you say i'm a dreamer, but i'm not the only one.

by Idnis

Summary

Neil Josten wouldn’t say his life was very magical. His dreams on the other hand.

They always seem too real.

And then there's the fact that he finds himself returning to one person's dreams.

Notes

Hello,

it's me again!

SO, credits for me writing like a lunatic and posting another Andreil fanfic go to Marichatskipper for suggesting I write Magic!Neil. I tried my best to make it magical, but it ended up being less like a fairy tale than I wanted. Ah well, that's what you get when writing the Foxhole Court. :'

Enjoy!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"I know you,
I walked with you once upon a dream."

(Sleeping Beauty)

Neil Josten wouldn’t say his life was very magical.
His dreams on the other hand.
They always seemed too real.
Too lucid.
And while he’d been running for such a long time now, running from his father mostly, he never felt like he had to run from these dreams.
Why should he?
They were just dreams after all.
Even if they seemed eerily real.

Tonight was no exception.

After Neil took a last look around, the abandoned building grey and broken and, most importantly, empty except for him, he closed his eyes.
The couch he was lying on was just as worn down as the rest of the building, some of its metal springs digging into his legs and hip.

There was a cold draft,
since the building didn’t have a single wall or window that was still intact.

So it took a while for the shivering to stop.

And it was only late September, Neil remembered.
Not a good sign.
Next time, he should use some of his money to pay for warm lodgings, lest he catch a cold.

But renting a room always left some sort of trace, a mark that he’s been there, and being found meant Neil would feel cold for a long, long time.

He couldn’t remember falling asleep, but when Neil opened his eyes, he was lying on a more
comfortable couch than the one he fell asleep on.

He’d been to this room a couple of times before.

‘Not the shrink’s office again,’ Neil sighed, and immediately heard the answer behind him.

‘Do you see a shrink anywhere?’

Turning around on the couch, Neil watched the blonde haired guy leaning casually against the door post.

‘Seeing as I’m on the couch right now, does that make me the patient and you the shrink?’ Neil joked.

The guy rolled his eyes but decided to humor Neil by walking over to the desk and sitting down on the big swively chair behind it. ‘Okay. Let’s talk about all your mental issues. I’ll act surprised when they’re the same as mine.’

Neil stretched out on the couch, going along with the scenario.

‘Well, let’s see,’ he mused. ‘I’m afraid of heights.’

The guy snorted, but waited silently for Neil to continue.

The only problem was, Neil didn’t know how to continue. He knew for certain the other was afraid of a few things, but they were… not something you joke about.

So Neil sat up and decided to throw caution to the wind by telling the other something about himself.

‘I’m afraid of never having lived.’

The guy squinted at him.

‘Wrong,’ he said. ‘I’m not afraid of that.’

Neil shrugged. ‘I know.’

What followed was an intense stare-off between them, in which Neil noticed for perhaps the hundredth time that the guy’s brown eyes were very mesmerizing to watch, and that Neil had trouble looking away.

But he managed to tear his eyes away after a while, and the guy eventually broke the silence by saying,

‘I didn’t think I was that creative.’

For a split second there was the hope and fear that he would find out.

Find out that Neil’s not.

Because the guy thought Neil was a figment of his imagination.

A manifestation of some part of his own character.

And Neil mostly acted like he was, because it was easier than sharing the fucked up reality of his own life.

What would he even share? How shitty it is to sleep outside?
Yeah no.

‘So how was your day?’ Neil asked, deflecting the topic even though he knew it was useless because the other was very observant.
Which was why the reply wasn’t a surprise.

‘I’m not going to do small talk with my own mind,’ he said. ‘That’s the very definition of being boring.’

When Neil woke up, it was with the rising of the sun, so it had to be pretty early.

He thought about his dream.
They ended up talking about the probability of an airplane crashing somewhere safe, and the weirdest ice cream flavour they could think of.

Stretching his arms above his head, and 

 fuck, they were stiff and painful, Neil packed his bag and set off to another destination.

Maybe he’d find somewhere he could stay semi-permanent.

It was his favourite daydream.

A pretty shabby looking motel would be his lovely new place to sleep.

Neil thought anything was fine as long as he could sit down for a while and rest his feet.

So when he entered the equally shabby and shitty room, he grabbed his bag and held it against his chest as he lay down on the bed.

Sometimes he felt like his dreams were the only positive thing in his life.
He found himself actually looking forward to sleeping, and that couldn’t be normal, could it?
He was supposed to want to live.

But his dreams were more interesting.
And safer.

The wind was tugging harshly at Neil’s hair, threatening to push him over the edge of the hundred story high building.

Luckily it wasn’t a cold wind, and Neil felt grateful for the fact that he always felt warm in his dreams.

It would even be a pleasant sort of scenery, since the sun was setting, dropping into the sparkling sea, colouring all the other buildings and the beach below in warm orange tones.
It would be pleasant, weren’t the roof at least a hundred stories high.
The guy was standing near the edge, frozen to the spot.

‘Hey,’ Neil called out.

No response.

But this dream was a recurring one, and so Neil knew what to do.

Walking closer, he simultaneously took a few steps away from the ledge, until he was behind the guy.

‘Help me,’ the guy said through gritted teeth.

Neil held out his hand.

‘Sure.’

Reaching behind him, the guy found Neil’s hand and gripped it tightly before taking a few steps back, away from the ledge.

His breathing was going fast, and his eyes looked a bit wild.

He hadn’t released Neil’s hand.

Neil didn’t mind.

‘Do you want to wake up?’ he asked him, secretly praying he didn’t, but understanding if he wanted too.

It wasn’t good to linger too long on nightmares.

But to his surprise, the guy gripped his hand even tighter as he said, ‘No.’

Neil nodded.

Then joked,

‘Maybe you should dream a better place than this though.’

‘I can’t dream about better places,’ was the answer.

But their surroundings changed, and morphed into the shrink’s office again.

The dreams had been going on for a year now.

Well, the dreams with the blonde haired guy.

Neil has been visiting dreams for a long while.

One day, all of a sudden, Neil found himself on top of a roof, wind and rain nearly blowing him off his feet, thunder rumbling in the distance, as he saw a blonde haired guy standing near the ledge.

Neil didn’t know who he was or what the guy was going to do, so the first thing he yelled was,
'Don’t jump!'

The guy startled so badly that he nearly fell, and Neil could’ve slapped himself for his own stupidity.

Reacting on instinct, even though the height made his own legs tremble, Neil ran forward and took hold of the guy’s arm, trying to steady him.

‘Let go,’ the guy immediately growled, ripping his arm out of Neil’s grasp.

‘Sorry,’ Neil said, ‘But I think it’s better if you step back.’

Turning his head, the guy looked at him.

The first thing Neil noticed was how grounded he felt with those brown eyes watching him. Even if they were looking at him rather skeptically.

After a few seconds the guy said, ‘I’m not going to jump.’

‘Great,’ Neil sighed in relief. ‘But, what are you doing near the ledge?’

The question was immediately shot back at him. ‘What are you doing near the ledge?’

Neil frowned. ‘I don’t really know.’

Obviously, the guy thought that was weird. Neil could tell because he lifted his eyebrow skeptically.

So Neil said, ‘I think you can explain it better than I can. I’m in your dream after all.’

It was kind of impressive how there was no shock or surprise on the other guy’s face. Just a blank expression, and a skeptical eyebrow.

‘Then I’m going to wake up,’ was what he eventually said, looking bored with the situation.

And he did.

When Neil opened his eyes, he knew he had just visited someone’s dream again. Some completely random guy who seemed terrified of heights.

Grabbing his stuff out of the hotel room, Neil didn’t really think back on it. It would probably be the first and last time he ever saw the guy.

Except it wasn’t.

Just Neil’s luck.

The second time, he found himself standing in an office where everything, from the stationary on the desk to the glass figures on the shelves, was placed rather neatly. Probably someone with OCD, Neil thought.
But when he walked closer to the couch, he saw the rooftop guy lying there.

The guy didn’t look up as he said, ‘Took you long enough bee.’

‘Um,’ Neil said. ‘I’m not an animal, sorry.’

The guy’s head whipped around faster this time, if that was even possible. But when he saw Neil, he seemed to relax again.

‘What? You don’t have better dreams to visit?’ he asked.

‘I don’t really,’ Neil confessed.

The guy shrugged and turned away from Neil. Bored.

Neil wondered what would interest him, then immediately told himself that no he was not supposed to be interested in the people whose dreams he visited.

Because he would never get to know them.

Still, he couldn’t help but ask, ‘You don’t want to know who I am?’

There was no immediate response and Neil feared the guy was doing some meta sleeping but then he said, voice flat, ‘You’re probably a manifestation of some part of me.’

Huh.

That’s a first, Neil thought.

Well, it was also a first that he got to talk so casually with the dreamers.

‘Mm,’ Neil said, pretending to think. ‘And what part do you think I represent?’

Turning around, the guy looked him over slowly.

Neil couldn’t help but stand a little straighter.

And even though those brown eyes looked really, utterly bored right now, they still managed to make Neil feel… seen.

Bad thoughts.

‘Probably my heterosexuality.’

‘Huh?’ Neil said dumbly.

‘Common, boring, and not real.’

That was probably an insult.
‘I don’t think I’m either of those things,’ Neil protested.

The guy waved his words away.
And didn’t speak to Neil anymore.

At the very least, it had been a relaxing dream.

Neil had even wanted to call it boring, but sitting in the back of a greyhound bus that brought him across at least two states, he found himself thinking back on their conversation, and the way he had felt when those eyes were watching him.

It would be nice, Neil thought, to be seen.

But meeting him was out of the question.

And, a more logical reason, Neil would probably never visit one of his dreams again.

Wrong again.

Though it was dark, Neil could see that this time he was in a child’s bedroom.

As per usual, Neil quickly looked around, taking in his surroundings, noting the lack of pictures on the wall and the absence of toys.
There was, however, a razor on the little bedside table.
Strange thing for a child to have.

The guy was sitting on the ground beside his bed, knees raised, arms curled around them.
His head was resting on his arms, so Neil couldn’t see his eyes.

Taking a few hesitant steps forward, which didn’t get him any response, Neil quietly kneeled in front of him.

‘Where are we?’ he asked.

The guy didn’t raise his head,
didn’t look at him,
didn’t even move.

But he said,
‘You should know.’

Neil looked out the window and saw nothing but an overwhelming darkness.
The only light seemed to come from the hallway, as it seeped underneath the bedroom door.

‘Is this your bedroom?’ he asked.

But there was no reaction.
It was, and remained, eerily quiet.

Neil swallowed, feeling incredibly like a trespasser.
This felt personal.
Maybe he should... go?
Yeah, if he knew how.
If he had ever shown any interest in figuring out how this worked.
But he hadn't, because he hadn't wanted to think about his dreams, hadn't wanted to figure out how to control them when he found out he couldn't stop them from happening anyway.

Wanting to show, what, some sort of support?, Neil reached out and lightly touched the guy's arm.

Even though he was wearing long sleeves, so Neil hadn't even touched his skin, the guy jerked back as if the touch had hurt.

'Get away from me,' he ground out.

Neil quickly leaned back, and when his fingers touched the carpet, found that they felt wet. He looked at them and saw they were red with blood.
Not his own blood though.

'I'm sorry,' Neil quickly said, standing up, when all of a sudden the eerie quiet was interrupted by footsteps walking up the stairs.

If Neil thought the guy had been frozen on the ledge of a hundred-story high building, then that was nothing compared to the level of stillness he saw now. As if he wanted to pass for furniture.

Meanwhile, the footsteps were approaching the door.

Neil turned around and saw the shadow of two feet appear underneath the door, breaking up the light.

Behind him, the guy started breathing loudly.

Ever so slowly, the door knob turned, and Neil got the sudden impression that something was about to go horribly, horribly wrong, and as he turned around and saw the guy trembling, arms gripping his legs painfully, eyes wide from fear, Neil made a decision.

It was a sorry ass solution, but it was the only way Neil knew how.

While the door behind him was opening, Neil lurched for the guy, throwing himself to the ground and then, slapping him really hard across the face.

'WAKE U-'

Neil woke up with a start.
.... wellll...

I'm suuuper curious what you think about this premise!
Because this feels so out of my comfort zone for some reason. Don't know why exactly.
Anyways, I hope you enjoyed reading :D !
Hellooo lovely people!

Phew, it's the weekend, and a well-deserved weekend that is, because my first week back at uni was TIRING. Luckily I could catch up on some sleep last night :D
Talking about sleeping, let's see how Neil's doing.

Enjoy!

For some reason, the nightmare stuck with Neil. So much so that he didn’t pay attention to which way he walked and ended up walking in the wrong direction for at least six miles before he noticed the street signs were wrong.

Dragging his feet back was a pain, physical and mental.

When he reached an acceptable looking broken down building, Neil crashed down on the floor, and found himself, for the first time in his life, sort of willing to visit someone’s dream again.

Well, okay, not just someone.

Back at the office again.

Neil didn’t really mind, as he knew what it meant.

And indeed, the guy was sitting on the couch, staring at his hands. ‘You here again?’ he asked without looking up.

Neil remembered the last time they met here and replied, ‘Yeah, still not an animal.’

He walked towards the couch, and, after a few seconds of staring at it stupidly, gingerly sat down. There was a lot of space between them, but he still felt like he was violating the guy’s personal space.

Not that the guy so much as looked at him.

Though Neil wanted him to-

The feeling surprised him,
and so, in order to distract himself from wanting stupid things, Neil blurted out, ‘Why would there be a bee in an office?’

In response, the guy walked towards one of the windows behind the desk.

‘See these?’ He rapped his knuckles against the glass, ‘Know what they are? I’ll tell you. Windows. They are portals to the outside, where, amongst other species, bees reside.’

Neil didn’t know how to respond, torn between thinking the guy was irritating and that his sarcasm was kind of funny.
He settled for an unimpressed snort.

‘I know what they are.’

‘Great,’ the guy replied flatly, ‘You must be my intelligence.’

Okay, definitely bordering on the irritating.
Neil glared at him, thinking of some way to retort, but the guy surprised him by explaining, ‘Bee is short for Betsy. This is her office.’

Neil looked around.
‘She has OCD,’ he remarked.

‘So? That a problem?’

Neil shook his head.
‘No, the problem is more that she’s a shrink.’

The guy now turned his full attention on Neil.
‘Weird,’ he said slowly.

Well, Neil had been called worse.

Being observed by the guy made Neil’s body feel highly alert and sort of strange at the same time, so Neil focused on the fact that it was a little exhausting to keep calling him ‘the guy’. He wanted to ask for his name, then immediately reprimanded himself at the thought. It wasn’t good to get close to the dreamers.
Because, he had never been able to save them.
They always found out.

So Neil forced his gaze away from the guy’s, and opened his mouth to start a new conversation topic when a sudden shout sounded through the room.

‘Andrew, wake up.’

When Neil opened his eyes, looking at the drab ceiling, well, the pieces of ceiling that were left, the first thought he had was

\textit{fuck}.

He hadn’t wanted to hear that.
But it wasn’t like Neil had a choice.

Though he tried to keep his thoughts occupied with something else, as he walked along the side of the road, his thoughts constantly repeated, *Andrew Andrew Andrew Andrew*. 

‘Why are there no other people in your dreams?’ Neil asked, looking around the completely empty airport hall.

An- The guy was standing in front one of the large windows, watching the airplanes. Not one of them was moving, which Neil thought was unusual.

‘You’re here.’

Neil had almost missed the words, too busy observing the very detailed airport hall. Now that he thought back on it, the last couple of locations had also been very detailed. Not many things were blurred or left out. Interesting.

No, Neil immediately corrected himself. Not interesting.

‘Not by choice,’ Neil replied.

The guy looked over his shoulder.

‘Obviously. You’re a manifestation.’

Neil nodded.

He wasn’t.

And for a second it seemed as if the guy didn’t believe Neil’s lie either, his eyes narrowing as they focused on Neil. As they saw Neil.

Neil looked away.

‘So do you usually hang out at airports?’

As Neil dropped onto the bed, it protested loudly against someone lying on it. But what good was it, if it couldn’t be used for what it was meant, Neil thought melodramatically, then closed his eyes.

And dreamt about Exy.

Which was another point on his list of wanting stupid things.

In his dream, Neil ran for the ball, as hard as he could, his breath coming in short pants, and he felt so
alive that a huge smile spread across his face.

The next morning, when Neil woke up, he woke up aching.
He missed Exy.

But,
where had Andrew been?

Last night’s dream had been all his.
He doubted Andrew even knew what Exy was.
Had it stopped?
Would he no longer visit Andrew in his dreams?
Or
Had Andrew simply not slept last night?

It wasn’t his concern, Neil told himself.

When the door of his hotel room rattled, Neil was immediately shocked out of his thoughts, and on instinct grabbed the gun underneath his pillow before jumping to his feet.

It probably wasn’t room service.

Neil had his gun cocked and ready when the door blasted open, the lock shot to pieces by the gun in his assailant’s hands.

‘Stay back,’ Neil threatened, keeping his gun trained on the other guy as he shuffled closer to the window.
He’d left it open an inch.
He always did.

‘Like hell I will,’ the guy grunted, and shot Neil.

Luckily, the bullet only grazed his shoulder.

But it blasted through the window behind him, shattering it and causing tiny pieces of glass to fly through the air.
They cut Neil’s skin sharply,
some embedding themselves in his skin most likely, but now was not the time to worry about it.

He had an opening, an exit,
a way out.
Even though it was a jagged, and painful way out, some pieces of glass sticking out of the window’s frame sharply and scratching him pretty badly.

But Neil didn’t feel the pain.
He only felt the breeze of the wind outside as he ran towards freedom.
Neil didn’t sleep that night.

The shrink’s office seemed almost like a safe haven to Neil, and he let himself fall onto the couch rather heavily. Even in his* the guy’s* dream, he felt tired.

Neil closed his eyes, but not after he’d established where the other was.

The guy was standing near the shelves with the glass figurines, but turned when he heard Neil drop onto the couch.

Silence.

Neil didn’t know how the guy was looking at him, probably annoyed, but he couldn’t really care enough to move right now. The warmth, the quiet, the comfortable couch. It was heaven.

‘What happened?’

The thrill of opening his eyes to find the other watching him, nearly left Neil breathless. For someone who didn’t want to be seen, it was a weird reaction.

‘What do you mean?’ Neil asked, puzzled.

The guy waved at his face.

‘That,’ was the explanation.

Reaching up, Neil touched his face and cringed at the sharp and stabbing pain of several open cuts on his cheek.

Oh.

Neil feigned indifference and shrugged.

‘Life,’ he said vaguely.

The other guy’s eyes narrowed.

And the most curious thing happened.

The glass figures behind the guy seemed to blur, getting hazier with the second, nearly disappearing.

Neil did his best not to notice, but that was the thing about noticing, wasn’t it? Once you noticed something, you noticed something.

Once you noticed someone,
you noticed someone.

‘I don’t understand,’ the guy said. ‘Nothing has happened.’

When Neil didn’t respond, the guy took a step closer.
‘What part of me do you represent?’

The question made Neil a little sad.

‘Maybe I’m your smile,’ he said.

The guy tilted his head to the side, face blank as he said,
‘I never smile in my dreams.’

Neil smiled sadly.

‘Exactly.’

...

Chapter End Notes

oh no

next time; ‘it looked exactly like the last time Neil had been here'

AH I hope you enjoyed this! I’m suuper excited and curious to know what you all think :D!

Anyways, thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people!

Ah, I couldn't wait to post, because I'd written so much, so here is another update!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leaning his head against the window of the bus, Neil sighed as he watched nameless towns fly by. Houses that were probably homes to people.

Another stupid wanting,
but this he’d actually given up.

He would never get to call a place home.

The quiet hum of the bus, the gentle shaking, the warmth, made Neil’s eyelids feel heavy, and they dropped close.

Neil sat on one of the benches of an Exy stadium, only he wasn’t wearing his gear.

He was looking at the people playing on the court, their racquets clashing occasionally. He couldn’t see which court it was because everything was a blur, the colours weirdly bright. Even the people seemed to move in blurs, their faces unrecognisable.
If he squinted however, Neil could make out one of the players.
Kevin Day.

Neil nearly jumped to his feet, afraid that this was another’s dream, but whose could it be?
Then,
A hand grabbed his arm and pulled him down roughly, and when Neil looked to see who it was, he nearly jumped up again in shock.

Andrew?

Was he in Andrew’s dream?

Except everything around them was blurry, and Andrew’s dreams were usually exceptionally detailed.
But-
Would that mean this was his own dream?
That also seemed unlikely,
and Neil’s heart rate spiked as he looked around, searched for another clue, but Andrew’s hand on his arm held him tight. Forced him to sit still.

There was nothing left for Neil to do but bash his own head in.

And he was ready to suddenly lurch forward and headbutt the chair in front of him, when all of a sudden Kevin turned around, his eyes surprisingly clear as they focused on Neil.

‘Play,’ Kevin said.

Neil shook his head wildly, and began struggling against the hand holding him down, wanting to get away from this, because playing Exy was wanting a stupid thing, and Neil had to let go of them-

Andrew grabbed his chin and forced Neil to look at him.

‘Stay,’ Andrew said.

Neil woke up.

After three days of being plagued by his own dreams, Neil suddenly found himself at the quiet and empty airport again.

‘It’s unhealthy to skip sleep,’ he told the guy.

He was given a blank stare in return.

Not wanting to admit that he’d missed visiting his dreams, Neil walked closer instead, until he was standing next to the other.

‘After three days without sleep, you’ll start to hallucinate,’ he continued, trying to go for casual as he glanced at the unmoving airplanes.
But he was secretly hoping for a conversation.

‘The side of me that wanted to go to medschool then.’

Neil snorted.
‘Somehow I can’t imagine you as a doctor.’

From the corner of his eye he saw the guy turn his head to look at Neil.
‘No, and I also didn’t know that skipping sleep for three days can cause hallucinations.’

Oops.
Neil winced.

‘Maybe you read it somewhere,’ Neil suggested.

‘I don’t think so.’
So much for pretending to be a part of his personality.

Neil tried to think of what to say, but drew up blank, and the quiet turned a little uncomfortable.

Reluctant to face him, Neil stared straight ahead as he attempted to change the topic.

‘So, got any hobbies?’

His words hung in the air between them, awkwardly.

‘Your cuts have closed,’ the guy said.

It was unexpected, and Neil automatically touched his face to feel for himself.

Huh, they had.

Neil hadn’t looked in a mirror for a few days.
Well, he’d checked his roots once, but avoided looking at his face like always.

‘Yeah,’ Neil couldn’t help but say, ‘That’s what happens when blood starts to clot. It forms a scab so white blood cells can repair the wound underneath.’

When he didn’t get a reply, he risked a glance at the guy.

Their eyes met immediately,
and the weird feeling of being seen returned.
Neil held his breath.

Though there was a blankness in the guy’s eyes, Neil couldn’t help but feel that he was curious and, interested
in Neil.

Then, the guy leaned forward,
into Neil’s personal space,
and
‘Did you know that?’ Neil asked, wanting to break the tension that was slowly and subconsciously building.

Eyes not leaving Neil’s, the guy ignored his question and asked in a low voice,
‘Who are you?’

Neil swallowed.
‘I’m a part of you,’ he lied.

After what seemed like a minute of awkward silence, the guy eventually leaned back, out of Neil’s space.

While he said nothing, his face blank, bored, bordering on apathic,
Neil saw that he didn’t entirely believe him.
Oh no.

After a month of the shrink’s office, the airport, and sometimes the ledge of a high building, it was the child’s bedroom again.

It looked exactly like the last time Neil had been here, a dark, desolate room, sparsely decorated.

The only thing that had changed, were the walls.

Written with what looked like fingernails, the word ‘please’ was scratched on every inch of the wallpaper.

Neil’s eyes darted towards the night table, but found it empty except for the night light.

The razor was near the guy’s feet instead.

Kneeling in front of him, Neil carefully slid it away before calling out softly, ‘Hey.’

No response, no sign that he’d heard him.

‘Are you okay?’ Neil asked quietly.

A scoff, and muffled words, ‘No, you’re definitely the stupidest part of me.’

‘Can-’ Neil began, then stopped. What could he do? Wake him up?

Neil guessed he could offer, and was about to do so until he saw the guy’s arms wrap more tightly around himself. If possible, he turned even smaller.

Not knowing whether it would help or not, but trying anyway, Neil said softly, ‘Andrew?’

Andrew didn’t look up.

But he said in a thin voice, ‘There’ll be nothing left.’

Neil had no idea what he was talking about. ‘Of what?’ he asked carefully.

Another silence, this one lasting about two minutes, before Andrew said, ‘Feeling.’
That didn’t make it any clearer, but Neil didn’t want to keep asking stupid questions, so he said nothing and to his surprise, Andrew continued talking.

‘It will all be fake.’

He laughed hollowly, and Neil immediately decided that he hated the sound.

‘Everyone will like me, and it will all be fake. There will be nothing left of me.’

Neil didn’t know what to say.

Andrew slowly lifted his head, and his eyes found Neil.

They were slightly red.

‘Maybe you’ll disappear too,’ Andrew said.

That was something Neil could answer.

‘I don’t think so.’

