer.

“It feels like hope,” he found himself saying. *I’ve never know what it was like to have that before*, he didn’t have to say.

“Hope is a dangerous, disquieting thing,” Neil mused.

And Andrew’s eyes caught on the young man right next to him, the future he never knew he had, the future he never knew how to hold on to, and he couldn’t help but think that whatever came next, he could handle it.

“I don’t know. I think perhaps I like it.”

***

The dawn was just starting to break, the pale light just starting to filter through the window above their heads. Neil stared sleepily at Andrew, face calm and still with sleep. Neil had just woken slowly a moment before, but he was content just to stay there. He didn’t want to get up. He just wanted to stay in bed a bit longer. It was comfortable and warm with the blankets pulled up to their chest.

Andrew’s hair was messy- sticking out at odd angles where he had rubbed it on his pillow. The soft light of dawn made his face look gentle. The pure light was clear, he could even see the particles of dust floating through the air, the pale hair on his face illuminated.

Andrew was never one for sleep so it didn’t take long for him to be roused. He blinked sleepily at Neil, taking his time to wake up. There was no need for him to be alert yet.

“Staring.”

Neil just hummed instead of saying anything.

“You’re not out running.”

Neil hummed again. “I wanted to stay in bed a little longer.” The unspoken question *Do you want to stay with me?* hovered between them

Andrew pulled the blanket up higher and just stared at him. Neil raised his hand between them in question. Andrew placed his hand in his own. Their fingers entwined together. Neil could feel the rough texture of his hand, the callouses rough under his fingers. He brought their hands closer to him, his breath brushing along their fingers. His eyes were locked with Andrew’s as he asked silent permission. Andrews hand tightened a bit before Neil brought his fingers to his lips, lightly brushing his lips across the backs of Andrew’s fingers, before slowly pressing them down. Andrew pulled their hands down and lent forward, dragging his hair along the pillow until he was at the edge. Neil leaned forward before their faces were inches apart.

“Yes or no.”
“Yes.”

Andrew leaned forward, placing his lips on Neil’s, their noses bumping as they met in the middle. The kiss was slow and lazy. It was comfortable and warm and Neil couldn’t help but thinking that he would be happy in this moment forever.

But unfortunately, life had other plans. Around noon Neil was forced to drag them out of bed to head over to Wymack’s, having just received a frantic email from Nicky with a lot of emojis and exclamation points saying that Kevin had just received his letter from Juilliard.

When they arrived at Wymack’s apartment Kevin’s anxiety and fear were still at a stalemate. His gaze was so focused on the letter in his hands he hadn’t even heard them come in.

Kevin stared at the letter for what felt like hours before his fingers finally flipped it over. Neil could see how his fingers were trembling. The scars on his hand were close in color to the letter. He bestowed before he steeled himself and began tearing open the envelope.

He read it and he read it again, face more impassive each time.

Nicky was fidgeting by his side.

“What does it say?”

Kevin opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. He tried again but to no avail. He shoved the letter in Wymack’s hands and dropped onto the couch, head in his hands.

Neil stood on his tip-toes to read over Wymack’s arm, but Wymack moved over to Kevin. “It’s your letter, son.”

Kevin pulled his face out of his hands and took the letter with shaking hands and began to read.

“To Mr. Kevin Day,

Thank you do much for your application to Juilliard. We are pleased to inform you—” but he couldn’t get the rest of the words out before a sharp, choked sound slipped from his lips. He dropped the letter to the table and covered his mouth with his hands.

Nicky leaped in the air and whooped, flinging his arms around everyone in a hug. Kevin gave him a shaky smile and everyone began talking a mile a minute. The excitement in the room was tangible, the electric energy of it thrumming through Neil’s veins.

He saw Kevin excuse himself to the kitchen to get a glass of water and Neil felt the urge to follow behind him.

Kevin was standing by the kitchen sink, filling up a glass that had long since started overflowing, eyes transfixed on nothing.

Neil walked over and turned off the water and Kevin’s eyes jumped over to him.

“Is there a reason you’re not out there celebrating?”

“I got into Juilliard.”

“I’m aware.”

“You don’t get it Neil. Juilliard is everything. It always has been. It’s where my mother went. She
was one of the most promising students to ever walk out of there. Wymack met her there. It's my past, it's my present, it's my future. Everything I have ever done is to help me get in there. Riko—” he shook his head. “I spent years in the nest learning how to get in, how to be the best, once I got in. Everything I’ve ever done had been to lead me to this moment, but now that I’m here, i don’t know what to do next.”