Disbelief briefly crossed Andrew’s face.

His eyes were boring into Neil’s.
And it made Neil take a deep breath, steadying himself, as he said what were perhaps the stupidest words he’d said in a long time.

‘I promise.’

Because Andrew made him feel seen, and if Andrew needed someone to still be a part of him, then Neil would be that part.

More than half of the words on the walls disappeared.

The following day was hazy, and went by way too slow for Neil’s liking.

As unhealthy as it sounded, he desperately wanted to sleep.

But not for reasons people would think of.

Last night’s dream had been-
And Neil didn’t know what to expect now.

It wasn’t his own dream, that was for sure.
After a week of no Andrew, Neil started to worry.

Fuck, he started to worry so much that he forgot to call him the guy. When his mind wasn’t focused on finding a new place to hide, to sleep, it was finding its way back to Andrew.

What the hell had happened?

Neil didn’t allow himself to think that perhaps, he’d simply stopped visiting Andrew’s dreams.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'when Neil woke up, he felt tears streaming down his face'

Thank you so much for reading! <3 I hope you still think it’s interesting! Comments and thoughts and everything are very much appreciated, I’d love to read your opinions :D
Hey lovely people!

I felt a little bad about leaving you with that cliffhanger until Sunday soooo here's another update :D
Also I've had a really shitty day today, but I guess it's normal after a stressful first week back at school and my internship. GAH, sometimes I wish I could just write all day :)
Anyways.

Enjoy!

The room was completely,
utterly,
empty.

There were no windows, no doors.
Nothing to break up the annoyingly bright orange wallpaper.
The colour was dreamlike in its intensity, so bright it nearly made Neil squint.

In front of him, with his back to him, was Andrew.

‘Got a new favourite colour?’ Neil tried to open a conversation.

But there was no response.

‘I don’t really mind orange,’ Neil continued, taking a few steps towards Andrew, ‘But this is a little too…’

He stopped when he stood in front of Andrew,
stopped when he saw his expression.

There was a large, shit eating grin on Andrew’s face.
It looked like it was carved into his skin.

‘Bright,’ Neil finished his sentence.

Again, no response.

Something akin to fear gripped Neil, who had once before thought of Andrew as apathic, but that had been nothing compared to this.

He moved until he was right in Andrew’s face.
And,
it seemed impossible when he was standing directly in Andrew’s vision, but Andrew’s eyes seemed
to look straight through him.
They were looking at nothing in particular, though,
‘looking’ sounded too active a verb.

‘Um,’ Neil said, feeling increasingly disturbed and uncomfortable. ‘Maybe you should dream a
door.’

Nothing.

There was nothing in Andrew’s face,
and nothing changed,
but everything had changed.

When Neil woke up,
he felt
tears streaming down his face,
and more alone than ever.

The bright orange room stayed.

Neil sighed as he saw the annoying colour again, and slid down the wall to stare at Andrew’s back.

It was the fourth time this week, and Neil didn’t know how long he’d be able to handle this.
He didn’t want to leave Andrew alone, because he promised, and even though he lied so many
times, he found himself wanting that promise to not be a lie.
He wanted to keep it.

But this
was disturbing, unhealthy and, okay yeah, boring.

The walls were impossible to look at, their brightness artificial and irritating. But what was even
more impossible to face was Andrew’s painful looking smile.

Neil hated it.

Folding his arms on top of his knees and leaning his head on them, Neil tried to think what he could
possibly do when suddenly
the realization hit him that he’d had some sort of control over the dreams he visited in the past.

The memories made him shiver, so he suppressed them quickly and took a deep breath.

‘I’m going to try something,’ he announced to no one, then closed his eyes as he tried his best to
picture the orange room changing into-

There wasn’t a ping or anything to signal that the change was done.

If it had worked at all.
Releasing the breath he was holding, Neil slowly opened his eyes and saw the Exy court where he’d played in the little leagues.

‘It worked,’ he breathed, quickly getting to his feet to better inspect the court.

Okay, the benches in the far back were definitely blurry, and he could see that some of the chairs were too big or too small, but that was fine.

The court though, the court was perfect.

Neil walked towards Andrew, smiling with every step he took on a court for the first time in what seemed like ages, and said, ‘Look.’

There was no reply, but, and it was so short that Neil had almost missed it, but Andrew blinked.

Then, after four nights of immovable silence, Andrew looked down and around until eventually his eyes found Neil’s and Neil felt seen again.

‘Why the fuck did you bring me to an Exy court?’ Andrew asked.

The exhaustion in his voice was at odds with the unwavering smile on his face.

‘It’s the first thing I could think of,’ Neil defended himself.

Then, ‘Wait, you know this is an Exy court?’

Andrew looked at him like he was stupid.

Well, Neil thought it was a valid question.

He looked at the court again, and without thinking sighed, ‘I wish there were supplies here as well.’

‘If you’re the part of me that loves Exy, then you don’t exist after all.’

So outraged by the implied message, Neil immediately asked in shock, ‘You don’t love Exy?’

Andrew laughed.

It creeped Neil out.

‘No,’ Andrew smiled.
‘Why are you doing that?’ Neil asked, gesturing vaguely at Andrew’s face.

‘You don’t like seeing me happy?’

Neil frowned.

‘You’re the opposite of happy.’

Andrew’s eyes were staring into his as he asked,

‘What’s the opposite of happy?’

‘Sad,’ Neil replied.

Andrew shook his head, and for a tiny second, his smile seemed to falter.

The court became their new bright orange room, except it wasn’t bright orange. Or a room.

For Neil, it felt great to be on a court again.

He didn’t know how it felt to Andrew.

The only emotion Neil could see was his fake and insistent smile.

Jogging around the court, Neil tried to picture himself warming up before a game.

It was a dream, after all.

As per usual, Andrew watched him.

As per unusual, Andrew asked him something.

‘Why don’t you play?’

Surprised, Neil stopped running and turned to face Andrew.

He spread his arms to indicate the court, the empty court, as he replied,

‘There’s no one to play with or against.’

Andrew looked at him like he was being exceptionally dumb.

But Neil didn’t understand what else he could mean, and unfortunately for him, Andrew didn’t explain.

It was all over the news.

Even being on the run didn’t mean that Neil could escape this particular piece of information.

**Skiing accident: Kevin Day breaks hand**

The words stared at him from a dozen newspapers.
Neil gasped and snatched one of the newspapers up, clutching it tightly in his hands, eyes quickly scanning the article.

‘Hey! You gotta pay for that,’ the man behind the newsstand yelled.

Neil threw him some cash before immediately turning back to the article.

Impossible.

What-

How-

Mind reeling, Neil couldn’t decide which question he found more pressing.

Eventually he settled on,
What now?

What would Kevin do now?

The thought of not being able to play Exy had been torturing him all day. Not physically being able to play Exy.

Because, it wasn’t even a choice for Kevin.

He simply couldn’t play Exy anymore.

Neil tossed and turned, thoughts uneasy and restless, and didn’t fall asleep that night.

‘Why don’t you play?’

Because he couldn’t.

But, now, with Kevin’s accident fresh in his mind, Neil found that those words had lost their meaning.

He could.
He was able to play.

He chose not to, because it was a risky choice, a dangerous choice.

But.
He wanted to.

Lying on the floor of the court, Neil stared at the clouds drifting past and congratulated himself on a job well done.
Those clouds looked really fluffy.

Andrew wasn’t looking up however, so Neil pointed it out to him.

‘Look at those clouds.’

Andrew looked unimpressed by Neil’s statement, which meant that his expression didn’t change, but also that he didn’t look up.

So Neil quite literally pointed to the sky.
‘Clouds,’ he repeated.

And there, on Andrew’s face, appeared a frown.

It was weird how it felt like a victory to Neil.

‘Are you…’ Andrew said slowly, ‘Really pointing out where the clouds are.’

Neil smiled.
‘Yeah.’

The frown remained, and even better, the corners of Andrew’s mouth twitched.

‘In case, you know, you’ve never actually looked up,’ Neil said.

Another irritated twitch.

‘If you’re the self-deprecating part of me, you’re doing it wrong,’ Andrew replied, and Neil’s smile disappeared.

☁

So it might’ve been a slight mistake on Neil’s part to dream about a court every night.

Because the itch returned, the never ending desire to play.

‘Why don’t you play?’

‘Because I can’t,’ Neil said to himself, but his reflection in the mirror said nothing back and Neil felt incredibly stupid.

He couldn’t wait for the weather to get warmer so that he wouldn’t have to stay in hotel rooms anymore, where there would always be a mirror. Besides, he would run out of money quickly if things went on like this.

Neil turned away from the mirror.

He hated looking at himself.
His appearance was nothing special, partly because of his efforts to make himself look like nothing special. But somehow, despite his dislike, Neil really liked it when Andrew looked at him.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'It was a small town, fewer than nine hundred residents.'

(talk about picking a boring preview sentence, I'm sorry, but if you recognize it you know what's coming)

AAh I hope you enjoyed the new developmentssss. I would love to know what you think :D

Thanks so much for reading <3
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people!
I don't know 'bout you guys but Mondays are not my favourite. So I thought you might like another chapter! <3
Because, well, reading always calms me down :)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bright orange room never got any less annoying, no matter how many times Neil found himself in it.
His normal response would be to immediately close his eyes and picture the Exy court, slowly perfecting the location’s details every night.

But this time, Neil didn’t immediately close his eyes.

Because Andrew wasn’t standing near the wall.

Instead, Andrew was sitting in front of him, casually leaning back on one arm, the other slung over his raised knee.

There was something different about Andrew.

‘No standing today?’ Neil asked.

Andrew tilted his head to the side, but didn’t say anything as he watched Neil.

Neil tried to repress a shiver.

‘Where do you want to go today?’ he tried to change the subject, but Andrew wasn’t interested in a conversation.

Instead of answering, he leaned forward a little, getting into Neil’s personal space.

While Neil tried his best not to squirm, he finally noticed what was different about Andrew.

The maniac smile was genuine.

‘Andrew?’

Again,
Andrew ignored his question in favour of moving close enough that Neil could count the rings
around Andrew’s iris. 
That he could feel Andrew’s breath on his face.

Fuck, he should stop calling him Andrew.

But it was hard to stop when Andrew was all Neil could see, all Neil could think of right now.

Neil’s breathing got a little louder, 
and he wished he could move back to clear his head. 
But his back was against the wall. 
And his will to push Andrew away was 
weak.

‘Well,’ Andrew said, his voice low, still so very close to Neil, ‘You’re definitely not my survival instinct.’

Then he leaned back, out of Neil’s personal space, moving back to his usual spot on the other side of the room.

A huge sigh escaped Neil before he could stop it.

It was concerning how he couldn’t tell whether it was from relief or regret.

And when he changed the room again, after a minute or so, 
the Exy court’s floor was a deep brown colour, a black dot in the middle, with 
rings around it.

It took Neil a few tries to get it back to normal.

It took a while for Neil to get his hands on more news about Kevin.

And it told him what Neil secretly knew would happen. 
Kevin quit the Ravens. 
But, in small letters, barely headline news, it said that Kevin would be joining a losing and unpopular small Exy team as a sort of part-time coach.

Neil snorted, but took caution to remember that it was safer if he was to avoid Palmetto State altogether.

‘I think I found your twin,’ Andrew said.

Neil turned his head to look at Andrew. 
He was lying in the middle of the court again, while Andrew was sitting on the ground at the edge of the court, back against the wall.

‘I don’t have a twin,’ Neil said, puzzled.
Andrew’s eyes flashed for a second.
‘You don’t?’ he asked in a weird voice.

Neil raised an eyebrow.
He got the feeling that he was missing something.

Very carefully, Neil replied,
‘Not that I know of.’

It seemed that was right answer, because Andrew leaned his head back, hitting the wall with a soft _thump_, and said,
‘What a shock, right.’

The question was out before Neil could stop himself,
his curiosity getting the better of him.

‘You do?’

‘Unless it’s my reflection that’s come to life,’ Andrew said flatly. ‘But that would be weird, wouldn’t it.’

Getting uncomfortable with the topic, Neil quickly said,
‘Is it nice? Having a twin?’

Andrew lifted his head slowly, his eyes finding Neil again.

There was nothing special about the way Andrew looked at Neil, but Neil felt special when Andrew looked at him.
Ugh,
Neil cringed at his own feelings.

Maybe he should stop thinking so much about A-

‘It’s seeing a possibility,’ Andrew said.

‘Huh?’

And finally,
the smile didn’t hold as Andrew said,
‘How it could’ve been if you hadn’t been fucked.’

Neil winced.

It was an unknown town.
It was a small town, fewer than nine hundred residents.

Neil’s first instinct was to continue walking, to simply pass through the area and find another, bigger,
town to spend the night. Or he could sleep outside, since the temperature had been rising.

Staying here wouldn’t be smart, because this seemed like a town where everyone knew everyone’s business.

But as he walked through the streets, some of the neighbours watching him through their windows, he noticed that a lot of houses were for sale.

Had been for sale for a long time.

So Neil concluded that Millport was also a dying town, with houses that would probably never sell.

Looking left and right, Neil walked to the back of one of the houses, and let himself in.

To Neil’s surprise, there was a racquet on the court’s floor.

He definitely didn’t dream that one.

He eyed it suspiciously, then turned to look at Andrew, who was lounging against the wall of the court, head tilted back, staring at the clouds.

Neil took a few steps closer to the racquet, inspecting it, but found nothing out of the ordinary.

Had Andrew dreamt this?

Neil called over his shoulder, ‘What’s this?’

There was a snort, which sounded like the Andrew from months ago and Neil almost felt a weird sort of happiness, were it not for Andrew’s reply, ‘A piece of aluminum.’

‘It’s not just a piece of aluminum,’ Neil retorted.

Andrew ignored that.
‘Are you going to pick it up?’ he asked, ‘Or is this a special playing style?’

Neil glared at Andrew, who smiled back in response.

Neil wasn’t entirely sure if the smile was fake.

‘Why is it here?’ he asked suspiciously.

Again Andrew looked at him like he was dumb, before, with extra care, spreading his arms to indicate the court.
Yeah
well
okay.

So Neil picked up the racquet, and lived.

It felt light in his hands, too light.

‘This is a striker’s racquet.’

‘Thanks brain,’ Andrew deadpanned.

‘I’m not a striker,’ Neil said, and his eyes widened as he realize-

‘No, you’re not,’ Andrew said, interrupting Neil’s panic.

‘I mean,’ Neil tried to save the situation, turning around to face Andrew but stopping as those eyes stared at him again.

A part of Neil wanted to ask what position Andrew played, if he played at all, but doing so would be admitting that he wasn’t a part of Andrew’s personality. Doing so was admitting that he wasn’t a part of Andrew, that he wasn’t meant to be here.

Something gripped his heart tightly, squeezing so hard it was difficult to breathe, and Neil tried to hold onto his racquet but the panic was becoming a living thing, pushing his whole body down, making it impossible to move or-

‘I’ll play,’ Andrew said.

Suddenly, the world got into focus again.

Neil’s eyes found Andrew’s, and he didn’t expect to see seriousness in Andrew’s eyes, nor the absence of the unhinged smile.

The invisible hand previously gripping his throat slid down and gently held his heart, squeezing just enough to make Neil wonder what this emotion was.

‘But you don’t have a racquet,’ he said dumbly, unable to tear his gaze away from Andrew, but finding the situation too… much for some reason.

In response, Andrew walked towards one of the benches and produced a long racquet from underneath.

It looked heavy.

‘You’re a goalkeeper?’ Neil blurted out in surprise as he watched Andrew take position in the goal.
Bending his knees a little, Andrew swung his racquet experimentally before staring Neil down.

‘Didn’t you know?’

There was a smile on his face when he woke up, and even though his muscles ached from playing for hours against Andrew’s ferociousness in the goal, Neil felt happy for the first time in a long while.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'say yes to what”

aaaaa happy Neil is good Neil <3 Anyways, let me know what you thought of this chapter!! I really want to build the relationship between them in the most realistic way possible which sounds a little ridiculous as it's currently only in Andrew's dream haha.

Thanks so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed it :D
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people!

It is time for another update! (I think? my uploading schedule is really flexible haha). Some people asked me last time what Neil looks like in Andrew's dream. The answer is, with dark hair and brown eyes. Neil can influence how he looks in his dreams as it's important to him that he doesn't give away who he is. In his own dreams though, he looks like himself!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Neil told himself it was just for another day, just to rest after the exhausting dream, but the Millport house was surprisingly pleasant to sleep in, and to lounge in, and to eat in, and to stay ☁

Come on, it even had a working shower. ☁

There was no rematch, even though, ‘Next time, I’ll definitely win,’ Neil told Andrew.

When Andrew didn’t reply, Neil bumped his shoulder.

‘Are you really intimidated right now?’ he smiled, looking at Andrew.

They were sitting shoulder to shoulder against the wall of the court, watching the clouds drift by.

‘Really.’ Andrew said.

There was no smile on his face, and Neil was happy for it. He wanted Andrew to be himself, to be real.
Neil wanted this to be real.

Ah,
that was another one for the list.

The bright orange room
wasn’t bright orange.

Neil had to blink a few times to adjust to the darkness and, afraid that he was back in the child’s bedroom again, called out hesitantly,

‘Andrew?’

It was quiet,
until Neil heard the squeak of a bed.

He turned around trying to locate the source of it, but it was hard to see anything in the warm darkness.

It almost felt like he was blind.

Neil took a few hesitant steps in the direction of the sound. When he didn’t bump into anything, he took another few, until finally his legs hit something.

It felt-
But Neil didn’t have time to figure out what the object felt like because all of a sudden, he was being pulled down,
or was it pushed down?
Until he was lying on what felt like a bed,
and someone was holding his wrists tightly above his head.

Neil’s eyes widened in the unseeing darkness.

He heard breathing above him.

Unsure of who it was, because he couldn’t see, Neil whispered,

‘Andrew?’

The person above him shifted,
and now Neil could feel warm puffs of air against his face.

‘I want you to say yes,’ Andrew said in a low voice.

Neil blinked,
which didn’t make a damn difference,
as he processed the words.

Say yes to what?

The silence lasted for a minute,
maybe two,
before Andrew’s hands released their hold on Neil’s wrists and slid upwards instead, linking their fingers.

Neil didn’t know what to say
or do,
his normally overactive and observing mind scarily quiet.

It felt like Andrew was moving closer again, the pressure on his hands changing for a second until, Andrew’s chest touched his.

Yeah, Andrew was definitely closer.

‘Are you going to say yes?’ Andrew asked hoarsely, lips brushing faintly against Neil’s as he talked, and Neil felt like his heart had stopped altogether.

The pressure on his hands changed again as Andrew probably leaned back, and without knowing what he was doing, without knowing that he was holding his breath, that he was closing his eyes, that he was leaning forward, Neil chased Andrew in the darkness.

And found him.

Their lips pressed together, softly at first, but harder as Andrew started kissing back, and Neil’s head hit the bed as the intensity of their kiss forced him down.

Until in a flash the pressure was gone, and Neil opened his eyes to find nothing but darkness.

‘Wait, Andrew,’ he called out, sitting up.

There was no answer.

Neil knew there was a slim chance he’d find Andrew if the other didn’t respond.

‘Whose dream is this?’ Neil whispered.

Touching his lips, Neil swore he could still feel-

Someone pounded on the door.

Quickly putting on some clothes, as to resemble a normal human being, Neil ran towards the front door and peered through the glass.
He couldn’t make out the blurry shape, couldn’t tell for certain who it was, and his flight instinct instantly grabbed hold of him, pulling him back, telling him to run to go.

Neil was already taking a few steps back, when ‘Dear?’

It was a woman’s voice. She sounded friendly enough, but Neil wasn’t stupid. He stayed put, waiting to see what she would do.

After a few minutes, she bent down, placing something on the front step before walking back towards wherever.

Waiting until it was safe to open the door, Neil squinted through the glass, trying to identify the blurry blob on the floor but not succeeding.

He had to open the door to check.

When he lifted the paper towel from the basket, Neil gave the lasagna a suspicious look. But the lasagna didn’t attack him, so Neil took it inside to eat a warm homemade meal in a cold, empty house.

Before he knew it, he’d been at the Millport house for two weeks.

Too long, was what his mind said. Comfortable, was what his body said. Why haven’t I visited Andrew’s dreams, was what his heart asked.

It had been three nights. Three dreams of his own, mostly jumbled fragments of memories.

It hadn’t been nice.

‘Do I need to remind you that skipping sleep is bad for you?’ Neil started the conversation with Andrew’s back.

Andrew’s back didn’t say anything in return. Neither did Andrew.

‘Is something wrong?’ Neil asked carefully.

He hadn’t expected Andrew to react the way he did.

Turning around suddenly, Andrew grabbed Neil’s shirt and pulled him closer.

Despite the shock Neil could still register the fact that their faces were very close, and that he wished
they were closer.

‘Andrew?’ he asked, trying to hold his ground as he looked into Andrew’s eyes.

There was a pause, in which Neil wondered if Andrew was actually doubting what he was going to do, what he was going to say. Neil hadn’t expected Andrew to say, ‘This is fucked up.’

‘This?’ Neil asked.

‘You.’

Tilting his head to the side, Neil said, ‘So you figured out which part of you I am?’

Andrew’s eyes narrowed. ‘Don’t pull that shit with me. Every part of me is fucked up.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ Neil said.

Leaning closer, Andrew’s eyes became the only thing Neil saw.

Luckily, the only thing Andrew’s eyes reflected was Neil as well.

‘Believing is bullshit. Believing is waiting for something to fuck you over. It’s wasting time.’

‘But—’

‘And I’m done wasting my time. Are you?’

The words echoed in Neil’s head as he opened his eyes and found himself back in the Millport house, the sun outside rising.

‘This is madness,’ Neil whispered under his breath, as he walked towards the Exy court.

It was madness.
It was dangerous,
it was not okay,
he should go,
yeah he should definitely g-

Neil forced himself to look up and stand still for a moment, watching the clouds drift by slowly.

‘I’m done wasting my time. Are you?’

Taking a deep breath, Neil wished for a second that he could fill himself up with air and join the clouds in their slow journey across the earth. It seemed safer, easier, than the constant running he’d been doing.
Well.
If he would be running, why not on an Exy court?

Neil walked towards Millport’s Exy coach, and said,
‘I’d like to try out for the team.’

Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘should I trust you?’

Ah sorry if the chapters feel too short! Sometimes it just feels like the best thing to end
the chapter where they do. Feels more round? But I hope I make up for it by uploading
frequently!!
Let me know what you think! I LOVE to hear opinions and feelings, they make me
really excited to continue this story!
(you can also shout to me on tumblr (idnis.tumblr.com) or twitter (@idnis9) if you
want!)

Thanks for reading! <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people,

wow the weather has been so... autumnal? that a word? Yeah. I love it, apart from the fact that I've been completely soaked the first five minutes that I went outside, TWICE.

Okay so longer update is longer.

Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was ironic, wasn’t it?

How the hell had Andrew known that Neil would be playing as a striker?

For the first time in a long while, even though it was a position Neil didn’t really know, he felt like he was alive.
Running across the court,
passing the ball,
playing Exy,
was living.

☁

So Neil didn’t immediately dream the Exy court.
Instead, he slid down the bright orange wall onto the floor and took a moment to simply rest.

In order to play Exy, he had to enroll into the Millport high school. It was exhausting, and stressful, but worth it at the end of the day when he got to put on his gear.

Andrew turned around, smile absent as he asked, ‘No court?’

Neil shrugged. ‘I don’t need the court, and you didn’t like it anyway.’

Andrew didn’t immediately respond, his face impassive, until suddenly, the fake and painful looking smile returned. It stretched across Andrew’s face.

‘No, you’re right. I don’t need it.’

Huh?
That was not what Neil had said.
'Andrew?'

'I'm sorry,' Andrew smiled. 'Andrew is not here right now. Please stop calling.'

Neil frowned and stood up, walking closer to Andrew but before he could reach him, Andrew held out his hand in warning.

'Don’t get close to me.'

'What’s happened?'

'Nothing’s happened,' Andrew smiled.

Neil didn’t believe him for a second.

He gestured to Andrew’s outstretched hand.

'I won’t touch you. But tell me what’s wrong.'

Tilting his head to the side, Andrew asked,

'Should I trust you?'

The question made Neil uneasy, as he didn’t think of himself as trustworthy.

But like before, Andrew made him want to be a lot of things that he wasn’t.

'I want you to trust me,' Neil offered.

Andrew’s smile turned brighter.

Crazier.

'Must be nice,' he said, 'Wanting something.'

Neil nodded.

'I can’t understand you people,' Andrew laughed. 'Who says that wanting something means you can get it?'

'It doesn’t,' Neil admitted, then asked carefully, 'Do you want something?'

In the silence that followed, Andrew’s eyes were focused on Neil’s. They seemed to be searching for something.

What he saw, Neil didn’t know, but Andrew ever so slowly lowered his hand.

'There’s nothing I want.'

'It’s okay to want things,' Neil said.

Andrew shook his head,
and smiled darkly at Neil.
‘It’s best if they stay dreams, right?’

Walking back and forth between the court and the house was getting too dangerous.
The chance that someone saw him returning to the empty building was getting too big.