Neil leaned on the counter next to him, mulling over his words. “Look, Kevin,” he paused trying to think of the right thing to say. “I know this isn’t the same, but when I was growing up, nothing was set in stone, except the fact that I was going to die. I had no future, hell, I didn’t even think I’d still be alive by this point. But now that I’m here, that I’m alive and will be for the foreseeable future, there are all sorts of things I have to worry about now. And that’s fucking terrifying.” He shook his head. “Kevin, you’ve been through hell and you survived. Not many people can say that. The fact that you’re scared just means you’re human, something Riko never allowed you to be.

“So as far as what you’re supposed to do next, I don’t know. Go to Juilliard, ask Thea to prom, fucking live your life without the idea that you shouldn’t be allowed to. You deserve that much, Kevin. The fear might always be there, but since when has that stopped you before?”

Kevin stood still before he nodded, picking up his glass of water and downing the entire thing in one go.

“I’m ready.”

***

The problem with being a part of the prom committee was that while all the other attendees were out eating dinner, they had to go down to the school early to set up.

Nicky had volunteered to drive them over, not trusting them to keep their suits wrinkle free on the way over.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” he explained, twisting the keys in the ignition, “though I don’t, it’s that I don’t trust public transportation to give you enough undisturbed space to put your suits.”

“Well, it’s not like they have clothing racks on the bus- hey! What do you mean you don’t trust us?” Neil sputtered the last words, utterly offended.

“Please, as if you two wouldn’t just chuck you suits in the truck of the car.”

Neil managed a few disgruntled murmurings, but he couldn’t deny it.

“And anyway, I worked too hard getting your suits pressed for my efforts to be wasted.”

“You hung them up in the bathroom while people showered.”

“Which I did not have to do.” He flicked the turn signal and pulled into the school parking lot. “You’re welcome.”

Nicky put the car in park and they all began to pile out of Bee’s van to make their way to the gymnasium.

“Thanks Nicky,” they called out as they exited the vehicle.

“It’s not problem. Have fun, be safe!” he called after them. Andrew closed the backseat door and Nicky turned to him. “Hey Andrew, can I talk to you for a minute?”
He turned and walked over to the passenger-side door and closed it as he took a seat next to Nicky. “I needed to tell you something. Well, you and Aaron, but I was planning to tell him later.”

He shot him a look that said, go on.

“I'm leaving next year,” Nicky said, hands tightening around he steering wheel, “after you and Aaron graduate. Aaron won't need me. He'll have a dorm and be in college. You, too. I know you two can take care of each other even if you two aren’t going to the same school.”

“Are you going to move in with Erik?”

Nicky gave him a watery smile. “Yeah. I can’t wait. I love him so much, you know?”

“Yeah.” He pulled his eyes away from Nicky’s. “You deserve to be happy,” he said and he knew that he meant it.

“I know. It took me a long time to realize that but I know that now. I thought I should have to suffer because somebody else thought I should. But that not really fair, you know?” He looked over at Andrew. “You deserve it too, Andrew. I know I haven't always gotten you, and heaven knows I probably never will. You and Neil are fucking weird sometimes.” He shook his head but he looked back up to meet Andrew's eyes. “But I want you to be happy. And if you and Neil with whatever you two are doing is how that's happens, I'll support you all the way.”

He swallowed.

Nicky held out his arms. “Hug?”

“No.”

Nicky chuckled. “Yeah, I should have guessed as much.” He pulled out his fist. “Fist bump?”

He indulged him and if he stored away Nicky bright smile at the acceptance, that was nobody’s business.

When he made it into the auditorium, Aaron, Katelyn, Kevin, and Neil had already moved all of the decorations out of the supply room and they had already hung their suits and Katelyn’s dress up on one of the racks.

They made quick work of setting everything up, but even then they only managed to finish a mere half-hour before the prom was set to begin.

Kaitlin, Aaron, and Kevin had already gone in and changed into their formalwear and Katelyn was trying to tidy up the last remaining stray strands of hair.

As they stepped into the room, Andrew took it all it.

The senior prom. Andrew didn’t really know what he expected, but everything they had worked on was rendered unimpressive under the low light. He had seen a lot of proms in the movies that Allison showed them, but none of them even compared to what was in their gymnasium. Desperation and budget cuts weren’t a good mix for a prom committee.