Sighing, Neil settled himself on the uncomfortable wooden bench in the locker room.
It would have to do.

But he couldn’t fall asleep.

Not that the bench was too uncomfortable, though it was, but Neil’s mind kept returning to surprise Andrew.

Something was going on.
Neil had noticed Andrew’s moods were getting worse,
and he wanted to help.
But he didn’t know what to do.

What he did know was that he shouldn’t bother.
He knew he should leave it alone,
because it was unsafe.

It was as if he’d jinxed himself.

The basement was cold, and damp, and dark, and all things a cellar used for torturing and killing people was.

Neil was definitely in his own dream.

Only,
he couldn’t remember tying himself to a chair.

‘Good dream, Nathaniel?’ someone said from a corner of the dark room.

Neil flinched.
He’d stopped calling himself Nathaniel.
He’d chosen his new alias, Neil Josten, some time ago, for when he’d settle somewhere again.
So far he hadn’t.
Until Millport.
But maybe it would be time to leave again.

‘No? Maybe someone else’s dream then?’ the voice asked.
Andrew.

Neil refused to respond.

Footsteps,
as his father walked out of the shadows, stopping in front of him.

‘Hi son,’ Nathan smiled.

Fear, hot and cold and all-encompassing coursed through Neil’s body, but he still managed to reply through gritted teeth,

‘Father.’

His father’s eyes narrowed,
and he lurched forward,
fear not the only thing gripping Neil by the throat now.

‘It’s inconvenient for me, Nathaniel, that you’re gone.’

He squeezed Neil’s throat harder,
and breathing was getting difficult.

‘I’m sorry,’ Neil wheezed, but apparently that wasn’t good enough because his father took out a knife from his pocket and held it in front of Neil’s face.

‘Since when is an apology enough? You cost me money, Nathaniel, and I want it back.’

Neil refused to speak, never mind the fact that he probably didn’t have enough breath to talk anyway.

And it seemed that was the final straw.

His father lashed out, once, twice, thrice,
four times
five times
six times
seven times
eight times
nine times

slicing through the soft skin of Neil’s cheek.

The tenth time,
he angled the knife underneath Neil’s eye,
and drew a line just beneath his eyeball, so that tears of blood were pouring out.

‘Tell me whose dreams you’ve been visiting.’

Neil would not answer.

The only escape from this would be to wake up, so Neil willed himself to wake up, but the grasp on his throat was too strong.
He wanted to scream that he wasn’t dying, that he could still return to his body, but it was getting harder to focus as blood kept trickling down his face, and his breathing was coming in short, harsh gasps.

It was his worst nightmare. Dying in his dream, leaving his body behind, and— for some unfathomable reason, never seeing Andrew again. Because he’d promised, hadn’t he? To be there, to be the piece of Andrew that would stay, that would remain.

wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up

‘Don’t think you can wake yourself up. You’re dying.’

Neil refused to believe his father.

His father sighed, as if Neil was being childish, and stabbed Neil in his thigh.

A choked scream escaped Neil.

wake up wake up wake up wake up not his leg anything but his legs

‘Whose dreams are you visiting, Nathaniel?’ his father asked again, pulling the knife from Neil’s left leg and moving over to the right one.

Salty tears were burning the cuts on Neil’s face as he watched his father bring up the knife, preparing for another stab.

‘I’ll ask one more time,’ his father said threateningly, ‘Whose dreams are you visiting?’

Ignoring his father’s question, Neil gasped for air that wasn’t available, his throat burning as much as his cheek and thigh.

WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP

His father shook his head in disappointment, then brought the knife down with such force that he loosened his grip on Neil’s throat.

Neil was still screaming when he woke up.

He couldn’t walk.

But he had to.
He was bleeding all over the wooden bench, and people couldn’t find him like this.

When Neil tried to stand though, his legs gave out and he fell, hard.

He had to get away, clean himself up.

So Neil started crawling, but it was hard when the panic was so fierce, tears streaming down his face.

What if his father sliced through muscles that wouldn’t heal?

What if he would never be able to-

Neil passed out.

He was lying on the floor of the bright orange room.

too bright

Tired, and barely conscious, Neil closed his eyes and willed the colour to disappear.

But when he opened his eyes, he was back in the basement.

no no nono nonononono

It meant he was asleep again, that he was dreaming and dreaming was bad, because they, his father, might find him in his dream. And Neil, he- he couldn’t be here.

Closing his eyes again, Neil told himself to wake u-

‘Where are we?’ Andrew asked.

Startled, Neil opened his eyes to see Andrew standing in his usual spot at the far end of the room, his back to Neil.

Wait.

It meant that Neil wasn’t in his own dream.

He was safe.
Sighing from relief, Neil made to stand but his hands slipped and he fell again, face down in his own blood.

The sound made Andrew turn around.

There was a moment of absolute silence, where Neil tried, unsuccessfully, to push himself up again, but his legs weren’t cooperating.

‘I didn’t mean to-’

Andrew’s voice was quiet, but Neil could hear shock. It was hard however, to focus when his mind kept repeating

\textit{I will never walk again}
\textit{I will never be able to play Exy again}

Feeling extremely helpless, Neil let the tears go, balling his hands into fists and giving up on trying to stand.

‘Damnit,’ he choked.

A hand touched his arm.

Then gripped it, and pulled him up.

Andrew was surprisingly strong.

He slung Neil’s arm around his neck to help him stand. Though his legs were shaking, Neil found that he could stay upright. Somewhat.

‘You’ll play Exy again,’ Andrew said.

Shocked, Neil turned his head to look at Andrew. How did Andrew-

Andrew shook his head. ‘You’re addicted. Just like him.’

‘Who?’ Neil rasped, voice rough from screaming, from being choked.

But Andrew ignored his question. ‘I hate guys like you. Now bring back our stupid Exy court.’

Neil complied.

Closing his eyes was not difficult. Forgetting the word ‘our’ was.
next time; ‘I want to wake up.’

sooo a few people have been asking I write something from Andrew's POV, and I wanted to try it for a while now so here it is:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/12094380

I hope it's, idk, something?

Thanks so much for reading! I'd love to know what you thought about the chapter or just the story in general :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people,

hope you've had a nice weekend :) I have literally done nothing, except work on this story and watch series. Talk about a good, relaxing weekend.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking up in the locker room was unpleasant to say the least.

Neil’s legs were burning, as was his cheek, which was plastered to the ground.

It hurt immensely to tear it off the floor.

Neil flinched when he saw the blood stains in the locker room.

He had to get away.

But how?

He couldn’t walk

he couldn’t get away

he couldn’t pl-

‘You’ll play Exy again.’

Gritting his teeth, Neil put both hands on the floor and slowly but surely pushed himself up, first on his knees, then on shaking and burning legs.

Going back to the Millport house was hell.

But that wasn’t a new association for Neil.

His legs felt terrible,

hurting with almost every movement.

Neil wasn’t a stranger to pain,

but whenever he felt pain in his legs, it was followed by an extreme anxiety attack.

He needed his legs to stay alive,

physically as well as mentally.

Wanting to heal as quickly as possible, Neil slept a lot.

His day dreams were feverishly,
but
when he opened his eyes that night he found himself on a comfortable couch.

Neil groaned.

‘I thought I missed this place but now that I’m here, I take it back.’

Andrew was standing near the glass figurines, and it seemed like he was observing them, but Neil could see they were blurry.

The couch’s fabric was exceptionally in focus though.

‘I thought the court would be difficult.’

Something warm bloomed in Neil’s chest.

Had-
Had Andrew actually made an effort to dream about the shrink’s office again?

So Neil could lie down?

Neil smiled, despite the pain in his legs, and asked,

‘How are you?’

‘Great,’ Andrew replied sarcastically.

Neil gave him a look.
Andrew shrugged in return.
‘Just because we’re here, doesn’t mean we have to talk about feelings.’

‘But I want to,’ Neil retorted.

‘Oh no,’ Andrew said, crossing his arms across his chest but taking a step towards Neil at the same time. ‘You know how I feel about wanting.’

Holding Andrew’s gaze, Neil gestured to the couch.

‘I want to share the couch with you.’

‘High goals you set for yourself,’ Andrew said, but he walked over anyway, sitting down near Neil’s chest.

Neil scooted over a little.
‘Look at that,’ he said smugly, ‘I got what I wanted.’

Andrew froze,
but immediately forced himself to relax again.

‘It doesn’t work like that.’

No, Neil knew that.
But for some reason he didn’t want Andrew to know.
So instead he said,
‘Try it.’
It took a while for Andrew to answer, and Neil used the time wisely, staring at Andrew’s profile, and the way a few strands of hair nearly fell into his brown eyes. The straightness of his nose, the slight curves of his lips.

Neil found it impossible to look anywhere else.

‘I want to wake up,’ Andrew said quietly.

The answer hurt a little. Still, Neil nodded and pushed himself up on his elbows, preparing to slap or shake or scare Andrew into waking up.

But Andrew shook his head. ‘Not like that.’

A vague understanding dawned on Neil. The bright orange room.

Andrew leaned forward a little. ‘How does it work?’

‘Your heart rate needs to spike,’ Neil answered without thinking, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t answer questions Andrew didn’t know the answer to.

But his concern was forgotten as Andrew placed a hand near Neil’s head, and leaned in close enough for their noses to touch.

Neil suddenly remembered the other wanting. ‘Yes,’ he breathed.

Andrew’s lips touched his, and for a few moments, Neil forgot everything apart from Andrew’s lips touching his, sliding his tongue over Neil’s bottom lip which caused Neil to gasp-

Neil woke up, forced to remember that it had been a dream.

It took a little over two weeks for his legs to heal.

Not being able to train but still having to come to school to pretend to be a normal teenager was hard for Neil, but he tried his best not to let it show.

Andrew dreaming about the shrink’s office every night was an indication that it showed.

Neil just hoped it didn’t show that, after their second kiss, he wanted a third.

But besides that, Neil found his heart clenching every time he woke up on the comfortable couch.
He had figured the room resembled a sort of safe haven for Andrew, but the couple of weeks before Neil’s ‘accident’, Andrew had never dreamt of the shrink’s office. It was hard for dreamers to influence their dreams to such an extent, and the fact that Andrew did it night after night showed Neil that Andrew had a strong will, and maybe, that Neil meant more to Andrew than he let on.

But Neil didn’t allow himself to dwell on it. It would do neither of them any good.

His first practice wasn’t nice.

The coach didn’t want to tire Neil out too much, so he wasn’t allowed to play, only practice a few drills, and Neil felt frustrated.

No, his legs weren’t completely fine, but if he had to wait another week before he could play again, Neil thought he would lose his mind. And he needed that to play Exy.

But he wasn’t the only one who was frustrated.

It wasn’t the shrink’s office.
It wasn’t the bright orange room, which Neil was grateful for.
It wasn’t their Exy court, because the colour scheme of their court was mostly grey, and this Exy court had the same annoying bright orange colour as the room.
It wasn’t their Exy court, because their court had a blue sky with clouds, and this Exy court had a dark night sky.

Neil was standing in the middle of it, alone.

Looking around, afraid for a second that he was in someone else’s dream, Neil finally found Andrew sitting on one of the benches in the stadium.

‘Andrew?’ he shouted, wondering why he was up there.

Andrew ignored him, taking another drag of his cigarette.

Cigarette. That was a new one.

‘Andrew?’ Neil tried again, and to his surprise it worked the second time. He’d been prepared to yell more.

Andrew turned to look at him, saying something, but Neil couldn’t hear him.

He was too far away.

‘Huh?’ Neil shouted.
This seemed to irritate Andrew, but well, Neil couldn’t help it that he was too far away, could he?

‘You have to come down,’ he yelled, ‘Or talking is going to be difficult.’

He didn’t know if Andrew had heard him, but when Andrew stood up slowly, he figured he had.

When Andrew finally stood in front of Neil, he took another drag of his cigarette then dropped it onto the floor, and crushed it beneath his boot.

Neil frowned.
‘That ruins the floor.’

In reply,
Andrew blew smoke in Neil’s face.

And Neil remembered why he’d thought Andrew was annoying.

‘I’m here,’ Andrew said. ‘What are you going to do?’

Neil didn’t feel like dealing with Andrew’s vague shit so he shot back,
‘I don’t know, it’s your dream.’

Andrew cocked his head to the side, observing Neil.

‘I thought you were a part of me. That means this is our dream.’

‘This Exy court isn’t ours.’

Andrew held Neil’s gaze for a few more seconds before shrugging.

Which irritated Neil.

Did Andrew think shrugging things off would make the situation better? Did he think he was fucking cool or something?

‘Let’s play,’ Neil said.

‘No,’ Andrew replied.

Which irritated Neil more.

‘Why not?’

‘Why should I?’

Neil knew the answer ‘because I want to’ wouldn’t fly, so he looked to the side in irritation, thinking of a reason.

He settled on,
‘Because we’re both irritated.’

Andrew laughed too cheerily for Neil to believe his smile.
‘More reason not to play.’

Just to be irritating, Neil shrugged.

‘If you want to have a boring dream, go ahead,’ he taunted, then walked towards the sidelines where a few racquets were lying on the ground. He picked one up.

And to his amazement, his taunt worked.

Because Andrew started walking towards the goal.

‘Think you can make it interesting?’

Walking towards the middle line, Neil held Andrew’s gaze as he said daringly, ‘I’m already interesting.’

He took a shot at the goal.

Of course Andrew deflected Neil’s first shot.

He didn’t deflect Neil’s statement however.

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Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘there were splotches of paint everywhere.’

I hope you still think this story is good! :D I’ve been feeling a little down about the story lately, dunno why, but it’s SO counterproductive aarhg. Just feels like it’s not good or something, which is probably just my insecurity. Sorry, I don’t want to complain!!

Anyways, thanks so much for reading <3 That means a lot to me, truly does :(
Hey lovely people!

Sorry this update is later than usual, I was doubting whether to put one up tonight or tomorrow, and then decided wayyy to late to do it tonight... obviously. Otherwise you wouldn't be reading this. :)

Also, can I just say you guys are the sweetest ever? Thank you so much for all the wonderful comments <3 You really made me feel better :)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next night,
the bright orange room wasn’t exactly… the way it used to be.

Instead of a smooth coat of irritatingly orange, there were splotches of paint everywhere. They were dripping onto the floor.

To Neil it looked like someone had angrily thrown buckets of paint around, and he wondered if everything was okay with Andrew.

He found him standing in the exact same place in the exact same way as always.

Getting to his feet, Neil asked,
‘Everything oka-’

But his question was immediately shot down.

‘Don’t talk.’

Sighing, Neil wondered if it was going to be another one of those nights where he simply had to sit the dream out.

He waited for a few moments to see if Andrew was going to say anything else but when he didn’t, Neil plopped down on the floor, since the walls were too wet to lean against.

Neil knew he could wake himself up.

Perhaps even force himself to stay out of Andrew’s dream, though he didn’t have much practice and even then it didn’t always work.

But,
and that was the most dangerous thing, he didn’t want to.

Sitting here in silence with Andrew was already enough.

After seemed like ages, Andrew turned around, staring Neil down.

Neil shivered from the intensity of his gaze, goosebumps on his skin.

‘I was wrong,’ Andrew said, voice emotionless. ‘I thought you were the same.’

As who, Neil wondered.

‘But you’re not.’

‘Is that a good thing?’ Neil dared to ask.

‘I’m not sure if anything about you is a good thing.’

It was a sensible point of view, so Neil didn’t say anything. Neither did Andrew.

Neil found himself getting better at playing a striker’s position.

Not being the worst player on the team felt good, and Exy got even more fun.

Wanting to improve himself as much as possible, because getting into shape was beneficial either way, Neil trained every morning before school and every evening after dinner.

At the end of the day, he was so dead tired that lying on the floor of the wrecked bright orange room was all he could manage.

If he hadn’t been so tired, he might’ve noticed how the paint splatters were getting more hectic, now covering parts of the ceiling and the floor as well.

It was the usual.

Neil was lying on the floor, head turned to secretly watch Andrew from the corner of his eye.

Until he suddenly noticed something.

‘You’re really short.’

It made Andrew turn around.
‘And?’

‘I just noticed.’

Andrew looked at him like he was being dumb.

Okay,
Neil admitted it sounded a little… slow.

‘I know I’m not much taller,’ he said, which made Andrew raise an eyebrow.

‘No, that would be weird, wouldn’t it?’

It took a second for Andrew’s sentence to make sense to Neil.

Then,
Fuck.
How could he keep forgetting?
Why did he let his guard down every time?

Neil was supposed to resemble a part of Andrew.

‘It might be metaphorical,’ Neil tried, ‘I could be your bravery. Then I’d be taller.’

‘Great,’ Andrew said flatly. ‘My bravery is only an inch taller.’

Neil snorted, and opened his mouth to respond,
if it weren’t for the fact
that the walls suddenly imploded,
Andrew’s eyes going wide with terror,
as everything went dark.

Blinking furiously,
Neil tried to make sense of where he was, and, stomach slowly sinking in horror, discovered it was the child’s bedroom again.

‘Andrew?’ he called out.

The sound of his voice sounded too loud in the muffled quiet,
and it gave Neil a slight headache.

Then,
he saw him.

Leaning with his back against the bed was Andrew.
Only it wasn’t
Andrew.

This Andrew was even shorter,
even smaller.
Younger.

And breathing very loudly, his arms wrapped around himself as he rocked back and forth.

Realisation slowly dawned on Neil, his eyes going wide from shock, at the same time that footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Child Andrew’s breath hitched, a tear rolling down his cheek.

The footsteps were near the door now, and a man’s voice called out, ‘Andrew? Are you still awake?’

Neil knew what this was. By accident, he’d entered one of Andrew’s memories.

Fuck.

What was even more concerning however, was that Neil didn’t know what was going to happen.

He knew it was going to be bad as he saw that Andrew was now close to hyperventilating, tears streaming down his face as he stuttered, ‘N-no.’

The doorknob turned slowly, and with it Neil’s stomach, and he started chanting to himself, *wake up wake up wake up wake up*

It only made his headache worse.

A man walked into the room, though Neil couldn’t see his face.

It was blurred.

Like Andrew had censored this part of the memory.

When the man got closer, young Andrew quickly stood up to run towards the door, but was grabbed by the arm before he got very far.

*wake up wake up wake up wake up*

Because Neil wasn’t ready to see whatever was so bad about this memory it made Andrew near catatonic whenever they were here.

He covered his eyes,
but that didn’t stop him from hearing Andrew scream.
‘Please!’

‘Now,’ the man said slowly, ‘Get on the bed.’

Neil’s whole world tilted,
and a loud, high pitched tone filled his ears as he balled his hands into fists, rage filling his vision.

In the one second before Neil pounded,
he saw Andrew lying on the bed, crying,
and the man hovering above him.

When his fist made contact with the man’s cheek with a sickening crunch,
Neil was
forced
out of the memory,
and woke up.

Immediately, it felt like his head was splitting in two and Neil curled up, hands grabbing his head, but the pain caused him to lose consciousness.

Neil knew from experience that dreamwalkers shouldn’t visit memories.

Through visiting, a momentarily strong bond was forged with the dreamer, which allowed Neil to influence both the dream and the dreamer.

But they could also influence him.

As for what had happened, the only conclusion Neil could think of was that Andrew had woken up abruptly, but before being fully conscious, something had reminded Andrew of that memory.

Neil wondered what had happened.

He didn’t need to wonder about the child’s bedroom anymore.

He knew more than he had wanted to.

The bright orange room was carefully clean.

Andrew was sitting in front of him, arms slung casually over his crossed legs, but his eyes were pinning Neil to the spot.

Neil swallowed his sudden nerves as he tried to not get overwhelmed by the sudden attention.

‘Hey,’ he said, sounding far more collected than he felt.

The memory of the child’s bedroom still weighed him down, because of what he’d seen but also
because he’d seen it without permission.

Andrew’s eyes narrowed.

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know what-’

‘Don’t lie,’ Andrew interrupted him. ‘Something happened. You’re more nervous than usual.’

Neil tried to feign surprise.
‘Why should I be nervous?’

Andrew leaned in close.

‘You tell me.’

With Andrew so close, it was hard for Neil to think of how to breech the subject.

He really wanted to be honest about this, even though it was difficult.

Call it stupid, but he still wanted to be honest for Andrew.

Only Neil didn’t know how, so instead he slowly reached out, Andrew’s eyes flickering to his hand, his body tensing, but Neil stopped before he could touch Andrew’s cheek.

That didn’t relax Andrew however.

‘Can I touch you?’ Neil asked.

And saw that it’d been right to ask. Because Andrew’s shoulders dropped the slightest bit.

It hurt Neil to now know what had caused this, and the painful images of Andrew’s memory forced themselves in his mind again. Neil was so focused on them that he startled when Andrew replied with

‘Yes.’

Oh.

Neil’s fingers lightly touched Andrew’s cheek, while Andrew sat completely still, eyes never leaving Neil’s.

‘I’m sorry,’ Neil said quietly.

‘For?’
'This,' Neil explained poorly.

But Andrew understood,
his previously blank eyes flashing,
and suddenly Andrew’s hand shot up, gripping Neil’s wrist roughly, pulling it away from his face.

‘Don’t touch me if you’re going to apologise for it.’

But
Neil wanted to say at least something-
Except Andrew cut him off before he could even begin.

‘Apologising for things you can’t change is pointless. Apologise for things you can do, but don’t.’

‘Like?’ Neil asked.

Andrew merely shrugged.

‘I wouldn’t know what a figment of my imagination could be sorry for.’

Neil’s gaze fell,
as did his hand,
and his hope.

The locker room bench was hard,
and cold,
and it was everything the dream couch was not.

But that was why it was a dream, Neil thought bitterly.

Because it did not exist in real life.

Chapter End Notes

i'm sorry for the angst

next time; 'there's a thing called a map'

AGAIN, guys, gosh, I don't know what to say except THANK YOU for being so awesome, and thanks for reading this story <3 <3
Hello lovely people!

I'm EXHAUSTED I've been so busy today, hence this chapter being later than usual.
Anyways, let's see if I'll end this with a cliffhanger or not :))

Enjoy!

Neil threw himself into Exy,
but every time he turned around, he expected to see Andrew lounge against the walls,
and it hurt.

Which was stupid.
It shouldn’t have hurt so much, because he knew Andrew thought Neil wasn’t real.

That didn’t mean Neil hadn’t hoped.

The number one on his list of wanting stupid things.

Because against all odds,
Neil still wanted to hope.

Neil didn’t visit Andrew’s dreams for a whole week.

And another.

He wondered if he’d finally mastered the art of only dreaming your own dreams, then immediately had to admit that he hadn’t even done that, because Andrew was still in his dreams and nightmares, brown eyes focused on Neil.

The bright orange room wasn’t as annoyingly bright anymore.
That, or Neil was too relieved to be bothered by its intensity.

‘I was right.’ Andrew said, his back to Neil, who immediately focused all his attention on him.

‘About?’ Neil asked.

‘You’ll disappear.’
Without hesitation, Neil immediately promised for the second time, ‘I won’t.’

Andrew turned around, his face blank.

‘You’re just a reminder that I’m more fucked up than I thought.’

His words sliced deeper than his father’s knife.

Because Neil didn’t want to be that to Andrew.

But Andrew wasn’t finished, his eyes still so blank, so uncaring.

‘You’re just a reminder of energy I no longer have.’

Neil winced as Andrew continued in a flat voice, ‘You’re just a reminder that I used to care.’

‘And you don’t anymore?’

And there it was again. Stretching across Andrew’s face, that fake and hurtful smile reappeared.

‘Haven’t you noticed?’ Andrew smiled, ‘I never did.’

It hurt.

It hurt because, against all reason, Neil cared.

‘I don’t believe that,’ Neil said, still feeling Andrew’s grip on his arm, pulling him to his feet, picking him up when he was a mess.

Andrew’s smile froze for a second, a second before Andrew pulled himself together again.

‘Maybe you’re a part of me after all.’

Neil visited Andrew’s dreams once a week now, if not less.

*Through visiting, a momentarily strong bond was forged with the dreamer.*

But what if the bond wasn’t strong enough?

Neil pulled his hoodie over his head as he left the house, wanting to be as invisible as possible as he went for his evening run.
Though it was more of a night run.

His feet moved quickly,
running away from the Millport house.

What had he been thinking?

A bond created through visiting someone’s dreams,
would never be strong enough.

It seemed fitting that it rained during their last game.

Dark clouds filling the sky.

Though,
they hadn’t known in advance that it would be their last game.
They hadn’t known, and now it was suddenly over.

Neil was stubbornly watching the sky,
raindrops falling on his face,
as he willed the clouds to brighten up,
to be the fluffy white ones from their dreams.

He heard his coach walk closer.

‘The weather was a shame.’

‘As was the game,’ Neil said.

‘I didn’t see your parents.’

Yeah, well.
Neil hoped it would stay that way.

‘They’re out of town,’ he lied.

His coach was quiet for a moment before saying,
‘I thought they’d make an exception tonight.’

‘They didn’t miss much.’

Neil hoped the conversation was over. He hoped he could go back to the Millport house to shower,
to feel warm again.
But his coach wasn’t done talking.
‘Anyway, there’s someone here to see you.’

They were the words from a nightmare.