But still there was something sort of endearing about it. The quirkiness of it all. Maybe time was just making him soft, or he was growing sentimental, he didn’t know.

He felt Neil tug at his sleeve abs they went into the storage closet and changed into their suits.
“Fuck, I just realized, this is our last dance,” Neil muttered, hands messing with his fox tie.

“Just be glad that you aren’t on the student council. You actually have the option of leaving.”

“And leave you here to have all the fun? Like hell.” His lips had a playful quirk to them and Andrew was tempted to lean forward and kiss it away.

There was rapping at the door and the moment was over. He opened the door to Katelyn.

“The people are coming. You two have first shift at the ticket booth, right?”

Neil nodded and they made their way to the lobby area outside the gymnasium and sat down at they little table they had label the ticket booth.

The moment the doors were open they were bombarded by students lining up to get in and they were rapidly stamping the tickets and had been printed to look like pages of a passport.

They worked until their fingers were stained with ink and one of the teachers came to relieve them of their duties.

Andrew stepped out of the building and lit a cigarette, taking a moment to catch his breath. Neil held his own cigarette, lighting it on the tip of Andrew’s, letting it burn down to the filter.

He wasn’t sure how long they stood out there, only that Neil cigarette had lazily burned its way almost to Neil’s fingertips and that Andrew and long since dropped his burned-out one on the concrete.

Neil dropped his cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. “We should go in eventually. You only get one senior prom.”

Andrew snuffed the last remain embers of his own cigarette and then they turned and pressed their way in through the double doors to their prom.

Apple bottom jeans

Boots with the fur.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Andrew muttered and Neil couldn’t help but laugh. They watched as all the other kids danced in a way that would have had Kevin breathing into a paper bag. It was almost amusing, but it was more fun to watch Neil’s face. Around Andrew he rarely hid what he was thinking, his face an open book.

“Andrew, Andrew do you hear that?”

“Only the sounds of screaming teens.”

“No, not that. The music, Andrew. Listen.”

You’re always hoping that we make it

You always want to keep my gaze

Well you’re the only one I see

And that’s the one thing I won’t change
He listened and the unmistakable sounds came to his ears.

“That-“

Neil was jumping up. “That’s our song. Andrew. They’re playing our song. They’re playing our song.”

“Junkie,” he said but Neil smile was infectious and his happiness was contagious. He radiated it and Andrew couldn’t help but absorb the warmth. And he looked out at the crowd around them to see their peers swaying with eyes closed, singing along. He had always thought he’d hate others people listening to his music, but he found that it wasn’t so bad. Maybe it wasn’t so bad at all.

He had always thought they were so different, and he wasn’t really keen on being associated with them. But the thought that some of the words he said spoke to someone else meant something. The thought that he said something and people were finally listening, was incomprehensible.

With the music blasting loud enough to obliterate any other sound, what he was saying was being heard. No one knew it was him, but he didn’t think he would change that. The anonymity protected them. They could think whatever they wanted about the singer. No matter who sang it, the words would still be the same.

And when he looked back at Neil’s, his face beautiful and radiant, Andrew wished he read more, because the words he had weren’t enough.

Fuck, when did he get like this? If he didn’t have all of this, what would he have become? If things had been different, if they hadn’t. He didn’t want to admit it, but he knew where he’d be. He’d be alone or he’d be dead. Neil would be dead, too. They both would have been gone, and no one would have known that they were real, that they were more than just a problem for someone else to deal with. They were real and they were there. And for once he didn’t want to leave.

He spotted Kevin’s dumbstruck face from across the room, finally quiet. No criticism spilling out. And he looked like he was about to cry. He tore his eyes away from him to catch the flash of color that was whirling part him and barreling into Neil.

Katelyn came running up to them, Aaron trailing behind her and she leaped and pulled Neil into a hug and he caught her, laughing as she told them congratulations. Aaron didn’t say anything, but when he looked at Andrew and he smiled a little before leaving with Katelyn. And as Andrew watched them walk across the gymnasium he could feel Neil come up to his side, feel his warmth bled into him and it wasn’t bad.

It wasn’t bad at all.

*I’ll never stop choosing you babe*

*I’ll never get used to you.*

***

Neil has been buzzing high on adrenaline all night and when they came back to Wymack’s he all but burst through the door, interrupting what looked like a very intense game of UNO.

“What’s going on kid? You came in here like a hurricane.”

“They played our song, Wymack. At the dance. They played it. People are actually listening to it.” And his mouth creased up in a look of pride and Abby came up to him and gave him a large hug.
And he relished it, her comfort and the way she wasn’t leaving him.

Kevin jumped in talking excitedly about every detail and Katelyn and Thea joined in with their own observations and comments until they were all chatting a laughing and smiling. It felt so amazing and as he looked around, Neil supposed this was what family was supposed to feel like

***

The world whirled around them in the days that followed. Finals passed in a wave of blissful silence and pencil lead and way too many bubble sheets, and then graduation was upon them before they knew it.

Everything was moving so fast. He had already accepted the offer to Palmetto State and Nicky was packing his things to move out of town to Germany. After his summer classes he would have finished his degree and would be leaving to live with Erik. Aaron had gotten into university with Katelyn. He had been hoping to avoid their sappy lovey-dovey faces but he found he might miss them over the next few years.

Neil came into the living room tying his tie.

“I still don’t understand why they’re making us dress up for this thing.”

“This is the point where our lives change Neil,” he intoned, perfectly mimicking the monotone infection Mr. Howard had used the past few weeks when explaining the importance of graduation.

He moved closer and gestured to Neil’s tie. Neil gave up and let him work at it. To think, there had been a day where he would have been more inclined to strangle him than help him. He told himself that things hadn’t changed that much. “This is the moment where we get our first taste of adulthood,” he finished.

Neil looked down at his tie and smiled appreciatively. He snorted. Andrew pretended it wasn’t endearing. “As if we don’t already know what adulthood is like.”

They walked down the stairs and nodded at their neighbors and walked to the bus stop, plastic gowns flowing behind them. It was too hot to zip them up. They pulled the cord at their stop and climbed off the bus.

They made it to their school and walked to the lineup. He could see the other foxes milling around trying to find seats.

There was only an hour left before they never had to see these people anymore. He didn’t really believe in new starts- he didn’t really think that was possible; the past followed too closely, held on too fiercely to ever be let go of completely- but he did think this could be a new chapter.

They found their place in the procession, many of the students talking to Neil as he took his spot in the middle of the line.

Andrew took his spot near the front of the line and waited, ignoring he others who tried to talk to him.

It wasn’t long before the music began playing and the teachers began herding them forward to the chairs that had been set up on the lawn. The school was small so they all knew each other. There was speech after speech made and finally they began to be called up to the stage. He grabbed his diploma holder and bypassed the principal’s hand as he walked off the stage. There weren’t very many people in their graduating class, so it want long before Neil got his diploma as well.
When Neil walked up to the stage, head held high, cap perfectly situated atop his head, it was like the world stopped for a moment. He had command of that moment. Neil reached for the principal’s hand to shake it and then they handed it to him. He turned to go face forward and in that moment he held the diploma in the air with his left hand, in stubborn defiance. *You dare throw me to the ground?* his expression said. *I’m not just nothing. I never was.*

The next thing he knew they were all standing and being dismissed from the ceremony. He booked it off the field maneuvering around the crying friends hugging. He was met by Neil who had managed to avoid everybody else, if their speedy reunion were anything to go by.

“That was quick."

“There was no one I needed to say goodbye to.”

They walked over to where Wymack and Nicky and the other foxes were standing. Nicky was crying, blubbering about how they were growing up so fast. Bee smiled at him and he nodded.

“We just have to wait for Aaron and Katelyn.”

But it want long before they too came over. Katelyn only had a few friends left after she had started dating Aaron as she hadn’t hesitated to cut ties with those that were so shallow and judgmental. He made eye contact with Aaron and looked at Kaelyn as Aaron looked at Neil beside them. They met eyes again and there was a sort of olive branch extended between them. Their fights wouldn’t probably ever end completely, but now they had a sort of truce, a sort of peace. Then he turned and followed Wymack out of the school, his family ahead and behind him and Neil beside him. And he didn’t look back.

***

EPILOGUE- 10 YEARS LATER

Neil woke up to a pressing weight on his chest and sharp pinpricks piercing through the thin material of his t-shirt. He pried one eye open to see the tail end of a very fluffy grey cat. He plopped his head back against his pillow and ran his fingers over the fur behind Sir’s ears.

“Hello, Sir.” He slowly leveraged himself up, Sir moving from his chest to his lap. He rubbed the top of Sir’s head one more time before picking him up and setting him to his side as he got up. Sir shot him a look, but Neil was used to it. He yawned and made his way down the hall to the kitchen.