Neil’s mind quickly processed a few things.
He was outside, that was good, loads of opportunities to get away.
He had his bag with him, also good, he would be able to provide for himself.
And if he ran, if he took out his gun in self-defense, the questions his coach would ask would be too difficult to answer and Neil had to leave Millport.

That wasn’t a problem.

Neil didn’t belong here anyway.

So Neil’s grip on his bag tightened as he turned on his heel, which went too smoothly, the ground a little slippery from the rain, and-

He had to pause as he saw a man with tribal tattoos standing in front of him.

Neil’d never seen the man before, which meant he wasn’t from Millport, but he could still be working for his father.

‘I don’t know you,’ Neil said, but his coach immediately filled him in.

‘He’s from a university. He came to see you play tonight.’

Of all the things Neil expected to hear this definitely wasn’t it.

He eyed the man suspiciously.

‘Bullshit,’ he said. ‘Nobody even knows where Millport is.’

‘I wonder how I’m here then,’ the man said before adding, ‘There’s a thing called a map.’

‘He’s here because he’s short a striker, and I sent him your file. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know if anything would come of it,’ his coach immediately filled Neil in.

Who felt himself get angry.

He did what?

‘Anyway,’ the man said, pointedly ignoring Neil’s glare. ‘It’s stupid late in the season for me to be here, and Coach Hernandez said you still haven’t chosen a school for fall. So if you ask me, it works out perfectly. All you have to do is sign the dotted line, and you’re mine for five years.’

No.

No, Neil’s survival instinct, his common sense, said.

‘You can’t be serious.’

But they both looked very serious, especially as the man indeed produced his file, produced a contract.

Though it should have been easy to say no, especially when almost every part of his mind was screaming at him to just go, there was still the doubt.

There was still
‘I’m done wasting my time. Are you?’

and

‘Apologise for things you can do, but don’t.’

Neil didn’t want to apologise to Andrew again. He didn’t want to apologise to himself either, in a few months time, when the itch to play returned and he knew that he’d turned away from the one opportunity to play. To play, and to live.

Neil swallowed the sudden lump in his throat.

It was too dangerous, he told himself. Kevin would be there.

But

‘What’s the opposite of happy?’

Not playing Exy, Neil answered his own question. Not having a goal in life. Not having a place to belong.

Neil closed his eyes.

He didn’t want playing Exy to merely be a dream. Enough things were merely a dream. He needed something real

‘Where do I sign?’

In his mind, Neil added the words my death sentence to that question.

Neil was too nervous to sleep.

It didn’t feel real as Neil travelled to the airport.

It didn’t feel real as Neil boarded the plane, and it didn’t feel real as the plane flew off. Exhausted from mostly his nerves, Neil unwillingly fell asleep,
and funnily enough,
dreaming did feel real.

‘Andrew?’ Neil asked. ‘What do you do when you know you’ve made a terrible decision?’

His question was sincere enough for Andrew’s gaze to slide away from the bright orange wall and find its way to Neil.

Andrew observed him in silence for a moment.
Then,
‘I don’t let others know.’

Neil smiled at the answer.

‘What do you let others know?’

Andrew took a step closer.

‘Depends.’

Neil woke up before Andrew did because his flight was over.

Neil stretched his arms above his head before grabbing his bag, unbuckling himself and walking towards the exit.

It was still very, very early in the morning.

But the man, Coach Wymack as he preferred to be called, was waiting for him, coffee in his hand.

It still didn’t feel real.

Neil’s body was thrumming with energy, and he couldn’t wait to see the actual court, but Coach Wymack told him that he needed to eat some breakfast first because it was too damn early.

After dutifully inhaling his breakfast,
Coach finally gathered his set of keys and they set off for the court.

The only damper on Neil’s mood was the fact that he could very well run into Kevin Day.

Which was undesirable to say the least,
because of his connection to Kevin.

Neil just hoped Kevin would not remember him.
Neil certainly wasn’t going to say anything.
Hey, we played Exy together in your dreams when we were little would definitely be too weird a conversation starter.

When Coach Wymack turned the keys in the lock and opened the door that led to the court, Neil had expected to feel a lot of emotions.

He hadn’t expected to be overwhelmed by bright orange and a weird feeling of deja vu.

‘Oh, he’s not here,’ Coach Wymack said. ‘That’s fortunate. Now you can actually see the court without getting hurt.’

Neil lifted an eyebrow, but Wymack didn’t elaborate.

Weird.

‘Why is it so orange?’ Neil asked slowly.

Wymack turned towards him.

‘Those are our colours. The colours of the Palmetto State Foxes.’

‘Right,’ Neil said, thinking something was most definitely weird.

‘Right, so, training,’ Wymack said.

Neil stopped drinking his coffee to listen intently.

Wymack snorted.

‘I’ll have you train with Kevin for the time being. It won’t be easy, I can promise you that, but your only hope will be that Kevin is part of the reason why you’re here now.’

‘He is?’ Neil asked in surprise.

‘He wanted you as our new striker. Said you had a lot of potential. So good luck with that.’

Half of Neil was excited, half of him concerned.

‘When do we start?’ he asked.

Just then, Wymack’s phone buzzed. He picked it up, looked at the message and said,
‘Apparently, right now.’

The entire way there, Neil’s legs kept bouncing up and down. He had underestimated how nervous he would be, but immediately forced all his concern away because,

‘I don’t let others know.’

How much he’d started to rely on Andrew.

If Neil was someone who blushed easily, he would right now.

‘The rest of them wants to meet you too,’ Wymack said, startling Neil out of his thoughts. ‘We’re meeting them at the stadium.’

Too nervous to talk, Neil only nodded, forgetting that Wymack was driving and couldn’t see his face.

There was only one car parked at the stadium, and it looked ridiculously expensive.

Neil snorted.

‘Kevin sure knows how to lay low,’ he commented.

‘It’s not Kevin’s,’ Wymack corrected him, punching in the code for the door.

It opened, and Neil walked in after Wymack, who was already introducing him, ‘Be nice to him. If I find out you’ve haven’t, I’ll ban you from my court.’

Nobody said anything, and Neil took a deep breath as he walked around Wymack to stand beside him.

Three things.
Two Andrews.
One Kevin.

For a moment, Neil’s mind was blank.
Then, as Neil’s eyes quickly scanned the faces of the people hanging around the lounge, it felt like time started moving slower, as if he was moving in slow-motion, noticing at first that Kevin didn’t look particularly surprised to see him, then that there was a guy with them Neil didn’t know, and two guys who both looked like Andrew.

But only one of them looked at Neil
like he actually saw him.

It knocked the breath out of Neil.

Andrew

Andrew

‘Andrew,’ he choked out, without meaning to. Definitely without meaning to.

There was a silence in the entire room after his outburst, as everyone who had previously been observing Neil, now turned to look at Andrew.

Andrew, who hadn’t moved an inch, whose face was impassive, since Neil walked in and stood in front of them.

‘You know him?’ the unknown guy asked. ‘No, wait, more importantly, you can actually keep them apart?’

Twins. Of course.
Neil knew this.

‘I-’ Neil started, but couldn’t get any words out, trapped by Andrew’s intense gaze. It was somehow even worse in person. Worse in a good way maybe.

‘Okay then,’ Wymack said. ‘For those of you who don’t know him, this is Neil.’

It was those words that finally made Andrew move slowly towards Neil.

‘Neil,’ he said slowly.

Neil swallowed, but it did nothing to calm him down.

Another few steps closer.

‘Neil,’ Andrew repeated, as if he was testing the word, trying it out in his mouth.

‘Yes,’ Neil breathed nervously.

And Andrew closed the distance between them.

There was a moment where Andrew’s eyes were all Neil could see, his stomach swooping, as suddenly, his dreamer stood in front of him.
Then,
eyes not leaving Neil’s,
Andrew swung his fist and punched Neil in the stomach.

Neil immediately doubled over, coughing violently.

‘Oh,’ Andrew said. ‘He’s real.’

‘Andrew!’ Wymack shouted. ‘The fuck? This is why we can’t have nice things.’

Meanwhile the guy Neil didn’t know quickly walked towards them, asking in a concerned voice,
‘Neil, are you okay?’

Before he could get near, Andrew held out his arm.
‘Don’t get close,’ he said threateningly.

The guy immediately stopped, looking in shock at first Neil, then Andrew.
‘Jesus Andrew,’ he said. ‘Why’d you do that for?’

Andrew shrugged, a smile creeping on his face.
‘He said yes.’

‘Not to punching,’ Neil wheezed, using the wall behind him to right himself again.

‘Not?’ Andrew asked cheerily, turning his attention to Neil again. ‘Then what did you say yes to?’

If he was real.
If this was happening.
That it wasn’t a dream,
and Andrew was in fact
‘Awake,’ Neil coughed.

Andrew’s eyes darkened.

‘Yeah, but you see, Neil,’ he said, still smiling that horrible looking smile, the smile that told Neil
Andrew was not okay.
‘How can I be sure?’
Andrew pushed Neil against the wall.
‘For all I know,’ he continued lowly, moving closer into Neil’s personal space, the only thing
separating them now a few inches of air,
‘You are lying.’

Andrew said each word slowly.
Threateningly.

And Neil couldn’t correct him.

Though he wanted to say that he’d been as honest as he could.
For Andrew.

He opened his mouth,
but Andrew interrupted him.
‘I don’t like him.’

‘You don’t have to like him,’ Wymack said. ‘You just need to play with him.’

Andrew’s smile disappeared and his expression turned a little
dangerous,
murderous even.

It made Neil shiver.

But he didn’t move away.
Neither did Andrew, voice too happy as he said,
‘But coach, he already played me.’

‘I never-‘ Neil started,
but Andrew cut him off by punching him in the stomach again.
Hard.

Neil doubled over a second time.

‘Goodbye,’ Andrew smiled, taking a step back, and another, and walking away.

Neil tried to regain his composure,
tried not to panic,
when he heard Kevin sigh.

Neil looked up.

Kevin was looking at him with a puzzled look on his face.

‘I don’t know how you know Andrew, or why you would want to,’ he said, ‘But when you’re on
the court, you leave all that shit behind you.’

Oh.
Neil hadn’t expected those to be Kevin’s first words to him after such a long time.
He’d expected maybe an introduction, some sort of welcome, but.

Neil actually liked this better.

Skip the bullshit.

So he nodded.

‘Good,’ Kevin said. ‘Change into your gear, and we’ll start training.’

‘Wait,’ the guy near Neil said. ‘Aren’t we going to talk about Andrew’s reaction?’

Andrew’s twin shrugged. ‘It’s Andrew. What did you expect, Nicky?’

Nicky looked a little helplessly at Neil.
‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

Neil nodded again.
‘I will be when I’m playing.’

‘Oh geez,’ Nicky said. ‘That’s not healthy.’

Chapter End Notes

Hihi no cliffhanger :)
BUT that didn't go... smooth
at all.

next time; 'Familiar; when you know someone.'

I hope you enjoyed this long awaited moment! >w< Comments and thoughts are very
much appreciated! :D Thank you so so much for reading <3
Hello lovely people!

Talk about a good start of Autumn! The sun was shining, orange and red leaves were flying through the air. It was a great day, and I hope you had a great day as well :)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kevin said nothing personal to Neil while they were training.

Until Neil dropped unceremoniously on the ground, his legs giving out.

‘Come on, Neil,’ Kevin shouted, ‘Make up for your lack of height by at least being fast.’

Okay.

Now it was personal.

And different from how they used to talk to each other.

Very different.

Lifting his head and pushing himself up on tired arms, Neil saw from the corner of his eye that Andrew was sitting on one of the benches, watching them.

Why?

Gritting his teeth, Neil reminded himself that he wanted this. Even though he’d known what a terrible choice it would be.

Only he hadn’t thought it’d be this bad.

‘I’m taller than Andrew,’ Neil said through clenched teeth as he tightened his grip on his racquet.

‘And he’s better than you,’ Kevin said. ‘Now try and get past me again.’

When they finished practicing, Neil had to admit that even though his legs were shaking, his pulse was racing, and he was sweating through his jersey, he felt alive.

It was great.
He couldn’t wait to play again.

But first.

He turned around, wanting to— but Andrew was nowhere to be found.

Somehow, Kevin caught him searching.

‘He’s waiting outside.’

Neil didn’t want to admit that he’d been looking for Andrew, so he said nothing and followed Kevin into the locker room.

Kevin’s dreams always took place on a court.

And Nathaniel loved it.

He immediately raced towards the racquets lying on the sidelines.

‘Let’s play!’ he shouted, waving the stick around.

‘Hey,’ Kevin laughed, ‘That’s dangerous.’

They quickly got into position, Nathaniel in defence, Kevin as a striker.

After three games, they both needed a breather.

‘Ahh, you’re just too good,’ Nathaniel complained, hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath.

Kevin smiled.

‘No, I’m okay. It’s just fun playing against you. I can’t help but get super competitive.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Nathaniel smirked. ‘Otherwise I’d definitely win.’

Kevin gave him a slight push, which caused Nathaniel to stumble. He shouted indignantly, ‘Hey! No fair.’

Kevin giggled, and Nathaniel went to tackle him to the ground—

Nathaniel woke up in his own bedroom, his father sitting on his bed.

Before he could sit up however, his father gripped his shoulder harshly.

‘And?’ he asked.
‘Um,’ Nathaniel said, blinking the sleep from his eyes. ‘We played Exy.’

His father’s jaw clenched.

‘Again?’

Feeling guilty, Nathaniel dropped his eyes and looked at his bedsheets.
‘Sorry,’ he mumbled. ‘I didn’t see Kevin change anything.’

His father’s eyes were harsh and cold when Nathaniel dared to look up again.

Looking at his watch, his father said,
‘It’s not morning yet. Kevin will still be asleep.’

From his pocket, he produced a bottle of pills.

‘Dream better, Nathaniel,’ his father ordered, before pushing one of the pills roughly into Nathaniel’s mouth.

As Kevin had said,
Andrew was indeed waiting outside.

He hadn’t mentioned Andrew was waiting inside the unreasonable car.

‘We’ll give you a ride,’ Kevin said as he opened the passenger door.

Andrew didn’t say anything,
which Neil took as silent agreement.

When he sat down on the expensive leather seats however, he couldn’t help himself.

‘What’s with the car?’

Andrew’s hands clenched around the steering wheel.

‘Do you know this sensation, Kevin?’ Andrew asked. Kevin didn’t reply, somehow sensing it was a rhetorical question.
‘Hearing voices. Very weird. As if my mind is talking to me.’

Fine.
Neil gritted his teeth and looked out the window.

He tried to see the clouds,
but all of a sudden the car shot back, and Neil nearly fell forward if it hadn’t been for his seat belt.

Andrew then smoothly drove the car out of the parking lot.

Ugh.

‘If you’re hearing voices,’ Neil snapped, ‘You should see someone.’

Even though they were going nearly a hundred miles an hour,
or at least that’s what it felt like to Neil,
Andrew’s eyes suddenly met him in the rear view mirror, and Neil’s heart clenched at the detachedness he saw there.

‘But who am I seeing, Neil?’ Andrew asked.

They arrived at Wymack’s place.

Neil got out of the car, but before he could talk to Andrew, even though he had no idea what he was going to say, Andrew drove off, tires screeching.

For fuck’s sake.
The car door had still been open.

Neil was scared to fall asleep that night.

It had been a while since he felt that way.

But he shouldn’t have feared. Because even though he was dead tired, his mind was keeping him awake, spinning in circles, constantly repeating the way Andrew had looked at him, had looked at him in real life for the first time.

Needless to say, the next morning, Neil’s movements were sluggish and slow as he walked towards the breakfast table.

Wymack raised an eyebrow while he took another sip of coffee.

‘Rough night?’

‘Didn’t sleep,’ Neil grunted as he grabbed a piece of toast.

When Wymack had downed the rest of his coffee, he placed his mug carefully on the table before saying,

‘Look. I get that it’s hard, adapting to a new place. But do not think for a second that you have to do it alone, okay? You have me here to help you if you need it.’

A weird feeling squeezed Neil’s throat, so his voice sounded tight as he said,

‘Yeah… Thanks.’

Wymack sighed.

But he still drove him to the stadium though he wasn’t sure it was healthy and maybe Neil should try
to rest.

Nope, not happening, Neil thought stubbornly. There was a court here, and he was allowed to play. He was *not* going to waste that.

Even though his breath hitched as he saw the sleek black car parked at the stadium.

No, Neil thought. Not worth….
He couldn’t finish the thought, so he quickly threw open the door and walked towards the lounge.

Inside, Kevin and Andrew were already waiting for him.

Or, well, Kevin was waiting for him.

Andrew was slouched on one of the couches, staring at the wall in front of him.

‘That’s a familiar sight,’ Neil said.

A second,
two,
three,
four,
grew by, and Neil was sure that Andrew was going to ignore him for the rest of his life, when Andrew actually spoke up.

‘What’s the definition of familiar, Kevin?’

Kevin sighed but didn’t respond. Maybe that was his go-to reaction whenever Andrew asked him a question.

‘Familiar. When you know someone.’ Andrew answered his own question in a flat voice.

‘Well,’ Wymack said, turning towards Neil. ‘I’ll leave you to it. Andrew, you take him home okay?’

Andrew didn’t respond. Kevin did though.

‘He will.’

A sudden pang shot through Neil’s chest. *If only.*

‘You okay, Andrew?’ Wymack asked.

Again, no response. Wymak looked at Kevin.

‘Something happened?’

Kevin shook his head. ‘No, he didn’t sleep last night.’
Son of a-

Neil snorted. ‘Afraid of dreaming, Andrew?’ he couldn’t help but taunt.

The corners of Andrew’s mouth twitched, and,
Andrew rolled his head back until he was watching Neil upside down, a smile now stretched wide across his face.

‘The goal is to die with memories, Neil, not dreams.’

In that moment, Neil would rather be forced to sleep for a week, would rather feel his father slice him up than hear those words again.

It took every scrap of bravery to say, ‘Is that a challenge?’

Andrew’s eyebrows raised.

Neil stared back.

After what seemed like too long a silence, Andrew let his head fall forward again, standing up from the couch and walking towards the court.

Neil’s heart fell.
Don’t leave.
Not like that.

please see me

Then,
Andrew paused in front of the door.

‘Stop being interesting.’

Despite the hurt, despite the frustration and the guilt and the terrible gnawing feeling of being alone, Neil smiled at those words.

As Andrew threw the door open, Neil suddenly wanted, wanted and caught the door before it swung shut.

‘Memories just take you back,’ he said to Andrew’s back. ‘I think dreams take you forward.’

Andrew continued walking.

That night, Neil wasn’t afraid to fall asleep.
And so he did.

He slept soundly, and quietly, and when he woke up he couldn’t remember his dream anymore. Which meant he hadn’t visited Andrew’s.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'you'll have to sleep eventually'

Thank you SO much for all the lovely support last chapter! I was really excited and nervous for you to read their meeting, and I'm so glad you all thought it was okay! <3

Thanks for that :D
(and oh look at that, I threw in another little plot thing)

Thanks for reading <3 !
Hello lovely people!

Okay so that little cold turned into a full blown feverish flu (WOAH see that nice alliteration). Anyways, after loads of cups of citrus-y medicine, I feel better and able to post another chapter! Sorry that I didn't post it yesterday, I was too busy being delusional and telling my roommate she is my bestestestest friend in the world, haha.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Too agitated to wait for Wymack to drive him, Neil wolfed down his breakfast, grabbed his things and ran towards the court.

They were already waiting for him in the lounge, which Neil thought was impressive as it was currently seven in the morning.

‘Ready?’ Kevin asked, pointing towards the locker room, but Neil ignored him and moved to stand in front of Andrew.

Andrew’s eyes were staring straight ahead, probably ignoring him again, but Neil didn’t want to wait.

He crouched so he was eye-level with Andrew, so he could see how tired Andrew looked, the dark circles under his eyes evidence enough.

‘It’s unhealthy to skip sleep,’ he stated. ‘After three days without sleep, you’ll start to hallucinate.’

Andrew already looked bored with the conversation.

‘I know.’

‘Oh?’ Neil cocked his head to the side. ‘You do?’

Andrew waved a hand in his face.

‘Don’t try to be interesting.’

‘Me?’ Neil feigned surprise. ‘I’m not doing anything. But I wonder how something can be interesting, if you’re not interested?’

With some smugness, Neil watched Andrew’s jaw clench.

When Andrew’s hand curled into a fist, Neil was prepared to get hit again.
Because, okay, he kind of deserved it.

He had lied to Andrew about his identity, and now he was using taunts to try to coax Andrew into reacting, into talking to him again.

It was working, but it wasn’t a method Neil particularly enjoyed.

Not while Andrew was obviously hurting.

So when Andrew leaned back, away from Neil, Neil was a little surprised that he wasn’t going to get hit for his remark. And hoped that it meant that Andrew didn’t want to punch him for telling the truth.

‘Can we practice? You’re still not good enough,’ Kevin broke the silence, startling Neil.

To be honest, he’d forgotten Kevin was still here, too focused on Andrew.

fuck

‘I know,’ Neil said, and followed Kevin into the locker room.

‘Why do you keep pushing him?’ Kevin asked, before Neil could hurry off to change in one of the stalls.

Neil paused in the doorway, gear in his hand, as he thought about the answer.

‘Because I hope he’ll come back,’ he replied finally.

Kevin looked at him for a moment.

‘I don’t think it works like that.’

Neil shrugged.

‘I don’t think Andrew works like people think he does.’

Neil wasn’t stupid.

That night, when he was sure Wymack had retreated to his room, he pulled on a dark hoodie, put his shoes on and sneaked out the door.

The sound of his feet hitting the ground, the cool wind hitting his face, was just like before.

It felt nice.
Though he wasn’t sure how he was going to get Andrew out of the house without waking up everybody else.

Because he was sure everybody else would be sleeping.

Everybody, apart from Andrew.

Abby’s house was completely dark. No lights were on.

Still didn’t mean Andrew was asleep.

Standing in front of Abby’s house, Neil debated how he was going to do this.

Was he going to get in?
And how?
Maybe Abby left the key underneath the doormat and he could simply unlock the door.
And if that wasn’t the case, he could always pick the lock.

Neil took a few hesitant steps forward when-

‘Breaking in again, Neil?’

Andrew was sitting on the doorstep, a cigarette in his hand.
Neil hadn’t seen him at first.
But as always, now that Neil had, it was difficult not to see Andrew.

He was so fucked.

‘I don’t want you to hallucinate,’ Neil said, which wasn’t the best explanation for what he was doing here in the middle of the night.

Andrew took a drag of his cigarette.

‘I feel like I already am.’

‘I’m real,’ Neil replied through gritted teeth, taking a step towards Andrew, who looked up, and-

Neil halted.
Andrew’s eyes looked detached dead
and there was no emotion on his face.
There was no unhinged smile, or wildness, or anger.
Nothing.

‘Andrew?’ Neil asked hesitatingly.

With a sigh, Andrew blew smoke into the air between them.

‘Neil,’ he said slowly.
There was a silence.
In which Neil took another step closer.

‘Can I sit next to you?’

Andrew didn’t reply, but he moved to the side,
making room for Neil.

Neil took care not to touch Andrew as he sat down, but their knees were still
inches apart.

Lifting his head, Neil watched the stars above them.
There were many.

‘You’ll have to sleep eventually,’ he murmured, trying to find a constellation between all those
pinpricks of light.

‘There’s always the choice to sleep forever.’

Neil immediately turned his head.

Andrew was looking at the sky as well,
and even though his eyes looked dead,
Neil could see stars reflected in them.

‘Don’t,’ he breathed.

Andrew didn’t reply, eyes still staring unseeingly at the universe.

Neil wanted Andrew to see.
For Andrew made Neil feel seen, made him feel alive, made him feel here,
and Neil wanted Andrew to feel the same.
Neil wanted Andrew to feel alive
Neil wanted Andrew

‘I like being in your dreams,’ Neil admitted quietly.

Andrew turned his head slowly,
and Neil should feel awkward for getting caught staring, but he didn’t.

Not when Andrew was looking at him.

‘I’ll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours,’ Andrew said.

Neil’s throat felt small, constricted,
as he confessed,
‘You already are.’

Dropping the cigarette on the floor,
Andrew put his hand on the ground between them,
and leaned forward.
His eyes were boring into Neil’s.
Whose heart was beating,
fast.

‘Why aren’t you smiling?’ Neil whispered.

Andrew’s eyes dropped to his lips,
which set Neil’s blood on fire as he hoped-

‘No medication.’

Huh?

‘Medicatio-’ Neil started to ask, but Andrew put a finger against his mouth.

‘Ask me a different question.’

Oh.

Heart pounding wildly,
Neil whispered,

‘Yes or no?’

Instead of replying,
Andrew slowly dragged his finger down Neil’s lip,
the sensation setting Neil’s nerves on edge.

‘I don’t trust you.’

Neil nodded,
thinking that was fair,
until Andrew leaned even closer and thinking was getting difficult when his body was so attuned to
Andrew’s every move.

‘Wait,’ Neil said, when Andrew’s lips were an inch from his.
He didn’t want to wait, but,

‘You didn’t say yes.’

Andrew froze.
And something flashed behind his eyes.

‘Fuck you,’ Andrew growled.

‘But-’

Andrew’s hand shot up and buried itself in Neil’s hair, pulling until their foreheads were nearly touching.
This close, Neil could see that Andrew’s pupils were large as they stared into Neil’s,
as they shared their every breath.
'Yes.'

And Andrew kissed him.
Really kissed him,
for the first time.

For all the detachedness Neil had seen in his eyes,
Andrew kissed like he couldn’t keep his emotions in,
like he really wanted to kiss
Neil.

*Badump* went Neil’s naive heart.

Tilting his head to the side, in order to deepen their kiss, Andrew loosened his grip in Neil’s hair and slid his hand down so he could cup the back of his neck.

It felt grounding,
and Neil’s hands flailed at his side as he wanted to hold Andrew too but didn’t.

So instead
Neil pressed his lips harder against Andrew’s,
who immediately pulled him closer.

The unexpected pull almost made Neil fall so he quickly put his hands on the ground on either side of Andrew.

Neil shyly opened his mouth,
because if he’d already opened his heart, what more harm could this do?

But when Andrew tightened his grip and slid his tongue inside Neil’s mouth,
Neil found out that it was
*a lot*
of damage.

He groaned.

And even though Andrew didn’t make a sound,
the harsh breaths against Neil’s mouth told him enough.

When Andrew pulled back,
Neil couldn’t help the deep sigh that left him as he watched the redness of Andrew’s lips, the slickness.

Andrew pushed him lightly.

‘Go back.’

Neil frowned, but stood up all the same.

Before he walked away, he looked over his shoulder at Andrew.
Who was already watching him.
Who tapped a finger to his head and said,
'See you when I fall asleep.'

Neil smiled.

As Neil let himself fall down on the couch, he threw an arm over his eyes as he just let himself remember the feeling of Andrew.

He knew it was wrong to get attached, and dangerous, the words his mother had beaten into him all too clear. Don’t do love.

But how could he forget the way Andrew had kissed him?

Neil touched his lips.

From the moment he’d said, ‘I promise.’ From the moment Andrew had seen him, Neil had been lost.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'now's the time to cut the bullshit.'

I hope you still like all the developments :) Please don't be afraid to tell me what you thought!

Thanks so much for reading! <3
Hello lovely people,

WHAT IS THIS SUNNY WEATHER? I was just SO ready for cozy sweaters, interesting coloured tights, tea, candles and books and now here I am, SWEATING,, on my couch. Outrageous. Though the leaves on the trees look exceptionally bright in the sunlight :) Also, I feel better! No cold (not with this weather EYYY).

Enjoy this long-ass chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Practice with Kevin was both inspiring and killing all motivation Neil had ever had for playing Exy.

But when Neil achieved a certain move, a difficult drill, and he saw the spark in Kevin’s eyes that told him Neil was worth all the trouble of coaching, Neil gritted his teeth and forced himself to try one more time.

When Neil opened his eyes, he finally found himself in Andrew’s dreams again.

The bright orange room was, not so bright. Which was great for Neil’s eyes.

But that wasn’t what immediately drew his attention, no, it was the glass wall running through the middle of the room, separating Neil from Andrew.

Neil walked towards the wall, knocking on it to estimate how thick the glass was and if Andrew could hear him through it. From the way Andrew turned around when he knocked, Neil guessed he could.

‘I’m not going to ask who’s there,’ Andrew said, taking a few steps closer to the glass. ‘Because you’re not going to be honest.’

‘Andrew, I didn’t mean t-’

‘Neil,’ Andrew cut him off, eyes hard. ‘There’s a time to be nice. Now is not that time. Now’s the time to cut the bullshit.’
‘I told you as much as I could.’

Neil put his hand flat against the glass, wanting to reach out.

Andrew shook his head.

‘Not good enough.’

Exasperated, Neil said, ‘I can’t tell you everything, but I didn’t lie about most things.’ He looked Andrew in the eyes. ‘The promise wasn’t a lie.’

But Andrew’s eyes didn’t reflect anything.

Neil now knew why.

Andrew wasn’t on his medication, the cause of the horrible smile.

Didn’t make it hurt less.

‘Does anyone know?’ Andrew asked.

‘Maybe Kevin does,’ Neil replied truthfully. ‘But so far it doesn’t look like he remembers me.’

‘You erased his memories?’

‘What?’ Neil asked in shock. ‘No. I can’t do that. That’s not how it works.’

For a second, Neil was afraid Andrew was going to ask him to explain how it did work. Because he couldn’t. He didn’t know, and he had never wanted to know.

But Andrew dismissed the mechanics of dreamwalking, for now anyway, and asked,

‘Why are you here?’

Neil shrugged, not wanting to admit why. ‘Maybe because you want me in your dreams,’ he said instead.

Andrew took another step towards the glass. ‘Can you be killed in dreams?’

Okay, point taken.

But the real answer was so much harder to give.

Neil dropped his eyes, looking at the ground.
‘Because the opposite of happiness would be not playing Exy,’ he said quietly. ‘It would be not having lived, not having anything that’s real.’

He looked at Andrew again.

‘And I want something that’s real.’

Andrew didn’t answer, and they stood like that, unmoving, silent, for a while.

Then, the glass wall disappeared, and with it Neil’s support.

He stumbled forward, but before he could fall, Andrew grabbed his arm to steady him, but also to keep him at a distance.

‘Good enough. For now,’ he said.

A wave of relief washed over Neil.

Considering Kevin’s harsh regime, it didn’t come as a surprise when Kevin said, ‘See you tonight.’

‘Tonight?’ Neil asked, wiping away the sweat on his forehead.

‘Practice.’

Neil merely nodded.

‘We’ll pick you up,’ Kevin added.

True to his word, at eleven o’clock Kevin knocked on Wymack’s door.

Neil grabbed his bag and was standing up when Wymack shouted from his office, ‘Who’s here?’

‘Kevin,’ Neil answered. ‘We’re practising tonight.’

‘Healthy,’ Wymack snorted. ‘Don’t let him murder you.’

No, Neil thought, walking towards the door. He’d have to get in line.

When he opened the door, it was not Kevin.
'Andrew,’ Neil said in surprise.

Andrew looked tired,
his eyes indifferent as they took Neil in.

And the realisation suddenly hit Neil.

This was the first time Andrew had actually chosen to go to him.

Instead of replying, Andrew jerked his head towards the hallway.
Getting the message, Neil walked out, closing the door behind him only to be immediately pushed against it.

Andrew closed the distance between them quickly,
but before their lips touched
Andrew asked,

‘Yes or no?’

Neil immediately replied.

‘Yes.’

The first touch of Andrew’s lips against his was light and soft.

Neil’s hands twitched at his side.

But after that one soft kiss, Andrew was already leaning back.
Still Neil couldn’t help smiling, and he leaned forward to hide it, pressing his lips against Andrew’s again.

It must’ve been a good move, because Andrew’s hand immediately cupped the back of Neil’s neck, pulling him forward to deepen their kiss

‘Oh, Neil–’
Wymack opened the door, causing Neil to stumble back.
He would’ve fallen if it hadn’t been for Andrew’s strong hold on him.

‘Oh,’ Wymack said, taking in the situation.

While Neil wondered if it would be rude to ignore Wymack and go back to their wonderfully soft kissing, Andrew on the other hand immediately released Neil and walked away without another word.

‘Well, I was going to say be careful around Andrew. I hadn’t realized I had to say be careful with Andrew.’

Okay,
even Neil’s cheeks couldn’t stay unfazed after that.

Shifting uncomfortably on the spot, Neil asked, ‘Was that everything?’

Wymack raised an eyebrow. ‘Yes. Unless you want to explain to me why—’

‘No, thanks,’ Neil interrupted him, and quickly walked away.

Kevin had no mercy for Neil that night, as he let him practice a move again and again and again and again all the while commenting way too personal shit about Neil.

Fucking tall privileged jerk.

And while Neil had to suffer through Kevin, Andrew was lounging in the stands, looking like he was ready to fall asleep.

When Neil was allowed five minutes of rest, he walked towards the edge of the court and knocked against the wall.

‘Join us,’ he said.

Andrew looked at him like he was stupid.

‘Hey,’ Kevin shouted, ‘Your break time is for drinking water, not wasting energy by socialising.’

Neil glared at the bench in front of him.

‘Join us,’ he repeated, looking at Andrew again. ‘It’ll be more fun.’

‘Yeah, you look like you’re having fun,’ Andrew deadpanned.

Neil groaned.

‘At least when you’re down here, he won’t make comments about my height anymore.’

Andrew didn’t look impressed, nor touched by Neil’s plea and all too soon Kevin announced that break time was over.

When Neil walked back towards the middle of the court, Kevin said, ‘He never does.’

‘What?’ Neil asked.

‘Play.’
Neil turned around to look at Andrew again.

Well, that wasn’t true, was it?
Andrew played Exy sometimes.
In his dreams.

Neil was exhausted.

Their nightly training was fun, but when he fell on the couch that night, after having quietly sneaked back into Wymack’s apartment,
Neil sighed deeply.

Finally.
Lying down.
 Sleeping.

Neil reached for the blanket lying at the end of the couch, then frowned.
Hadn’t he already thrown that over himself?

He was just getting settled when someone knocked on the door.
Again?

Afraid they would wake up Wymack, Neil quickly walked towards the door.

For the second time that day
he did not expect
Andrew.

Neil blinked in surprise.

And when Andrew jerked his head towards the hallway, Neil got a weird feeling of deja vu.

‘Andrew?’ he whispered. ‘What are you doing here? What if Wymack woke up?’

His words made Andrew pause.

‘You agreed to train with Kevin tonight.’

Wait, what?

‘Unless I’m in a timeloop, I don’t think so.’

Andrew frowned at him,
and it concerned Neil all of a sudden.

‘Did you take your medication?’ he asked.

Andrew shook his head.
‘I don’t take it before sleep anymore.’
Oh, Neil didn’t know that.

‘Why not?’

But Andrew looked away, clearly not going to answer Neil.

So Andrew had taken his medication before bed in the past?
And then he hadn’t.

‘You can’t sleep with them?’ Neil guessed, but Andrew immediately responded with,
‘I can.’

Huh.
Then why had Andrew stopped taking his medication?

Before Neil could figure it out, Andrew took a step closer, forcing Neil to take one back.

‘So if Kevin’s not waiting in the car,’ Andrew said slowly, ‘And Wymack is asleep.’

Neil’s back hit the wall,
and still Andrew came closer
until
their bodies were pressed against each other.

The pressure made Neil breathless.

This was a lot more touching than they normally did.

Andrew’s brown eyes were staring into his,
and wait, wasn’t Andrew talking about something?
Neil couldn’t remember anymore.

He remembered how they kissed before though,
and how he wanted it now.

So Neil whispered,
‘Yes.’

Andrew tilted his head to the side.

‘I didn’t ask anything.’

‘I hoped you would.’

Andrew’s eyes narrowed.
‘I thought you didn’t hope.’

His number one on the list.
How did Andrew know that?

‘I thought I didn’t either,’ Neil replied truthfully, like a man who’d told himself a million times over that he shouldn’t expect to meet Andrew in real life.
A frown appeared on Andrew’s face while he stared into Neil’s eyes, looking for well, probably, the truth.

But Neil was getting a little impatient.

‘Are you going to kiss me or what?’

The frown disappeared.

And in response, Andrew grabbed Neil’s hair roughly, pulling his head down. There was almost nothing between their lips now, except their fastening breaths.

‘Yes,’ Andrew growled, and kissed Neil hard.

Well, he kissed him hard, the kiss didn’t make him ha-

Pushing Neil nearly into the wall, Andrew slid his leg between Neil’s, his hip now pressing into Neil’s erection.

okay
yeah okay
He was hard.

A groan escaped Neil.
Andrew pulled back for a second.

‘Still yes?’

Neil nodded, but Andrew pulled on his hair.

‘Neil,’ he warned.

Neil shifted his hips forward impatiently and groaned again.
‘Yes.’

Immediately, Andrew kissed him as if he wanted to make up for the lost time between them.

Neil didn’t mind, absolutely didn’t mind
that Andrew’s lips were bruising his,
that Andrew’s hips were grinding into his erection,
that the intensity of the kiss was making his head spin.

His hands scrambled against the wall as Andrew slid their tongues together, as Andrew moaned quietly when his hips ground against Neil’s particularly hard and Neil could feel
Andrew’s erection as well.

ooooooh fuck

‘Andrew,’ Neil groaned. ‘I want to touch you.’

But Andrew didn’t pay his words any mind as he grabbed Neil’s chin with one hand and forced his head to the side, leaving openmouthed kisses on Neil’s neck.

‘Andrew,’ Neil moaned, trying one more time before he got lost in the wonderful, arousing sensation.

In reply, Andrew bit his neck.

‘Nnngh,’ Neil said very coherently, head falling back against the wall with a thump.

His heartbeat was going crazy.

The pressure, the wonderfully slow and rhythmic grinding, were making it hard to remember how to stand how to breathe.

If this continued any longer, Neil would surely come.

And it seemed Andrew sensed this, because his mouth found Neil’s again, and soon their lips were sliding over each other, Neil groaning into Andrew’s mouth.

fuck any moment

Hands burying themselves in Andrew’s hair, Neil pulled Andrew impossibly closer as he was falling over the edge, moaning-

Neil felt himself come in his pants as he opened his eyes.

Panting, he watched the ceiling above him, and noticed that he was lying on Wymack’s couch.

How?

Oh.
Suddenly, it was obvious.

It had been a dream.

Neil blushed.

A wet dream.
About Andre-
No, he immediately corrected himself.
With Andrew.
Andrew had actually dreamed about the moment they were interrupted. Was this what he’d wanted to do?

Despite the burning of his cheeks, Neil grinned.

‘At least now I know how you feel about wanting,’ Neil said smugly after their afternoon training.

Andrew drove away before Neil could get in the car.

‘I still think it’s weird,’ Nicky said.
‘I agree,’ Matt nodded.
‘Same,’ Allison replied, before popping a piece of chewing gum in her mouth.

Neil shrugged uncomfortably.

‘I mean,’ Nicky continued. ‘Andrew won’t tell us how he knows you. That leaves us with questioning you.’

Neil shrunk further into the couch.

They were in the lounge, waiting for Wymack to come and announce whatever he was going to announce.

The rest of the foxes were all staring at Neil, who found that while he liked them well enough, he didn’t like where this was going.
The only one who wasn’t staring at Neil so far, was, of course, Andrew.

Didn’t mean Neil didn’t shoot Andrew a panicked look.
It was in vain.

‘Come on, can’t you at least tell us something?’ Nicky whined. ‘Now we’re just going to think weird things.’

‘Uuh,’ Allison agreed.

‘I mean,’ Matt said slowly, ‘If you’re really uncomfortable, you don’t have to tell us of course.’

Nicky looked incredulously at Matt.
‘What? Of course he does! How else are we going to know? We’re never going to get the answer from Andrew.’

‘Yeah, but if he doesn’t want to, he doesn’t have to.’

‘Ugh,’ Nicky waved Matt away. ‘You’re too good for this world.’
He turned his attention on Neil again.

‘Damnit.’

‘Sooo,’ Nicky said, stretching his so very long and lowering his voice after the fourth o.

Neil shifted nervously on his seat.

‘Okay, well, here goes.’

‘I met him in a dream,’ he replied straightforward.

From the corner of his eye he saw Andrew’s head snap to him.

The rest of the foxes were silent,

Nicky’s eyebrows shooting up.

‘Aww,’ Renee smiled, at the same time that Allison said,

‘Is that a fucking Disney reference?’

‘Huh?’

‘Oh no,’ Nicky said, eyes going wide. ‘I knew you had a fucked up childhood, but don’t tell me...’

Neil raised an eyebrow in confusion.

‘Tell you what?’

‘Oh no, not with that face.’

Nicky looked like he was in pain.

‘Have you never seen Sleeping Beauty?’

‘Isn’t that the fairy tale where the princess sleeps forever?’ Neil guessed.

Renee smiled at Neil,

who thought it was too sweet a smile for someone with her eyes,

then said,

‘Not forever. The prince wakes her up, after all that time, with a kiss.’

Yeah, right.

‘How does that work?’ Neil asked skeptically.

Finally, Andrew chimed in.

‘Yeah, how does it work?’

Neil frowned at him, knowing what Andrew was getting at.

Nicky on the other hand, did not, as he was alternating between giving Neil and Andrew exasperated looks.

‘Love obviously!’

Andrew didn’t seem impressed.
Neither did Neil for that matter.

In his opinion, love was never obviously the answer. It wasn’t a thing that happened a lot, not in his life.

Before Neil had to answer Nicky’s ridiculous explanation, Kevin walked into the lounge with Wymack behind him.

“What are you talking about?” Kevin asked as he sat down on the couch beside Andrew.

“Neil met Andrew in a dream,” Allison stated.

All the blood suddenly drained from Neil’s face, as Kevin turned a curious look on Neil.

“Dreams?”

Oh no.

 purported

Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘Edgar Allan is moving to our district.’

As always you LOVELY wonderful people, thank you so much for reading! <3 I hope you get to have a relaxing weekend, sleep in, or be extra productive, or extra lazy! Whatever you have planned, I hope that it'll work out <3
Hello lovely people,

I hope you're all doing fine! It's FINALLY spoopy time! The first of October! Time for pumpkins, witchy shows, and another rewatch of Coraline. Gosh I love that movie. AND my birthday month! Aaah.

Enjoy this chapter!

The announcement couldn’t have been worse, and it explained why Kevin was currently sitting white-faced on the couch.

‘Edgar Allan is moving to our district.’

Shock silenced the team, but not for long.

‘No way,’ Dan said sharply. ‘That’s not funny, Coach.’

Immediately after her comment, the rest of the foxes started demanding an explanation as to why this was happening. Everyone excluding Renee, Andrew and Kevin, who all sat in silence.

Neil wanted to join the others in their outrage but found that he couldn’t. His mind was reeling. This was too much. The dangers of meeting Riko…

The muscles in Neil’s legs started thrumming, getting restless, telling Neil what he knew. It was too dangerous here and he should leave.

Andrew’s voice startled Neil out of his restless thoughts.

‘Hey, Kevin,’ Andrew said, smiling widely. ‘Hear that? Someone really misses you.’

‘The ERC shouldn’t have approved it,’ Kevin said, though it was only by the barest definition of the word. Neil had barely heard him.

‘You said he would come for you.’

‘I didn’t know it would be like this.’

Andrew’s body language told Neil that he didn’t believe Kevin.
'Liar.'

It made Kevin flinch.

‘You did know about this. How long? One day, two days, three four five?’

Neil frowned as he watched Andrew twist to sit sideways on the couch so he could see Kevin better, while Kevin started to look sick to his stomach.

‘Coach told me when it was approved in May.’

Ouch, that was a long time ago.

‘May. May, Day. Mayday. A little curious, Kevin Day. When were you going to tell me?’

‘I told him not to,’ Wymack cut in.

‘You picked Coach over me?’ Andrew asked, and laughed the terrible laugh that had Neil curling in on himself. ‘Ohhh my. Deception, betrayal, how familiar. After all I’ve done for you.’

Though it was painful and awkward, the conversation also gave Neil more insight, more knowledge, about the dynamics between Kevin and Andrew.

It was now obvious to him that Andrew was protecting Kevin from the Moriyama’s. While it didn’t look like Andrew and Kevin liked each other all that much, Andrew had apparently promised to protect Kevin. Willingly.

Neil suddenly ached with wanting, and he swallowed hard against the churning in his stomach.

He knew he’d given that up when he’d started off their relationship by lying to Andrew, and now there was no way Andrew would ever willingly choose to stay by Neil’s side.

When he looked up again, it seemed like Andrew and Kevin had resolved their dispute.

Without a backward glance, Neil got to his feet and started for the door.

He vaguely heard Dan call him back for his physical, which frankly, Neil had forgotten all about, but right now it was a little too confronting to see how-well, to see how Andrew did not need Neil in his life.

Neil felt like-

But Kevin needed Andrew, and Andrew had chosen to help Kevin, hadn’t he?

Neil was just an outsider. Always had been.
His feet had almost brought him back to Wymack’s apartment before he remembered that he now owned a bed at the Tower, the place where all of the foxes lived during school terms.

It was a shame that he never got to live here. Could’ve been nice, sharing a room with his teammates.

Producing his bag from the safe he’d stored in the closet, Neil quickly checked if everything was still present before zipping it close and slinging it over his shoulder.

Time to go.

He’d taken one step towards the door when his mind assaulted him with the image of Andrew, in front of him, Andrew smoking on the doorstep, Andrew watching Neil play Exy from the stands. 
Andrew, real.

No.

While it had been nice, unexpectedly nice, it was something Neil couldn’t have.

Taking the final steps towards the door, Neil’s hand hovered for maybe another indecisive second above the knob before turning it.

He walked out of the apartment and straight into Andrew.

‘Andrew?’ Neil blurted out in surprise, taking a step back which Andrew immediately followed up.

Andrew closed the door behind him.

‘Going somewhere?’ he asked, sounding bored, but his eyes were focused intensely on Neil.

Neil looked at the ground.

‘Does it matter?’ he spit out, which was more emotion than he’d wanted to show. He didn’t matter to Andrew.
Neil knew this.

Leaning back against the door, Andrew took a moment to look at him.

Though Neil wanted to pretend otherwise, as always, he was weak against his gaze.

So when he looked up and felt seen by Andrew, every muscle in his body locked down.
It was his body’s way of saying ‘stay’.

Andrew shrugged.

‘Ask me again when I’m sober.’

And Neil wanted to argue that he wasn’t going to be here that long, until he realized it was Andrew’s way of saying ‘stay’.

Neil swallowed.

‘You promised Kevin you’d protect him,’ he said, but his voice wobbled. ‘Against the Moriyama’s. But you don’t know how dangerous they ar-’

‘More dangerous than someone who can influence my dreams?’ Andrew asked, eyes flashing.

But Andrew didn’t understand.

‘At least I don’t misuse it,’ Neil said quietly, needing Andrew to understand.

‘There are others.’

Not meeting Andrew’s eye, Neil nodded quietly.

‘They’re different from you,’ Andrew guessed.
Alarm bells were ringing loudly in Neil’s head. Why was he allowing Andrew a glimpse of the full truth?

But Neil knew why.

It was because he’d seen the trust between Kevin and Andrew, and had wanted it.

Andrew moved closer, getting into dangerously distracting territory as he questioned in a low voice, ‘Someone from the Moriyama’s?’

The door behind Andrew opened as Matt walked in.

‘O-oh,’ Matt said awkwardly, while Andrew took a few casual steps away from Neil. ‘Yeah, they warned me for this, but I didn’t really believe them.’

‘This?’ Neil asked at the same time Andrew said, ‘There’s no this.’

Matt looked between them.

‘Um, okay. If you say so.’

Before Matt could say anything else, Andrew walked away, throwing the door open and appearing to leave without another word but-

‘Have good dreams, Neil.’
Even though Neil’s mind protested weakly that Neil was leaving,
if he was being honest,
Neil knew he was going to stay
if only to visit Andrew’s dreams again.

His first meeting with Riko had been unpleasant enough.
His first dream with Riko had been worse.
‘I always wondered,’ little Riko giggled, twisting Neil’s arms even further behind his back, ‘How much pain you can feel in dreams.’
Riko put his foot on the joint in Neil’s shoulder, who was lying on the floor beneath him.
‘I wonder if your arm would be wrecked in real life too?’ he asked, before putting all his weight behind his kick.
With a sickening crunch Neil’s shoulder got dislocated.
Neil screamed from the pain.
But Riko wasn’t done.
‘Hmm,’ he hummed, observing Neil’s crooked shoulder. ‘But this is so easy to fix. Maybe it’ll slip back when you wake up. I think I need something a little more permanent.’
As per usual, there wasn’t a ping or a sensation to signal that the dreamwalker had altered anything.
But Neil recognized the sudden sound of a gun being loaded anywhere.
‘No, nonono,’ he wheezed, desperate to talk any sense into Riko. ‘I need my arms, Riko, please.’
‘But the goal was to figure out this dreamwalking, wasn’t it?’
Riko sounded like he was pouting, and Neil figured his only chance would be to wriggle free from Riko’s grasp.
Trashing around, he almost managed to throw Riko off until ‘Stop moving!’ Riko whined. ‘Your dad promised Master that I got to experiment. Do you want your father to get mad at you?’
Almost.
Neil almost did.
But his father was an experienced butcher.
His father knew how to make it hurt for hours.
That, or he would not allow Neil to wake up for a whole week, forcing him to roam the disorienting world of dreams.
Neil stopped trashing.
Riko giggled again.
The bullet shot through the already sore muscle of his dislocated shoulder. The pain was so blinding, so intense that it felt like Neil was going to pass out.

Instead, he screamed his throat hoarse as he lay there on the floor beneath Riko, bleeding.

Neil learned you couldn’t pass out in dreams.

So did Riko.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, hair still wet from the shower, Neil touched the round, little scar on his shoulder.

It was safe to say that Neil’s arm had been wrecked in real life.

Fingers travelling down, they slipped over the slashes of his father’s knives, before pressing into several bumpy burn wounds.

Ah, memories. Memories and dreams.