Andrew was already awake, leaning back against the counter, a cup of light brown coffee in his hands. King was by his feet attacking a ball of yarn, pouncing on it before it rolled away. Neil dodged the yarn minefield on the floor and made his way over to the coffee pot and poured his own mug.

“You’re up early.” He murmured into the brim of his mug, body still heavy with sleep.

“Someone had to get up to make the cinnamon rolls for dinner at Wymack.”

Neil hummed and pressed a kiss to Andrew’s cheek. “Like you’d miss one of his dinners for the world.”

“Shut up.”

“Make me.”
And Andrew obliged.

They managed to get ready and not burn the cinnamon rolls all in time to head over to Wymack’s.

Sir and King were not thrilled to be left alone.

“Needy motherfuckers,” Andrew muttered fondly under his breath as they left, as if Neil hadn’t seen him sneak them an extra treat before they left.

Neil always loved these get-togethers. They tried to have them as often as they could, but this time even Nicky was coming down from Germany.

They were all busy now with their own lives, living out their dreams.

Dan now had a degree in teaching and art and used her skills to open a community center known as the Foxhole Court- an organization to help troubled kids channel their energy into positive things like art, music, and dance. Matt used his business degree to take over his mother’s gym as he gave boxing lessons and taught self-defense.

Kevin had gotten a position as a part of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra alongside his wife, Thea. Jean worked there as well as with his fiancé, Jeremy and his other friends Sara and Lilia in their band, *The Trojan Horse*.

Aaron and Katelyn lived nearby in too working as doctors, Katelyn as a biochemist and Aaron working in pediatrics. Nicky was working in marketing alongside Erik in Germany.

Renee and Allison had gotten married many years before and were living down in LA. Allison ran her fashion business out of there and the airport made it easy for Renee to get home after her peace corps missions. Allison had carried through with her own self promises to have clothes for all people and worked to even make athletic wear that was more durable and stylish.

As far as Neil and Andrew were concerned, they had decided to stay in Palmetto alongside Dan and Matt.

Andrew was a social worker, a job he absolutely thrived in. He didn’t hesitate to recommend that his more troubled students to join Dan’s group. Neil used his days off from the tattoo parlor to help teach art at Dan’s group or to help out in Robin and Leroy’s joint kindergarten class.

Things hadn’t been easy over the past few years, but they hadn’t been bad either. Nothing was perfect, and nothing ever would be, but that didn’t invalidate what they had or the time they had together.

“-you two still close?”

“Renee, don’t.”

“We’re Klose!” Nicky laughed. “Get it? ‘Cause we’re married.”

Alison rolled her eyes. “Yes, Nicky, we’ve gotten it the past twenty times you’ve made that joke.”

“You’re a party pooper Allison. Renee you’re a bro,” he held out a fist and she bumped it. He glanced up and held his glass to the air. “Hey, it looks like the Minyard-Jostens are here.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and poured himself a glass of lemonade. “You know we kept our own last names.”
“Well I reserve the right to tease you considering you didn’t invite us to the wedding.”

“It wasn’t really a wedding.” Neil explained for what felt like the thousandth time. “We just went down to the courthouse-”

“Yeah, yeah, come over here. Renee was just telling us about South America.”

And as he looked around him, Neil saw he was surrounded by all those familiar faces he had grown to love, each of them content. They weren’t healed and they weren’t perfectly put-together, but they’d were together. They were his family and his love for them was enough to make his heart ache.

He held his love for them close to his heart

And he never let go.

***

‘Cause they say home is where your home is set in stone

Is where you go when you’re alone

Is where you go to rest you bones

It’s not just where you lay your head

It’s not just where you make your bed

As long as we’re together, does it matter where we go?

***

Just live

Chapter End Notes

So that’s the end! I hope you all liked it (at least the happy parts) I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who took the time to read this. <3 <3 <3 I really, super appreciate it.

Again, like always, I tried to tag everything or mention it at the beginning of the chapter. If I didn’t, please let me know. Also, I apologize for putting apple bottom jeans song in this story again, but that song haunts me and plays everywhere I go, so consider its inclusion a little splash of realism in this wide ride of a story about the mafia.

Thanks =)
Comments, questions, concerns, or problems, feel free to hit me up on my writing tumblr: Tourmaline147

Or my main blog:
horton-hears-a-doctor-who

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!