When Neil let his hand fall down, his fingers touched the still healing wounds on his legs.

The skin looked pink and new, and didn’t portray the amount of pain Neil had felt when the knife had entered his legs, nor the anxiety attacks he’d gotten, thinking he would never be able to move his legs again without pain.

He remembered Dan asking if he’d had his physical yet.

His body wasn’t nice, he knew that.

Neil never particularly cared. Though he didn’t want other people to see the scars, it was mostly to avoid questions.

There was a tiny whisper, in the back of his mind, asking him if he would care if Andrew saw.

‘Hey Neil,’ Nicky opened the conversation as he sat down in front of Neil. Who was just gathering his things to go change in the shower stalls.

‘Hey,’ Neil said, feeling uncomfortable just standing there.

He wasn’t going to change here though.
‘So as Andrew’s unofficial boyfriend, you’re joining us this Friday, aren’t you?’

Neil’s breath left him in a big woosh.

So did Nicky’s, but more because Andrew punched him in the gut than that the phrase ‘Andrew’s boyfriend’ had surprised him.

‘Nicky, shut up or I’ll kill you,’ Andrew said cheerily.

Nicky gasped for breath.

‘Point. Taken.’

What were they going to do on Friday?

Neil frowned.

‘I’ll come,’ he said.

‘You’re not invited,’ Andrew responded.

‘I was. Just now.’

Neil pointed at Nicky, whose eyes widened in horror, waving his hands wildly in front of him.

‘Nicky has a disease,’ Andrew smiled, ‘He can’t keep his mouth shut.’

‘Why can’t I join?’

Andrew looked at him in silence, which made Neil all the more curious.

Then help came from an unexpected corner.

‘I don’t mind if Neil joins,’ Kevin said.

Andrew immediately whirled on him, and Neil was happy to not be on the receiving end of that gaze.

Kevin didn’t seem fazed.

‘Won’t it be better anyway?’ he said. ‘You don’t have to worry about him when he’s in front of you.’

what?

Did he hear that right?

Neil took a step forward, but was immediately stopped by Andrew’s outstretched hand.

Andrew turned to look at Neil again.

‘9 o’clock,’ he said.

It sounded like a threat.

And maybe, a promise.
next time; ‘No medicine?’ Neil asked before he could stop himself.

Thanks so much for reading! <3 and I hope it's still interesting! ;)

Chapter End Notes
Hello lovely people!

You know, I've been seeing inktober ALL over social media (twitter, instagram, tumblr) and I have SO much respect for all those participating. I know it's only been three days but still. Respect for all the artists. It makes me kinda antsy to also participate in something, but I figured my month of stress could be November... Because I could maybe for the first time ever participate in Nanowrimo. AAH.

I've been doubting about whether or not I should write one or two big stories, OR maybe asks for prompts and try to write one story per two days. Mmmm.

Sorry for the ramble of thoughts, I guess I just got inspired by all those diligent inktober artists.

Anyways, onto Eden!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Someone knocked on the door.

Matt offered to open it, but Neil already knew who it was.

He tugged on his new shirt, a little uncomfortable with all the new clothes Andrew had gotten him. Why would he need new clothes?

When he opened the door and saw Kevin standing in front of him, Neil took an unconscious step back.

They had been alone on the court often enough, though Andrew was always around, but this was the first time they stood face to face without Exy between them.

‘So,’ Kevin said, and Neil instantly doubted that Kevin had invited him for Andrew’s sake. ‘Why do I get the feeling I know you from somewhere?’ Kevin cut straight to the chase. ‘I know Andrew doesn’t trust you, but he doesn’t trust anyone, so I didn’t think anything of it.’

Kevin paused, as if he was still doubting whether to actually say out loud what he was thinking.

Neil wanted to interrupt him, quickly say that what? What was he even talking about?, but Kevin found his voice sooner.
‘But I keep getting this weird feeling. Like I know you from somewhere.’

‘I have a very plain face,’ Neil said casually.

‘No,’ Kevin shook his head. ‘That’s not it. And I don’t think Nicky will agree with you.’

Well.

‘Is that why you wanted me to go with you?’ Neil asked. ‘To interrogate me?’

‘No,’ Kevin said slowly.

It seemed like he wanted to say something else but this time Neil was faster.

‘Let’s go then.’

........................................................................................................................................................................................

He’d almost made it,
Andrew’s car already in sight with Andrew leaning against it,
his leather jacket reflecting a little, the light of the single lamppost on the parking lot orange and soft.
Neil had never seen Andrew wearing leather.
He decided he liked it.
Definitely liked i-

‘Did we play Exy together?’ Kevin suddenly asked.

Neil froze,
his eyes widening as he thought
shit.

He could see Andrew shift as he took in Neil’s expression,
moving away from the car,
getting ready to come their way.

Please don’t.
I don’t want you to know all my secrets.
You won’t be able to handle them.
Neil pleaded silently.

Taking a deep breath,
Neil turned to face Kevin.

‘What? Don’t tell me your memory is that bad. We play Exy every day, Kevin,’ he bluffed.

Kevin glared at him.

‘I meant when we were little.’

‘Could be,’ Neil shrugged. ‘But that would be a long time ago.’

‘Yeah,’ Kevin said slowly. ‘I don’t know, it feels special somehow.’
‘Thanks,’ Neil said, ‘But I don’t swing.’

He saw Kevin’s eyes shift behind him.

_Great._

Just his fucking luck.

Neil turned around slowly to face Andrew

whose eyes were detached as he looked at Neil.

Which meant

‘No medicine?’ Neil asked before he could stop himself.

Andrew shook his head.

‘I don’t like not being in control.’

Made sense.

‘Isn’t that what causes anxiety?’ Neil couldn’t help but push.

Andrew was silent for a few seconds, before stretching his arm until his fingers were touching Neil’s forehead.

‘Anxiety is only in your head,’ he said, eyes boring into Neil’s. ‘Just like dreams.’

Neil swallowed.

‘Dreams,’ Kevin repeated.

Then.

‘That’s—’

Kevin shook his head, as if he didn’t believe his own thoughts.

‘That’s impossible.’

Andrew’s eyes didn’t leave Neil’s.

Even when Kevin said in disbelief,

‘Have I dreamed you?’

Andrew’s eyes remained focused on Neil.

As if he was afraid

Neil would disappear

when he looked away.

 полно

The car drove across the highway.

Neil watched Nicky’s hands on the steering wheel.

Nicky had come to see what was up before he could answer Kevin’s question.

In a way, Nicky had come to his rescue, but Neil knew he wouldn’t be able to avoid them the entire evening.

Though a night club wasn’t exactly the place to talk.
Sitting in a booth with Andrew and Kevin on either side of him, watching Nicky and Aaron devour a huge ice cream, wasn’t exactly what Neil had in mind when he thought they were going out.

He saw Andrew’s hand slip underneath a few napkins.

His hand was shaking.

‘You okay?’ Neil asked, voice quiet.

Andrew shot him a blank look, so Neil pointed out, ‘Your hand is shaking.’

Again, Andrew remained silent. His eyes were watching Neil though, an indication that for now, Neil was still interesting.

Okay then. He could roll with this.

Without really knowing if it was a good idea, Neil held his hand palm up, and watched as Andrew’s eyes dropped down, staring at Neil’s hand.

After a few seconds, Andrew looked up again.

Neil smiled.

‘If your hand is shaking so much, I can hold it for you,’ he joked, because he wanted Andrew’s mind off the drugs, off the withdrawal symptoms.

There was no answer from Andrew. Not a yes, but not a no either.

Inside Eden’s Twilight, Neil found out what the packets were when Andrew handed them out, ripped one open himself and poured it into his drink.

He handed one to Neil, and from the corner of his eye, Neil saw Nicky raise an eyebrow before smirking. Weird.

Neil shook his head,
which Andrew accepted wordlessly.

When Andrew went to get another round of drinks, Neil turned towards Nicky.

‘What was that?’ he asked.

‘Nooooothing,’ Nicky sing-songed, which meant it was obviously something.

Neil frowned.

‘What’s the deal?’

Nicky darted a quick look at Andrew, who was still at the bar.

‘Okay, okay, if you promise not to tell Andrew,’ he caved. ‘Usually, the first time we take someone here, they don’t get a choice about the cracker dust. They just get it.’

‘Without knowing?’ Neil asked in disgust.

‘Hey, don’t look at me like that. It’s because Andrew wants to know if he can trust people. Sort of like a test.’

And Neil had gotten a choice.

‘What does it mean?’ Neil asked.

Nicky stared at him like he was stupid, then burst out laughing, slapping Neil on the arm as if he had just told a great joke.

If that was the case, Neil didn’t get it.

After a few seconds Nicky noticed that Neil wasn’t laughing with him and raised his eyebrows really high.

‘No way,’ he said. ‘Did you not notice?’


‘Notice what, Nicky?’ Andrew repeated, appearing beside Neil, a tray with drinks balanced on his hand.

‘Um,’ Nicky said nervously, ‘That he looks really good in that outfit?’

What?

Now that was a joke Neil got.

‘Leave him,’ Andrew said, shoving a drink in Nicky’s hand, who grinned like he just got away with something and took a big gulp of whatever was in the glass.

Andrew offered Neil a drink.

He refused.

‘No drugs, no drinks,’ Andrew said. ‘And you don’t swing.’

Neil was surprised Andrew remembered.
Then again, they had kissed.

But it hadn’t meant anything. Not to Andrew anyway.

Neil shrugged.

‘I’ll get a coke,’ he said, standing up from the stool, but Andrew blocked his path before he could get very far and held the almost empty tray in front of Neil. Almost empty. Apart from one glass of coke.

‘I don’t know why the others are so afraid of you,’ Neil said as he took the coke.

‘I don’t know why you aren’t,’ Andrew said.

Because Neil had seen Andrew’s dreams, and his nightmares.

But saying that showed he cared. Cared more than he wanted to admit to himself.

So Neil chugged down half his glass, which was enough time to know that it was a bad, bad bad idea to say instead, ‘Hard to be afraid when I’m thinking about kissing you.’

The darkness that swirled in Andrew’s eyes wasn’t made of nightmares but rather of dreams.

Neil shivered as Andrew took a few steps closer, as Andrew’s gaze dropped to Neil’s lips.

‘Do I still need to say yes?’ Neil asked quietly, which would’ve been impossible to hear if Andrew hadn’t been standing close, hadn’t been focused on Neil’s lips breathing the word yes with every exhale.

‘No one asked you a question,’ Andrew said, dragging his gaze up.

Neil felt his heart sink. Though it wasn’t a no, it was a no.

Andrew took another step closer, nose nearly touching Neil’s.
'Keep dreaming, Neil,' he said.

*oh.*

Enduring Kevin’s stares was hard.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Nicky and Aaron returned from the dance floor, stumbling over their own feet as they all piled into the car.

The house in Columbia was unexpected.

Neil couldn’t imagine having a place to come back to, to call your own, but he figured it must be nice.

He watched as Nicky tried unsuccessfully to open the front door, multiple times, fumbling with the key and even dropping it once. To his surprise, Andrew didn’t say anything.

When Neil looked at him, he found Andrew was already watching him.

Andrew’s gaze felt heavy, like Neil was being pushed down on a bed, his body covered by Andrew’s, his wrists grasped tightly in his hands-

Neil saw Andrew’s eyes darken, and noticed that he’d been staring at Andrew while thinking about-

Heat flooded his cheeks.

Then, just once, Andrew’s eyes raked slowly over Neil’s body, who shivered involuntarily in response.

It was enough to almost drop his gaze, to break the eye contact that was threatening to make Neil forget all about keeping his distance, forget all about pretending his feelings weren’t real.

There was space between them, but it felt non-existent as Andrew’s eyes bored into Neil’s.

They could’ve easily been standing close enough to share every harsh breath.

The tension was almost palpable.

‘*Fuck,*’ Nicky suddenly exclaimed, apparently getting fed up with trying to open the door.
Neil blinked in surprise, and the tension snapped.

Wordlessly, Andrew walked towards the front door and opened it in one smooth move.

‘Fuck,’ Neil whispered, his heartbeat still thundering inside his chest as he watched Andrew walk inside the house, his own legs already following him.

‘Neil,’ Kevin called after him.

No, fuck off, Neil thought.

But Kevin grasped his shoulder and turned him around before he could follow the others inside. It was just the two of them again, outside this time, only Neil did not want Kevin to be the person he was alone with right now.

‘You never answered,’ Kevin said.

‘I don’t want to answer your question,’ Neil bit back.

But Kevin wasn’t letting go that easily.

‘I dreamed about you,’ Kevin said. ‘How?’

Neil shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Maybe you’re impressed by me?’

Kevin glared. ‘Stop pretending you don’t know what I’m talking about. You don’t look surprised at all.’

Neil took a step closer to Kevin as he said, voice low, ‘So? You dreamed about me when you were younger. I don’t see how that’s a problem.’

‘You can’t dream about someone you never met,’ Kevin stated.

True. But Neil was getting fed up with the conversation. What was he getting at? Nothing had happened. Neil had seen to it. Had paid dearly for it.

Neil took another step closer, getting into Kevin’s personal space.

‘Drop. it.’ he hissed.

‘Something doesn’t add up,’ Kevin said stubbornly, looking down on Neil. ‘Should’ve studied harder for calc then,’ Neil said, and walked away.
When he stepped over the threshold, he noticed a shadow standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed.

‘You and Kevin got a problem?’ Andrew asked.

‘Everyone has problems,’ Neil shot back.

‘And secrets, apparently,’ Andrew said.

Well, falling asleep had never been this hard.

If Neil wasn’t as frustrated as he was right now, he would’ve laughed at his thoughts.

But seeing as he normally didn’t have a lot of problems falling asleep, right now, it was really inconvenient to be lying awake, turn around, and think about all the things he could be doing with Andrew, if only he’d been fucking sleeping.

There was a sudden thought, a feeling, which had Neil throwing off his blanket and knocking on Andrew’s bedroom door.

After a few seconds, Andrew opened the door, taking one look at Neil before walking back inside, leaving the door open behind him.

‘Do you not know what sleeping is?’ Andrew asked.

Neil stared at the ground, still afraid to take a step inside, to take a step closer.

‘Couldn’t sleep,’ he murmured.

‘You could take something for that,’ Andrew replied, getting back under his blanket.

The involuntary spike of fear, the tremor, that wrecked Neil’s body was unfortunate enough if Andrew hadn’t seen it.

‘No,’ Neil said, voice thick. ‘I’d rather not.’

Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he observed Neil, who couldn’t meet his eyes for long. Fear, always a nice mood killer.

Andrew reached for the light, turning it off and then lying down.
‘What are you doing?’ Neil asked.

‘Sleeping.’

‘Now?’

‘This is generally the time when people sleep.’

Neil felt stupid.

‘Okay,’ he said, shuffling back slowly. ‘I’ll go.’

‘You can stay.’

Andrew said it like he was entirely bored with the situation. Like it didn’t mean anything.

it meant everything to Neil.

He walked over towards the bed and climbed in, lying next to Andrew, being careful not to touch him.

‘This okay?’ he whispered.

Andrew turned around to face him.

‘I don’t know,’ Andrew said. ‘Are you?’

In the darkness, it was a little difficult to make out Andrew’s expression. But knowing that he was beside him, that Neil didn’t have to invade his dream for this to happen, made his heart feel lighter.

‘I am now,’ he whispered.

Andrew said nothing.

Unsurprisingly, Neil fell asleep within the minute.

Surprisingly, there was no bright orange room, no Exy court, no dream.

*Dreamless; adjective*

a dreamless sleep is very deep and peaceful, and without dreams or nightmares.
next time; 'You're never in my dreams.'

I've rambled enough in the note in the beginning, so I'll leave it at:

Thank you for reading <3 Your support inspires me so much :)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people!
I'd like to call this chapter Soft & Suspicious hihi.
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Blinking the sleep from his eyes, Neil woke up in the soft morning light that filtered through the blinds.

The first thing he saw that morning was Andrew’s face, calm, relaxed, and still asleep.

His heart clenched, his stomach fluttered, and Neil had to sigh deeply.

Never before had he wanted to stay for someone, because staying meant risking everything. Putting himself in danger.

But that wasn’t true, was it? He’d wanted to stay when he’d promised Andrew after the horrible nightmare, and he’d put himself in danger, when he’d kept silent in front of his father.

Without realizing it, he’d already fallen.

Andrew wrinkled his nose in his sleep, and it looked so unexpectedly cute that Neil couldn’t help his giggle.

It woke Andrew up, who frowned as he had to blink against the light, then, as he took in Neil in front of him, giggling, the frown deepened.

‘Am I still asleep?’ Andrew mumbled, which sounded a little sleepy and confused and effectively shattered all of Neil’s defences.

‘Yeah,’ Neil said, ‘I wanted to try something different than the Exy court.’

Andrew’s hand clenched in the blankets, grasping the material. Testing, probably, if it felt real.
Deciding to take advantage before Andrew would fully wake up, Neil asked, ‘Do you like this better?’

Andrew observed Neil for a while, then looked at his hair.

‘It’s more amusing,’ he said.

‘Are you making fun of my hair?’ Neil asked, pretending to be offended.

‘It’s not that hard.’

And though Andrew’s face was blank, and his voice flat, there was a lightness in his eyes that Neil had only seen in their dreams.

‘Can I kiss you?’ he blurted out, a little breathless from feeling.

And Neil had expected a tense silence, a carefully selected answer, not the casual ‘Yes.’

Leaning over, resting a hand on the bed, Neil kissed Andrew softly in the Saturday morning light.

His heart leaped inside his chest as their lips touched. Reluctant to pull back, Neil whispered against Andrew’s lips,

‘It’s better in real life.’

Andrew’s eyes opened slowly, looking intensely at him. The feeling of being seen was warm and comfortable. Safe. Then, Andrew suddenly bit his lip.

‘Ouch.’ Neil leaned back a little, sucking his sore bottom lip into his mouth. ‘What’d you do that for?’

‘Checking if it’s real,’ Andrew said.

‘I’m real,’ Neil frowned.

Reaching out lazily, Andrew buried his hand in Neil’s hair and pulled him forward, placing soft kisses against his lips, which Neil was going to interpret as an apology for the biting. When Andrew’s tongue swiped softly over his sore bottom lip, Neil stopped interpreting and leaned forward to deepen their kiss,
but Andrew pulled back to look at him.

‘I know that now,’ Andrew said.

What Neil hadn’t expected
was standing on the orange court of the Palmetto Foxes
in front of Kevin.

crap damn shit fuck fuck fuck

Standing as still as he could manage, Neil watched for any signs that this was Kevin’s dream and not
his own.

When he looked around, he suddenly noticed how seamless the court’s wall was.
So seamless in fact, that there was no door.

Kevin’s dream then.

fuck

Maybe if Neil didn’t talk, Kevin wouldn’t know that Neil was-

‘Neil?’ Kevin asked.

Neil blinked, but kept quiet.
Just don’t respond, he thought, and Kevin wouldn’t know.

Kevin’s eyes narrowed.
‘You’re never in my dreams.’

‘I wonder what I’m doing here then,’ Neil said before he could stop himself.
In the blink of an eye, Kevin was standing in front of him, grabbing him by his shirt.
‘You’re in my dream.’

‘You know you can dream about other people, right?’ Neil said.

‘Yeah, but you’re never in my dreams,’ Kevin repeated, like a stubborn and broken record.

Neil sighed.
‘Then maybe this is not a dream. Maybe this is all real and the moment you close your eyes you’ll
fall asleep for real.’

‘I don’t think so. I know this is a dream.’

Neil raised an eyebrow.
‘You do? How?’

Instead of answering, Kevin held his right hand in front of Neil’s face.
His smooth,
unblemished
hand.

Ah.
Neil swallowed and looked away.

‘It’s a dream alright,’ Kevin said.

There was an awkward silence between them, where Neil could feel Kevin’s eyes on him.
In fact, it felt like everyone and everything was looking at him, even though when Neil looked
around, he couldn’t see anyone.

It had been a while since he visited someone else’s dream apart from Andrew’s.

Where Andrew’s dreams felt lonely,
confusing
and slow,
Kevin’s dream felt prickly, uncomfortable and watched.

‘Listen,’ Neil said, regretting it already, ‘You’re right, okay?’

‘Why didn’t you tell me soon-’

‘Because I don’t want everyone to know I can dreamwalk,’ Neil interrupted him angrily. ‘That so
hard to understand?’

Kevin shook his head.

‘What else do you remember apart from us playing Exy?’ Neil asked.

‘Not much,’ Kevin admitted. ‘I thought they were fun and scarily realistic, but that’s all.’

Neil nodded.
Good.

There was still one thing he wanted to know,
though he doubted it was smart to ask.

‘Has- Has Riko ever visited your dreams?’

‘Riko?’
Kevin took a step back in surprise.
‘No, he hasn’t. Why? Can he?’

Neil nodded.

The look of pure horror on Kevin’s face made Neil regret telling the truth.
That was the face of someone who wasn’t going to trust his dreams for a long time.

‘I don’t think he’ll visit yours,’ Neil said.
‘Why not?’ Kevin asked immediately.

‘Because he can’t. Not when you’re not around.’

‘Is that how it works?’

‘For Riko it is,’ Neil said.

Kevin seemed to digest the information fairly well, only Neil could see he was trembling, and the feeling of being watched intensified.

Time to wake up, Neil thought, and took a deep breath, closing his eyes.

‘Wait,’ Kevin said quickly. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Leaving your dream.’

‘We can practice,’ Kevin proposed.

It boggled Neil’s mind how Kevin had so quickly forgotten about the fact that two people he knew were dreamwalkers, something that according to common knowledge, should not exist.

‘What?’ he asked, perplexed.

Kevin waved his right hand in front of Neil’s face again.

‘No handicap,’ he explained.

Right.

Oh.

That made sense, in a way.

But.

‘I’m not going to do this every night,’ Neil stated.

‘You got better dreams to visit? Better things to do than practice?’ Kevin asked skeptically.

Telling his cheeks that no they were not allowed to get red was a lot easier in an environment where Neil could control his appearance.

‘We’ll get tired in real life too,’ Neil said instead.

☁

The knock on the door was unwanted.

Neil groaned and held his pillow over his head.

‘Should I get it?’ Matt asked sympathetically.

‘That’d be great,’ Neil replied, voice muffled, but Matt must’ve understood because Neil heard him walk away and the front door open.
It wasn’t.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Andrew said, ‘That you’re too tired.’

Neil groaned.

‘My body hurts,’ he complained.

‘No, no, I want you to actually say it,’ Andrew said joyfully. ‘That you’re too tired to play Exy.’

Neil groaned louder.

It had been such a bad idea to play Exy with Kevin in his dreams.

Of course it was nice for Kevin to play with his hand in tact again, but that was exactly why it had been such a bad idea.

He’d run Neil ragged.

Instead of giving in to Andrew, Neil threw his pillow at Andrew’s head.

He heard Matt gasp and looked up in surprise to see him hovering in the door opening.

Why?

Was he afraid Andrew was going to hurt Neil?

Meanwhile Andrew sidestepped the flying pillow, and looked unimpressed by Neil’s attack.

‘Kevin is also too tired,’ Andrew said. ‘Which is rare. Unheard of. The great Kevin Day, unable to play,’ he rhymed. ‘You’d think he had just trained for 8 hours straight.’

Uh-oh.

Neil winced.

‘Yeah,’ he agreed a little awkwardly. ‘I wonder who in their right minds would dream about training for 8 hours.’

Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he watched Neil fidget.

‘Oh,’ Andrew said, as if he’d just thought of the answer. ‘I know who would. Kevin Day. How weird.’

Okay,

Andrew definitely suspected what had happened.

Neil’s eyes darted nervously to Matt.

Andrew noticed and turned around to face Matt, who immediately held up his hands.

‘Hey, I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

When Andrew didn’t move, Matt said, ‘But I’ll go. To the next room, which is right behind this very
Again, Neil was surprised by Matt’s behaviour. Okay, so Matt would be close by. Why would he mention that?

After Matt had closed the door behind him, Andrew turned towards Neil again. ‘Change. We’re going.’

‘Huh?’ Neil asked, ‘Going where?’

But Andrew didn’t respond, so Neil begrudgingly pulled himself out of bed, his movements stiff and awkward.

He pulled some clothes from the closet, and his hands were just pulling at the hem of his shirt when he noticed that Andrew was still standing in the room.

Neil turned to look at him.

‘Um,’ he said. ‘I’m going to change.’

‘Sometime today I hope,’ Andrew said.

Yeah, he was, but his body.

Neil looked at the ground, as he was torn between wanting and

‘Yes or no?’ Andrew suddenly asked.

Neil looked up in surprise, and found Andrew watching him, face bored.

That’s right, Neil thought. Andrew doesn’t care. He probably doesn’t care. He won’t care he won’t

‘Yeah,’ Neil said, voice small, as he lifted his shirt over his head.

There was no sharp intake of breath, no gasp, no hiss, no shocked exclamation. No. Neil had been right, Andrew didn’t care.

It was quiet in the room, and only when he heard Andrew take a few steps closer did Neil realize he had closed his eyes.
So he opened them
and saw Andrew standing in front of him,
seeing him.

Not his scars,
his burns,
his cuts and bruises and ruined skin.
But him.

Neil took a slow breath,
which was hard as it felt like his throat was being squeezed shut.

He wasn’t vain,
didn’t really care about his looks, but
the feeling of being seen,
with all his scars visible
was still a vulnerable and
wonderful feeling.

Neil wondered if Andrew would be able to handle the entire truth, and found that he wanted him to.

‘Still a yes?’ Andrew asked, slowly raising his hand in front of Neil’s skin.

Neil nodded.
‘Yes.’

With careful touches,
Andrew traced every horrible memory on Neil’s skin.

Neil wondered if Andrew could feel how fast his heart was beating.

‘You weren’t in my dream last night,’ Andrew said, watching his fingers travel over Neil’s chest.

‘I’m sorry.’

Andrew’s eyes flickered up, watching Neil wearily.

‘Don’t. I don’t expect you to stay.’

But.

Neil’s voice was hoarse as he confessed quietly,

‘I want to stay.’

Andrew’s hand flattened itself against the burn marks on Neil’s lower stomach.

‘You know how I feel about wanting,’ he said.

Neil knew.
So he said,
‘I want to kiss you.’

Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Neil, his hand warm against his skin.

For a moment, Neil thought it was going to be a no.

But then he saw Andrew close his eyes briefly, resignation written all over his face as he leaned in, and kissed Neil like there was something he wanted.

And Neil was secretly glad Andrew’s hand wasn’t resting on his heart, for he felt it beating rapidly against his ribcage.

The feeling of kissing Andrew was still a little unreal, and intense, and Neil groaned.

Andrew’s hand twitched against his skin in response.

There was nothing Neil wanted more than to continue kissing Andrew, but he remembered Matt stressing how thin the door was. Better not.

Neil leaned back, and felt his breath leave him as he saw Andrew following him, body leaning even closer, pressing their lips together again.

For someone who didn’t expect Neil to stay, Andrew’s kiss felt like a plea.

‘Look at that,’ Neil murmured against Andrew’s lips, trying to sound smug but failing as he was a little too breathless. ‘I got what I wanted.’

‘Shut up,’ Andrew said, and grabbed Neil roughly by his hair, pulling him deeper into the kiss.

☁

Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘Kathy?’ Dan asked.

hohooo. More information for poor Kevin. Let me know what you thought of this chapter :) Comments always inspire me to write more!
I’m sorry if commenting is a hassle when I upload so frequently, but know that you reading this already means so much to me <3 Thank you for that! :)
Hello lovely people!

Oops this is A LOT later than usual. Sorry for that! I couldn't resist taking a bubble bath tonight and before I knew it I was sucked into watching YouTube videos for waayy too long.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Are you abducting me?’ Neil asked, eyeing the ridiculous car skeptically.

When Andrew didn’t respond and simply got into the car, Neil shrugged and figured that as far as fates went, this wouldn’t be a bad one.

Andrew had already stolen his heart, why not his body too?

Neil snorted loudly at his thoughts.

Then wondered if Andrew would appreciate the joke.

‘I guess I don’t mind, since-’

Andrew turned on the radio.

Neil frowned.

‘That’s rude.’

‘Sometimes when I hear you talk, I have to remember myself that I’m awake,’ Andrew said flatly.

Oh.

Well.

Neil could understand that Andrew needed to focus on driving.

He turned his head to look out the window, at the trees flying past, the houses, the cars, and for a moment it felt like he was simply moving on, travelling to another place, getting ready to start anew. It was a hollow feeling.

What Neil hadn’t expected was driving towards Reddin, where all the psychiatrists had their offices.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Neil said slowly as Andrew parked the car.

He had a sinking feeling he wasn’t going to like this.

The feeling only intensified when Andrew looked at him, a smile stretched painfully across his face.
'It's the fucking shrink's office again, isn't it?' Neil asked.

Fortunately, Andrew didn’t come with him into the familiar room. Unfortunately, Neil was in the fucking room.

‘Hey Neil,’ Bee said, shaking his hand.
If she at all sensed his reluctance, she didn’t react.

‘Hey Bee with OCD,’ Neil rhymed.

Betsy raised an eyebrow.
‘Andrew tell you about me?’ she asked, still in that stupid friendly tone.

Neil didn’t reply.
Instead he walked over towards the couch and sank down on it, concluding that it was indeed as comfortable as in Andrew’s dreams.

Betsy smiled and took a seat behind her desk.

‘I know Andrew and you are close.’

Neil frowned.
‘If you mean by close that Andrew’s close to killing me, then yes.’

‘Look at it this way,’ Betsy said, folding her hands in front of her. ‘You give him strong emotions.’

‘I’m pretty sure Andrew wants to kill a lot of people.’

‘Maybe. I don’t know if you’ve met Andrew before his medication, but he usually doesn’t care enough to want to go to such lengths.’

Shit,
Neil found himself getting interested in what she had to say.
This was a woman who knew Andrew for a long time, and knew him quite well.

‘But enough about Andrew,’ Betsy said, killing all interest Neil had in talking to her. ‘What about you?’

Neil shrugged.
‘Nothing much. Sometimes I wish I could be asleep instead of awake.’

That would be generic enough to count as somewhat cooperating.
But Betsy had a strange little smile as she said, ‘But that’s not true anymore, is it?’

well
no.
Not anymore.
Not since he’d met Andrew in real life.
‘What else do you want to tell me, Neil?’

‘Nothing,’ Neil shot back, and that’s what he did.

‘Alright, maggots,’ Wymack said, snapping his fingers to get all eyes on him, then continued to explain the training schedule now that classes had started.

But it were his next words that had Neil’s attention.

‘Campus police doubled their numbers, but they can’t cover everything or everyone. Be smart, be careful. If the press slips past and wants answers, you tell them we’re not saying anything until Kathy’s show on Saturday.’

‘Kathy?’ Dan asked.

‘Kathy Ferdinand.’ Wymack took one look at her confused face and scowled at Kevin. ‘Didn’t you tell them?’

‘There wasn’t a need to,’ Kevin said.

Neil felt like that was a load of bullshit.

‘We have to do some publicity at some point,’ Wymack explained. ‘We’re heading there on Friday evening after the game to avoid traffic and turning up late Saturday.’

When he got a lot of blank looks, Wymack explained, ‘Kathy invited the entire team to the broadcast. If we show, we get front row seats.’

Neil wanted to protest, but Wymack cut him off immediately.
‘I vetoed your choice on the matter. I’m not letting you out of my sight until the initial hubbub dies down.’

Great.

It was before the game that Neil noticed his teammates were looking at him nervously, anxiously. Except Renee, but Neil didn’t trust her smile.

‘There’s something we haven’t told you yet,’ Dan said, finally cutting to the chase. ‘So Andrew’s technically legally required to take his medication, right?’

As always when Andrew’s medication was mentioned, Neil felt his stomach turn unpleasantly. ‘Yeah,’ he said, having read the article a while ago. ‘It was part of his plea bargain.’

‘He struck a deal of his own with Coach,’ Dan said, and Neil couldn’t believe his ears when she explained that
‘Coach agreed to let him come off his drugs for game nights. Not even Betsy knows he does it.’

‘How is Andrew supposed to guard our goal when he’s sick?’ Neil asked perplexed.

This sounded like the worst of ideas. He’d seen Andrew’s withdrawal symptoms when they were in Georgia. It hadn’t been nice.

But the rest assured him that it would all work out.

While Neil didn’t want Andrew to get sick, he was secretly relieved to see the real Andrew again. The Andrew that had kissed him on the doorstep.

The fact that it was Kevin’s debut game made Neil relax a little. It meant they wouldn’t look so closely at him.

So when it was his time to step on the court, Neil let go of all his tension as he felt his feet touch the court’s floor, slowly walking towards his spot.

Before the game resumed, Neil looked behind him at Andrew.

It felt surprisingly safe to have Andrew at his back, and Neil suddenly realized that safe was a word he’d started to associate with Andrew. Since when had this happened, nothing had ever been safe for Neil and- The whistle sounded, and Neil forget everything as he played Exy as he lived.

It was dark outside as the foxes loaded their stuff in the bus then quickly got in, the air already getting chillier.

Before he got on, Neil stood still for a moment and watched the dark night sky.

He’d played Exy. And he would get to play again.

Neil smiled.

It wasn’t a question where Neil would sit.

He saw that everyone in Andrew’s group had claimed a seat for themselves in the back, Kevin sitting one row in front of Andrew.
Neil felt a pang in his chest, sudden anger at what Kevin had done to deserve… everything, and sat down on the seat behind Andrew.

He had wanted to sit next to him, but figured he would get shoved off before he could even blink.

‘Given up on that wanting?’ Andrew said without turning around, interrupting Neil’s thoughts.

Neil frowned. ‘What wanting?’

‘There are that many?’

Andrew’s voice still sounded bored, but Neil figured the drugs must be taking effect soon. Sadly.

‘I have a list of them,’ Neil confessed.

Andrew didn’t respond, but the silence felt more like an invitation to continue than a rejection.

‘Until recently, playing Exy was my number two.’

‘What is number one?’ Andrew asked.

‘Number one was hope.’

There was a silence, in which the low hum of the bus, and the quiet, sleepy voices of his teammates were the only things Neil could hear. He was afraid Andrew wouldn’t answer, but then Andrew said, ‘Was.’

Was.
Because ever since Andrew had entered Neil’s life, it had been impossible for Neil to stop himself from hoping. To stop himself from dreaming.

‘Yeah, I think there’s a new one,’ Neil said quietly.

‘No, there isn’t,’ Andrew replied.

There was no way Andrew could know that, and Neil wanted to protest but unfortunately, Andrew’s guess had been right.

Sinking lower on his seat, Neil made himself as comfortable as he could, leaning against the window. It was almost as comfortable as the couch in the shrink’s office.

Oooh. That wanting.

‘I want to share a seat with you,’ Neil said.
‘You’re definitely not my intelligence,’ Andrew replied, but all it did was make Neil smile as he recognized it for the silent permission and stood up.

Andrew had already scooted over, had already made room for Neil and Neil swallowed as he saw that there was a place for him.

‘It’s just a seat,’ Andrew said.

‘Like it was just a dream?’

Andrew turned to look at him.

‘Don’t be difficult.’

‘You don’t mean that. Otherwise you wouldn’t dream about me every night,’ Neil said, not quite keeping the smile off his face.

There was no retort, no reply, just Andrew’s heavy gaze on Neil.

It was interesting how Nicky got away with,

‘Andrew and Neil can share a room.’

Wymack raised an eyebrow.
‘Last time I checked, Andrew punched Neil. Twice.’

‘It’s a fetish,’ Nicky winked at Wymack, who looked like he’d rather unhear that.

At Nicky’s words, Kevin turned to look at Neil.

Neil rolled his eyes.
‘You don’t honestly think that’s true?’

Kevin’s eyes narrowed, but he refrained from saying anything.

Meanwhile Neil told the swirling sensation in his stomach to stop. Just because Andrew hadn’t contradicted Nicky, didn’t mean Andrew wanted- wanted Neil.

There was a bed.

Neil saw it clearly.
A bed.
One bed.
In their room.
One, singular be-

Neil grasped his bag tighter and walked into the bathroom,
leaving the issue to be dealt with a few minutes later
as he changed into his pyjamas.

When he got back, Andrew was already lying in the bed, blanket pulled up to his chin.

Neil snorted.
‘Are you cold?’

‘No,’ Andrew said.

Pulling the blanket aside to step in, Neil saw the way Andrew clenched the blanket tighter to keep it around himself.

‘I know it’s called feeling cold,’ Neil said, voice light. ‘But don’t worry. It’s not actually an emotion.’

Two eyes
above a blanket
so much anger.

Neil smiled and turned off the light.

‘Sweet dreams, Andrew,’ he said in the darkness.

‘Fuck off,’ Andrew replied.

When Neil opened his eyes,
he found himself on their Exy court, the clouds overhead drifting by slowly,
but
there was no Andrew.

Neil frowned, wondering where Andrew was and looking around.

The clouds above him started swelling,
getting darker,
as Neil searched every corner, every seat, for a sign of Andrew.

Nothing.

‘What a nice surprise, Nathaniel,’ someone said behind him, and Neil whirled around.

In front of him, standing in the middle of the court as if he owned the place,
stood Riko.
All the clouds blew up, drops of rain falling down as they disappeared, leaving behind a dark, dark sky.
As dark as Neil’s bedroom had been back when back when his father
It was Neil’s dream
and so he couldn’t control the way the sky slowly turned into his bedroom’s ceiling,
the walls of the court growing and closing in on him, turning into walls.

The only constant in the changing environment was Riko.
The suit he was wearing was blacker than anything Neil had ever seen.
It sucked in every colour.
Or it repelled every colour.
Neil wasn’t sure.

‘What are you doing here?’ Neil asked, with ‘here’ not being his dream but.

‘Visiting,’ Riko smiled.

‘Well, it has been nice,’ Neil said. ‘But unfortunately, I don’t have any cookies or cake to go with the coffee.’

Riko’s eyes flashed and he suddenly stood
in front of Neil
who had to change his earlier thought
as he looked into Riko’s black eyes.

He had seen that colour before.

‘I heard you’ve been on the run,’ Riko grinned. ‘And now you’ve settled, and with my darling Kevin no less.’

Riko’s hand shot forward so fast that Neil didn’t register the movement until he felt a hand squeeze his throat.
‘How stupid,’ Riko said.

Without thinking about the consequences, Neil swung his leg back and hit Riko in the side.

Riko grunted, but his grip on Neil didn’t loosen. If only, he now squeezed hard enough for Neil to start seeing black spots dance around.

‘And here I thought you didn’t want me to tell your father where you are,’ Riko said through gritted teeth.

‘I’m surprised he would listen to you,’ Neil wheezed, using the last of his breath to say, ‘Since you’re just a nobody.’

All joy was gone from Riko’s eyes, replaced by an inky and bottomless anger.
Suddenly, there was a knife in Riko’s hand.
Neil’s eyes flickered nervously towards it.
‘That’s right,’ Riko said. ‘You’re scared of knives, aren’t you?’

If Neil had more breath left for talking, he would’ve told Riko where exactly he could stick the knife. As it was, he needed it to stay alive.

A ringing sound filled his ears
and the room seemed to tilt.
Bad signs.

Trying one more time, Neil suddenly swung his fist at Riko’s face.

But Riko had been prepared
and stuck the knife underneath Neil’s raised arm,
settling it firmly in his armpit
disabling all control over his arm.

Pain flared, hot and bright, coursing through his arm in pulsing beats
as Neil screamed, the sound gurgled and choked off.

‘Luckily you had a game yesterday,’ Riko chuckled.

Neil tried to glare at Riko, but it was hard when the pain and the lack of oxygen were muddling his brain.

‘Okay, let’s start again,’ Riko said. ‘I wonder, what you would do in order to keep me quiet.’
The expression on Riko’s face told Neil he seemed delighted by all the options,
but Neil knew the answer would be short.

‘Would you let me cripple you? I’d love that,’ Riko mused. ‘I have never hobbled someone. But no, that would be over so soon.’

If Neil had already been lightheaded, that was nothing compared to the sudden spike of panic when he thought about never,
never,
being able to walk, to play again.

His eyes widened, and in a sudden burst of adrenaline he lurched forward, headbutting Riko harshly.

Riko fell back, unprepared for the attack, but before Neil could make a run for it, Riko had already recovered, grabbing his knife and swiping at Neil’s leg.

It sliced through the skin of Neil’s knees
and even though it hurt, Neil felt relieved that it had only been his knee.

Still the pain caused him to stumble back,
breath coming in short and panicked gasps
as Riko stood up, angling the knife towards Neil,
who wished to
wake up wake up wake up wake up
but the panic was making it hard to focus,
especially as he saw Riko’s eyes shift to his legs, a dangerous smile on his face, and suddenly Neil
couldn’t move further back, because his back hit the wall and then Riko was in front of him.

‘Oh Nathaniel,’ Riko said, pressing the knife in Neil’s thigh, hard enough to prick the skin, hard enough to force Neil to stand still. ‘Running from nightmares is what children do.’

And he dragged the knife down,
carving a jagged, uneven line along the center of Neil’s leg.

Tears fell down Neil’s cheeks
and he started shaking violently
as flashes of his father,
knife in hand,
slashing Neil over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and ov-

‘Wake up,’ said Andrew.

Neil did.
Hello lovely people!

OH gosh I've started this zombie apocalypse book and it's freaking me out a little. All in the Halloween spirit... right?

Anyways, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It felt like he was swimming, and when Neil woke up, arms and legs flailing, something wet clung to his skin.

Neil gasped in panic, hands flying to his neck, but nobody was squeezing it and he found that he was able to breathe.

He went to sit up but a stabbing, piercing pain in his arm caused him to lose his balance and fall on his back again.

Neil blinked away his tears.

‘Are you done trashing?’ Andrew asked.

The question was so casual that it Neil startled back into the here and now, and looking around, Neil saw that the here and now was a dark hotel room with one double bed, which he shared with Andrew.

Andrew, who was sitting beside Neil, his eyes wide.

Though Andrew’s voice had been casual, his face betrayed that something had surprised him.

Surprised or…
Neil’s fingers splayed on the mattress, feeling the wet fluid move beneath his fingertips.
Then, he slowly looked down, and saw that the bed was red with his blood.

Everything snapped into place.
The dream.
Riko.
His l-
Neil choked back a sob.

‘M-my legs,’ he said, voice trembling.
Andrew’s eyes immediately shifted to the dark patches of blood on the blanket, Neil’s legs still underneath. It didn’t even take a second for Andrew to decide what he was going to do, already lifting the blanket off of Neil and grabbing his sweatpants.

‘I have to take them off,’ Andrew announced, though it sounded like a question.

‘Okay,’ Neil said. He fought against the urge to close his eyes, not wanting to know but at the same time needing to see how bad it was.

He settled for staring at Andrew’s face as Andrew carefully pulled down his sweatpants. Still the movement stung, as some of the fabric was stuck to his wounds.

Silence.

He should’ve known Andrew’s face wasn’t going to tell him anything.

‘How bad is it?’ Neil asked.

Andrew’s eyes flashed as they looked back at Neil. ‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘I was dreaming.’

‘This isn’t one of your dreams.’

No, it wasn’t.

And Neil knew he should probably explain to Andrew what, who, and why. But it was difficult to give up more, to explain more about what made him incapable of leading a normal life. Of even having a life.

Neil swallowed and looked away. ‘Do I need stitches?’

‘Hard to see with all the blood.’

In the silence that followed
Neil doubted whether or not he should explain and where he should even start.
Doubted whether or not Andrew would even care if he did explain.

‘I need to see your arm,’ Andrew said suddenly, and when Neil looked at him, saw that Andrew had been observing the blood flowing from his arm.

So Neil nodded.

Andrew produced a knife from one of his armbands and started cutting Neil’s t-shirt, moving the fabric out of the way to look at the wound.

‘This one’s worse,’ Andrew said. ‘You’ll need to go to the hospital.’

‘I’d rather not.’

Andrew looked at him. ‘I can’t patch you up.’
‘I know,’ Neil said, ‘But I don’t like the hospital. They give you medication.’

Andrew raised an eyebrow in question.

‘To fall asleep,’ Neil clarified, then added in a thin voice, ‘To stay asleep.’

It was hard to keep his eyes on Andrew, but Andrew didn’t raise an eyebrow, didn’t scoff or snort or laugh. No, Andrew looked at him, saw him, and his fear, and accepted it for what it was.

‘You need medical attention,’ Andrew said. ‘I’ll ask Coach to find someone.’

Neil nodded, and Andrew picked up his phone from the bedside table.

‘Coach, come to our room,’ Andrew said, then hung up.

Oh man. That did not prepare Wymack for what he was going to see, Neil thought.

They were silent.

Neil shifted on the bed to try and get more comfortable, then grunted when another fierce stab of pain took over his body for a second.

Andrew’s eyes shifted to his legs.

‘This is the second time,’ he stated.

Neil nodded.

‘It’s as if someone knows how important they are to you,’ Andrew said, and turned his intense gaze on Neil.

Who found it was getting harder to keep quiet, so he dropped his gaze.

But suddenly there was Andrew’s hand underneath his chin, forcing his head up a little, forcing Neil to look at him.

‘I can’t protect you if I don’t know everything,’ Andrew said. Neil’s heart stood still then started beating loudly as the meaning of Andrew’s words started to-

‘What?’ Neil choked out.

Though Andrew didn’t say anything, he kept his eyes on Neil as Neil processed the enormity of Andrew’s words.

His offer.

Was-

Was Andrew willing to-

‘You want to protect me?’ Neil asked in disbelief, his voice wavering.
‘Yes,’ Andrew replied simply.
As if it was simple.
As if it wasn’t a huge deal.

But Neil knew that wasn’t the case.
Because he saw the intense focus in Andrew’s eyes, and knew it meant that he was keeping all of
Andrew’s usually fleeting attention.

‘What’s the catch?’ Neil asked quietly.

Andrew’s grip on his chin tightened for a second as Andrew said,
‘Stay real.’

‘What the flying fuck has happened here?’ Wymack said as he walked in, taking in Neil, half naked
on the bed with blood everywhere
and Andrew, sitting calmly beside him.

‘I knew it was a bad idea to room you two together,’ Wymack continued, moving quickly towards
Neil. ‘What happened?’ he asked again.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Andrew replied before Neil could answer. ‘He needs medical attention, outside a
hospital.’

To Wymack’s credit, he didn’t question why. He just nodded and grabbed his phone.

While he waited for the person to pick up, he pointed a finger at Andrew.
‘But you’re not getting anywhere near Neil again.’

‘He hasn’t done anything,’ Neil protested weakly.

‘You call this,’ Wymack gestured to the large pool of blood and the multiple knife wounds on Neil’s
body, with Andrew’s knife lying on the bed beside him, ‘Nothing?’

Neil winced.
It did look pretty bad.
Still
‘He didn’t do anything,’ Neil repeated,
but Wymack turned his attention towards his phone as the person on the other side started talking.

Neil had to admit Abby was pretty cool for driving all the way here to patch Neil up.

‘Let’s count this as your physical, alright?’ she said, trying to go for a light tone but Neil saw her
wince as she took in his wounds and scars.

‘Don’t ask,’ Neil said through gritted teeth.

Abby looked like she wanted to say something but then decided against it, pulling multiple strips of
bandages and anti-bacterial lotions and gels from her bag.
When she pulled out a needle and a vial with a colourless liquid inside, Neil tensed.

‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘Just an anesthetic to help you fall asleep. It’ll be easier that way.’

Panic, fast and all consuming, grabbed hold of Neil’s limbs and breath, and he felt himself recoil.

‘No,’ he forced out.

Abby frowned.

‘It would help if-’

‘He said no,’ Andrew interrupted her.

Though Andrew didn’t move from his position near the window, his tone was threatening enough that Abby looked at Wymack in question.

‘It will hurt more,’ Wymack said to Neil, then shifted his gaze to Andrew. ‘And why are you still here?’

‘I don’t care,’ Neil said before Andrew could answer, his eyes trained on the glass vial in Abby’s hand. ‘I don’t want anesthetics.’

Abby nodded.

‘Okay, I’ll try my best, but it will hurt.’

Neil sighed.

‘I can’t imagine it’ll hurt more.’

The question than what was clear in Abby’s and Wymack’s eyes, but Neil quickly looked away from them.

Andrew’s eyes didn’t question him.

Neil thought it would be a bad idea to tell Kevin what had happened. But he could guess what would happen at Kathy Ferdinand’s show. He could fucking guess.

‘Oh my god, Neil, what happened?’ Nicky asked at almost the same time as Matt did when he walked into the hotel’s foyer.

‘Um,’ Neil said eloquently, grabbing his bag tighter in his hand.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Wymack standing at the desk, checking them out of the hotel.

As Matt’s eyes were looking Neil over, Neil saw him getting angrier by the second and knew he had to come up with a plausible excuse, and quick. He should’ve thought of something yesterday, but after Abby was done, he’d almost immediately fallen asleep.
Matt turned towards Nicky.
“You said it’d be safe for them to be in the same room,” he said angrily.

“Hey!” Nicky held up his hands. “I’m sure this isn’t Andrew’s fault.”

“Oh yeah?” Matt asked, getting into Nicky’s personal space. “Wanna bet if those are knife wounds?”

Nicky shifted uncomfortably and looked at Neil for help.
“They’re not, are they?”

Uhhh.

Matt saw the indecision in Neil’s eyes, because he whirled on Nicky again, opening his mouth to start shouting when Andrew walked towards the group.

Without a word, Andrew took Neil’s bag out of his grip, slung it over his shoulder and walked towards the bus outside, where Kevin and Aaron were already waiting.

“Hey wait a minute,” Matt said, going after Andrew. “Care to explain why Neil’s covered in wounds?”

Andrew halted.

And Matt took the opportunity to move in front of him, looking angrily down at Andrew.

“Get out of my way,” Andrew said.

Matt pointed at Neil’s bag.

“And why are you carrying it?”

Neil could hear the smile in Andrew’s voice as he said cheerily, “Because Neil’s covered in knife wounds. Can’t carry it himself.”

Matt recoiled.
“Is this some sort of joke to you?” he asked in disgust.

Neil was afraid it was going to get ugly pretty quickly, so he stepped forward to stop Matt, but then Wymack walked towards them and grunted, “Let’s go. Kathy’s waiting.”

Nervous didn’t begin to cover it.

Neil watched every dark corner and jumped from every person walking by that was wearing black. He was sure Andrew was getting sick of him, but to his surprise, he just saw an intense focus on Andrew’s face as he seemed to keep an eye on everything, walking behind Kevin and in front of
‘I would like to stay as long as Coach Wymack will have me,’ Kevin confessions.

Neil’s eyes flickered towards Coach in the crowd, the rest of the foxes beside him. How he wished he sat there too.

His fingers scratched the fabric of the leather couch.

Stay focused Neil, he told himself.

‘Ahh, the Ravens must be sad to hear that,’ Kathy said. ‘I imagine Riko misses you.’

At the sound of his name

Neil tensed, searching the room for any signs of Riko.

He snapped back towards the conversation when Kevin said beside him,

‘We are all very busy. It is difficult to keep in touch.’

‘Well then,’ Kathy smiled brightly. ‘Have I got a treat for you!’

Music blared from the speakers, a dark melody with heavy drums, and the crowd started chanting in unison.

Neil’s eyes darted wildly across the room, until they fell on the silent, unmoving Foxes, who all looked in shock at him.

Neil turned to look at Kevin, who sat white-faced on the couch.

Staring

as Riko stepped on the stage

in a pitch black suit.

It had been nine months since Riko Moriyama and Kevin Day stood in the same room together, nine months since Riko destroyed Kevin’s hand, and

one dream ago

since Riko had slashed at Neil’s skin.

Every wound on Neil’s body ached.

When Riko sat down on the couch opposite them, he was smiling, but neither Kevin nor Neil was stupid enough to think he was happy. The only look in his eyes was murder.

‘Kevin,’ Riko said pleasantly. ‘It’s been so long.’

Chapter End Notes
next time; ‘You’re in a hurry, Kevin.’

I hope you had a great Monday, or as great as Mondays can get anyways. I'd like to hear your thoughts on this chapter if you want to :D They always motivate me to continue writing >w<

Thanks so much for reading!!
Hello lovely people!

I've been a bit busy lately, so sorry that this chapter is a lil' shorter than the last couple. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to keep up with the frequent uploading schedule and I really want to :) Don't worry, soon it'll be autumn break and I'll be writing like there's no tomorrow!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So far Riko had ignored him, but.
It was only so long that Neil could stay silent and watch Riko twist his invisible knife deeper into Kevin.
He knew how those felt.

‘I thought friends were supposed to cheer each other on,’ Neil said. ‘Believing in him now is the least you could do after completely abandoning him last winter.’

‘Ah, forgive my bad manners,’ Kathy said to Neil. ‘I didn’t forget you over there. Let’s get the pair of you introduced, though I’m not sure either of you needs an introduction by now. Riko, Neil. Neil, Riko. Kevin’s past and present, or should I say, past and future?’

Riko’s black eyes finally slid over to Neil.
‘Hello Neil,’ he smiled. ‘Lovely name. But I have to disappoint you Kathy, Neil is not Kevin’s future. Neil is merely a childhood dream.’
Riko’s smiled brightly as his eyes dropped to Neil’s arm.
‘Oh, are you alright? I wonder if you’ll even manage to be Kevin’s future with those injuries.’

‘This?’ Neil asked, holding up his arm. ‘It’s just my non-dominant arm.’

‘Yes,’ Riko nodded, his dark eyes staring at Neil. ‘Your legs would’ve been much worse.’

Neil forced his panic down as he tried to smile as pleasantly as he could.
‘Imagine how bad it would be if I’d injured my playing hand.’

‘You wouldn’t be able to play for your team anymore, I’m sure.’

Neil grinned.
‘Then again, I could always learn to play with my other hand. When I beat you then, it’ll just be more impressive.’

Beside him, Kevin pinched his leg in warning.
‘I doubt your team will do anything impressive,’ Riko said coldly.

Neil shrugged.
‘Hey, I can dream, can’t I?’

‘You can’t dream Kevin to play better.’

‘Oh, I don’t have to,’ Neil leaned forward. ‘That’s already a reality.’

Riko’s black eyes narrowed.

Before Kevin could pass out on the couch from nerves, and before Riko could commit murder on national television, Kathy intervened their conversation.

Heart beating loudly in his chest, Neil took a sip of his water as he prepared himself for the consequences of his words.

Whatever they would be, right now, it had been worth it.

Kevin and Neil immediately made their way off the stage.

Of course they only got so far before Riko’s silky voice sounded too close behind them for comfort.

‘You’re in a hurry, Kevin.’

Instinctively, Neil pushed Kevin behind him as they whirled around.

The stage lights were shining brightly behind Riko, causing him to be nothing more than a black, inky figure moving through the shadows.

‘Seems like you still can’t take a hint,’ Neil scoffed. ‘What more can Kevin do than transfer schools for fuck’s sake? He doesn’t want you near him.’

Riko didn’t answer but swiftly and smoothly closed the distance between them, grabbing Neil by his shirt and slamming him into the wall to his left.

‘And just like that, you’re thrown aside.’
Riko leaned in close as he continued, ‘Kevin will find someone new and interesting. Meanwhile you’ll be nothing but old news with unfortunate injuries.’

Dismissing Neil, Riko turned towards Kevin, slipping his hands into his pockets to assume a relaxed pose.

‘Kevin. Let’s quit the child’s games and think about what you’re doing.’

Panic was clear on Kevin’s face, and his shoulders were rigid.
‘It’s time to wake up, Kevin,’ Riko said, his tone threatening and dangerous as he took a few steps closer to Kevin.

Cursing his instincts, Neil reached out and grabbed Riko by the shoulder. ‘Leave him alone.’

He instantly regretted intervening.

Riko’s hand was swift as he brought it underneath Neil’s stiff arm, slamming into his wounded, freshly stitched armpit.

Tears sprang to Neil’s eyes, and he quickly blinked them away to grab Riko’s wrist before he could pull away.

‘Careful Riko,’ he said with difficulty, ‘I can pass out now.’

‘Is that an invitation?’ Riko sneered, pulling his wrist free and immediately slipping it into his pocket, pulling free a kn-

‘Riko,’ Andrew smiled, moving out of the shadows to stand in front of Neil. ‘It’s been a while.’

Neil saw the doubt on Riko’s face, but he eventually put the knife away and straightened as he faced Andrew.

‘Yet it felt so short,’ Riko smiled pleasantly. ‘How fast time seems to go when you’re unconscious. Or sleeping.’

The words hit home, and Neil flinched. Already it felt like something was slowing down the world around him, dragging his limbs to the ground.

He had to get away run go before the memories came back.

It was as if Andrew had heard his thoughts, because he reached behind him and pushed Neil back.

It was all the motivation Neil needed to get away, his feet already walking, when he noticed how Kevin was still frozen to the spot.

Neil quickly grabbed Kevin’s wrist and dragged him with him.

It was relatively easy to avoid Wymack’s angry speech, and the rest of the foxes thought that what he’d said on the show was cool anyway.

But.

Taking slow and sluggish steps towards the back of the bus, Neil tiredly sat down and watched Andrew walking towards him, eyes dark,
and he knew with certainty there was no escaping Andrew.

Andrew didn’t sit down.

Instead he looked down at Neil and demanded, ‘Care to explain?’

Neil blinked hazily. ‘Explain… what?’ he asked tiredly.

Andrew frowned, but actually explained what he meant. Neil must look as tired as he felt then.

‘Riko. Is he one too?’

Neil nodded. There was no point denying it when Andrew had clearly heard all the vague references.

‘Did he hurt you?’ Andrew asked.

God, Neil wished this conversation was over so he could fall asleep in the warm bus.

But Neil nodded again, then frowned. ‘You saw he did,’ he said.

Andrew’s eyes shifted to Neil’s hurt arm.

‘Did you tear any stitches?’

With some effort, Neil lifted his arm. A dark red spot stained his shirt.

How? Neil hadn’t felt the blood dripping, nor the pain from something he had apparently torn.

Neil frowned at his arm but found it hard to keep his eyes open.

‘Can I sleep now?’ he asked slowly, and forced himself to look at Andrew, who was also frowning.

Andrew sat down beside him, immediately turning to look at Neil.

‘Did he visit your dream last night?’

Neil knew Andrew was talking to him, but it was getting harder to concentrate and he found his eyes drifting away from Andrew’s warm brown eyes towards his shoulder. It looked strong. And really comfortable.

Before he knew what he was doing, Neil was leaning forward, resting his head on Andrew’s shoulder.

Yeah, that was comfortable. The added bonus was that it smelled like Andrew, which was a nice smell, maybe Neil should compliment him?

But the smell also reminded him of Andrew’s dreams because Andrew’s dreams smelled like andrew
which madesense in a way djdnth

‘I like…’ Neil began, trying for the compliment, but he was gone before he could finish his sentence.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'You'll be the warning.'

uh-oh. I think Riko didn't like Neil's challenge very much. Well as long as Neil doesn't fall asleep around Riko, he should be fine..........

As always, lovely people, thank you SO much for reading <3 !
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people!

It's the spookiest of Friday's today. How exciting! And by exciting I mean that I stayed at home to write and read. I read Coraline for the first time and it's actually at some points SO different from the movie. Super interesting. And still very good.

Anyways, onto Neil.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

the basement
his old bedroom
in the car with his mother
the basement with his father

scenes were changing so fast before Neil’s eyes that he had a hard time making sense of anything.

Finally his mind settled on somewhere
and Neil blinked to make sense of his surroundings, but as always, his father’s basement was dark and damp which made it hard to see what was going on.

As before,
it seemed like Riko melted from the shadows,
tearing himself loose from the unforgiving darkness.

‘Nathaniel,’ Riko said pleasantly, then tilted his head in thought for a moment. ‘No, Neil is it now? Such valuable information.’

Neil pushed himself up from the ground, keeping his eyes on Riko.
‘What do you plan to do with it?’ he asked.

Riko laughed,
a short, awful sound.

‘Oh, I know someone who would love to know where you are right now.’

His father.
Neil ground his teeth, and tried to go for casual as he said,
‘He’s probably already moved on.’
'You think? Strange, we talked about you just last month.'

A shiver wrecked Neil’s frame.

‘I won’t come back to him,’ Neil said.

Riko flicked his wrist in the air, dismissing Neil’s denial.
‘You think I care if you go back of your own free will? All your father needs is a name, and an address.’
A few smooth strides, and Riko was in front of Neil, trapping him against the wall with his arm.
‘And I can give him those. Palmetto Foxes, was it?’

Neil swallowed, as fear clenched his throat tightly.

‘What do you want?’ he ground out.

Riko smiled.
‘Leave.’

Neil blinked in surprise,
but Riko explained,
‘It’s what you always do, anyway. Your leaving will show Kevin that he can’t change that poor excuse for a team. That he can’t influence people.’

‘Why not ask me for Kevin instead?’

Riko slapped Neil across the face.
‘Don’t be stupid. Kevin needs to come back of his own accord.’

Neil looked at Riko for a second in bewilderment,
then started laughing.

Riko narrowed his eyes in irritation,
and he slapped Neil again.

‘Stop laughing.’

Neil stopped laughing,
but kept the smile as he said,
‘Your plan will fail. I don’t mean enough to Kevin. He won’t care if I leave.’

‘That’s right, you don’t. But you’ll be the first to drop, the first to fall. You’ll be the warning.’

Riko traced a finger across Neil’s face,
across newly healed skin and old scars.

Suddenly those inky black eyes lit up,
and Neil got a terrible feeling in his stomach.

‘I’ll even make it easy for Kevin,’ Riko said, and a knife suddenly appeared in his left hand.
Hating his predictability, Neil’s eyes still immediately flickered towards the knife, while his heart started racing.
So distracted by the knife, Neil didn’t see what Riko was doing until—

Neil’s blood turned to ice as Riko’s fingers gripped the edge of his shirt and pushed it up, his fingers freezingly cold against Neil’s skin.

‘Don’t touch me,’ Neil spat out. ‘I don’t swing.’

In response Riko’s hand stilled, and it made Neil’s skin crawl.

‘You sure?’ Riko asked. ‘I could practically feel your boner for that drugged psychopath.’

It took some effort for Neil not to respond, but he managed to keep his eyes steadily on Riko’s.

Who slowly curled his fingers, and dragged his nails down Neil’s stomach.

The pain pricked, but was small in comparison to the other dream. The feel of Riko’s hands on him however was damaging in its own way.

Blood trickled over Neil’s stomach.

It wouldn’t be the last of it.

Because Riko angled the knife, the point just touching Neil’s stomach.

‘Now you need to stay still, otherwise I might carve too deep,’ Riko instructed Neil, who felt his head start to swim as panic was coursing, hot and blinding, through his veins.

The thought that whatever Riko was going to carve into him was going to scar, was going to stay on his skin forever, had tears burning in his eyes. But Neil refused to let them fall.

It was just his skin.

He was going to endure this.

The first cut hurt the worst.

no

that wasn’t true.

Every cut hurt.

He was shaking slightly from left to right, though someone tried to keep the moving to a minimum.
Neil could tell from the way arms held him tightly.

It was a struggle to open his eyes, because the pain in his stomach was already unbearable. Neil scrunched his face involuntarily.

‘Neil?’

Andrew’s voice.

‘Neil, stop pretending you’re asleep.’

Andrew’s voice sounded low, and whispered.

‘Why?’ Neil slurred, but he opened his eyes slowly.

He was still on the bus, and it was light outside.

The brightness was so intense after the dark basement that Neil wanted to close his eyes immediately. The sight of Andrew above him was the only thing that kept them open.

He was lying in Andrew’s arms.

‘Because we’re going to arrive at the Tower,’ Andrew said, ‘And you don’t want to explain to people why you’re suddenly bleeding after a little nap.’

Neil’s eyes widened.

Fuck.

He tried to sit up quickly, but Andrew’s arms tightened and kept him in place.

‘Don’t move,’ Andrew said, looking like he’d rather not restrain Neil. ‘You’ll bleed on the floor.’

Oh.

‘Is it bad?’ Neil asked, leaning back again.

Andrew raised an eyebrow.
‘No. I love the red shirt you’re wearing.’

His entire shirt was stained red?

Fuck, if the others found out—What would he say? How could he explain?

‘Andrew,’ he said, eyes wide. ‘They can’t know.’
Andrew looked at him like he was being stupid and this was all perfectly clear to Andrew.

And Neil wondered, if what Andrew had said last night was really true.

As he looked at the silent anger swirling in Andrew’s eyes, he thought probably not.

Dealing with this mess, never knowing what was real.

Who’d want that?

Yeah, they never would’ve made it.

Even though Andrew waited until everyone was off the bus, jerking his head towards the exit to tell Kevin he should keep walking, with every step Neil took, blood dripped down onto the floor of the bus and sharp stabs of pain made breathing and walking difficult.

Wymack waited by the door, asking incredulously, ‘What’s taking you so long?’

Neil could pinpoint the moment he saw something was wrong.

Looking down, and seeing the streaks of blood running down his pants, Neil guessed what gave it away.

Unfortunately for them, Matt also came to see what was wrong.

Neil still didn’t know why Matt seemed to check on Neil so often. It wasn’t useful right now, as Matt’s eyes widened and ‘What the fuck?’ he said, effectively getting the attention of all the other foxes.

Neil’s legs were shaking.

‘Andrew,’ he said quietly, ‘I think I’m going to pass out.’

Andrew nodded, and continued leading them down the steps of the bus.

‘No. No way,’ Matt said, getting closer. ‘Coach are you seeing this? I swear to god, Andrew, if this is your doing, I wi-’

‘Neil’s going to pass out,’ Andrew cut him off.
Not a moment too soon.

Neil blacked out.

Kevin was staring at him as he woke up.

‘Is it Riko?’ Kevin asked quietly.

Looking around, Neil noticed he was on Coach’s couch, and it seemed like they were alone in the room.

‘Who else?’ Neil said through gritted teeth as he tried to sit up. The skin on his stomach protested against the movement however.

‘Your father,’ Kevin whispered.

So he knew about that? Well, it made sense that talking about their past had brought up the rest of the memories.

Neil shook his head. ‘The wounds would’ve been on places you could see.’

Kevin said nothing as he took in the information.

The silence that followed was slightly awkward, and Neil wished Kevin would just say what he wanted to say, until suddenly he heard Coach’s voice, yelling from inside his office.

‘It doesn’t exactly look good!’

Focusing, Neil thought he could make out the timbre of Andrew’s voice as he replied. ‘Like hell you can’t!’ Wymack shouted in response.

Neil winced.

‘Is it because of me?’ Kevin asked suddenly.

Neil sighed. Lying would be pointless. ‘Yes.’

Fear was written plainly all over Kevin’s face, and his mouth opened and closed a few times. The door of Wymack’s office opened before Kevin could get any words out however, and Wymack stormed towards Neil, Andrew right behind him.

‘You’re awake,’ Wymack said, surprisingly even. ‘How do you feel?’

‘I’m fine,’ Neil lied to the man who would decide whether or not he could play Exy.
Wymack raised his eyebrows.
‘Doesn’t look like it.’

Neil tried for a shrug, but the movement tugged on sore skin, so it turned into an awkward half shrug.

Wymack looked pointedly at him.
‘You’re staying here for the time being.’

‘I can stay at the Towe-’ Neil began, but Wymack cut him off.
‘Not a chance.’

Catching the look Wymack gave Andrew, he could guess why.

‘Coach,’ Neil tried, ‘It wasn’t Andrew.’

‘No? Care to explain to me then how I find you slashed up with a knife, two days in a row, with the only person close to you being Andrew.’

A different kind of panic grabbed hold of Neil, one he hadn’t experienced a lot before.

It was the fear of not being able to see Andrew.
The real Andrew.

Because Neil didn’t want to go back to only dreams to only imagination and questions.

And then there was Riko’s demand.
‘Leave.’

Neil’s throat felt tight.

‘Now go,’ Wymack said to Andrew. ‘Or I swear I’ll call the cops.’

To Neil’s surprise,
Andrew didn’t argue.
He simply left.

‘Leave.’

Was it that simple?

Andrew was in front of him, staring at him intently.

‘Tell me,’ Andrew said.
Neil blinked.
Then took in his surroundings.

Their Exy court?
What?

How?

‘Why are we here?’

‘Are we going to play the question game?’ Andrew asked, voice bored.

‘Um-’

‘The court relaxes you,’ Andrew answered matter-of-factly, then leaned forward.

‘My turn. Who hurt you?’

Neil shifted uncomfortably, and found that there was no comfortable way for him to sit anyway.

‘Riko,’ he replied.

Andrew nodded once.

‘Did you mean it?’ Neil asked immediately. ‘That you would protect me?’

Andrew took a little longer to reply, staring at the clouds with a detachedness in his eyes that reassured Neil Andrew was real.

‘I usually make deals,’ Andrew answered, though it didn’t make a lot of sense to Neil. ‘Deals are a two-way street. You promised to stay in my dreams. And I promise to keep you safe in return.’

The breath was knocked out of Neil.
Did it mean something to Andrew?
That Neil was in his dreams?
That Neil stayed?

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ Andrew said, annoyed.

‘You don’t know what you’re dealing with,’ Neil said.

‘Then explain.’

Neil shook his head.
Impossible.
Even if he did tell Andrew everything,

Andrew would probably take one look at all the mess that surrounded Neil and decided he wanted nothing to do with it.

But.
But he hadn’t turned away when he’d seen all his scars, nor when Riko had threatened him.

‘Why the fear of anesthetics?’ Andrew asked.

_Dream better, Nathaniel._

‘My father.’
was all Neil could say,
the memories too pressing
too vivid.
Especially when he was in a dream.

But Andrew seemed to accept his answer.

Finally,
it was time for the dreaded question.
Andrew knew it, from the way his eyes turned dark as he watched Neil form the words.

‘What did Riko write on my stomach?’

‘Fake,’
Andrew answered.

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Chapter End Notes

next time; 'I-I can’t, this can’t be on me, I can’t be, I can’t be, I can’t-'

Well. I’d love to know what you thought of this chapter! <3 Or just the story in general! :)

Thank you so much for reading <3
Hello lovely people!

Later than usual update because it was (or still is I guess) my birthday today and I visited an amusement park with a few friends. It was loads of fun but wheeeew am I tired.

Anyways, enjoy!

Andrew stopped him before he could tear off his bandages, unsure whether Neil would hurt himself in real life too.

The stress however caused Neil to wake up.

Neil could still feel Andrew’s arms holding his wrists tightly as he opened his eyes and quickly sat up. The sudden movement stretched his skin uncomfortably, but it wasn’t as bad as the thought of being marked as fake.

The room was spinning, and Neil’s breath quickened.

He couldn’t-
He wasn’t

Neil frantically pulled his shirt over his head, feeling something tear but now he had access to the bandages.

He clawed at the fabric, ripping it from his skin, needing it gone.

It had almost come off when Wymack stumbled into the living room, turning on the light. When he saw what Neil was doing, Wymack quickly kneeled beside the couch and grabbed Neil’s hands.

‘Neil, Neil, look at me,’ Wymack said softly.

But all Neil could see were the words carved into his stomach.

Fake.

His breath was going way too fast, Neil knew this, but it was impossible to calm down when everyone would know that he wasn’t
Neil struggled against Wymack’s hold.

‘Neil,’ Wymack said again. ‘Calm down. Try to take deep, calm breaths.’

Impossible.

‘Neil, it would help if you looked at me,’ Wymack said gently, but Neil kept pulling at his hands, trying in vain to get himself free.

‘I don’t want to restrain you, Neil,’ Wymack said. ‘But I don’t trust you not to hurt yourself.’

Wymack’s voice was low and friendly
just like his father sounded when he forced another pill in Neil’s mouth.

‘N-no,’ Neil panicked, voice shaking. ‘I don’t want to sleep.’

‘You don’t have to sleep,’ Wymack answered and
that was true
He just had to dream right

Someone pounded on the door.

‘No,’ Wymack called out, trying to keep his voice level. ‘You’re not allowed in here.’

Not allo-
who
Who wasn’t allowed?

Neil pulled at his wrists again
who was at the door?

The lock twisted, opened, and the door flew open.

Eyes wide, Neil was ready to bolt until he saw
Andrew
walking towards him.

‘Let him go, Coach,’ Andrew said.

‘I can’t,’ Wymack grunted. ‘Look at his stomach. He nearly tore his own skin off.’

‘Coach.’

Neil’s eyes found their way to Andrew’s face.

It was blank.

Why was it blank?

look at me

Neil’s breath hitched, and his chest felt too tight as he was close to hyperventilating.
see me

his mind pleaded.

please tell me I’m not fake

But Andrew was looking at Wymack, who seemed conflicted about what to do.

‘You promise not to hurt him?’ Wymack asked eventually.

‘Promise,’ Andrew said.

With some reluctance, Wymack let go of Neil’s wrists and took a few steps back. Andrew immediately took his place, kneeling beside the couch and looking up at Neil.

‘Neil.’ Andrew said. ‘Breathe.’

‘I-I can’t, Andrew, this can’t be on me, I can’t be,’ Neil stuttered. ‘I can’t be, I can’t-’

‘Neil.’ Andrew repeated his name in a way that had Neil looking at him.

‘You’re real,’ Andrew said.

And there it was.

As Andrew looked at him, saw him, Neil could finally take a calmer breath.

‘Andrew,’ he choked. ‘I can’t have this on my skin.’

Andrew didn’t even look down at his wounds. He just kept his eyes on Neil as he nodded once.

And even though it wasn’t a solution, somehow that already made Neil feel a little better.

As the minutes passed, Neil’s breathing slowly calmed down. With it, the tension in the room seemed to vanish too.

‘Better?’ Wymack grunted.

It took some effort to tear his eyes away from Andrew, but Neil managed to nod at Wymack, who then asked the impossible of him.

‘Can you tell me what happened?’

‘No,’ Neil said quietly.

‘Okay.’ Wymack sighed. ‘Okay, and it wasn’t Andrew you say?’
‘It wasn’t.’

Wymack rubbed the bridge of his nose.

‘I guess I’ll just have to take your word for it. I’ll try to convince the others tomorrow but I can only do so much. Anyway, this means I can go back to bed without worrying about getting anymore blood on my couch.’
He started walking away, only to turn around after a few steps.
‘And don’t think about doing anything on my couch.’

Doing anything?
Huh?

Neil frowned in confusion, but Wymack only shook his head and walked away.

Andrew stood up as well, only to return with a fresh pack of bandages.

Neil watched as Andrew silently threw away the torn ones, then cleaned the blood off Neil and bandaged him up again.

‘Thank you,’ Neil said.

Andrew stiffened.
‘Don’t.’

‘How did you wake up?’ Neil wondered.

‘I’m a light sleeper,’ Andrew answered non-committally.

But Neil wasn’t stupid.

‘Did you bash your head in?’ he asked.

Andrew looked up.
‘No. My heart rate spiked.’

Right.
Neil had taught him that.

But

‘How?’ Neil couldn’t help but press.

Except Andrew didn’t seem particularly forthcoming with this piece of information.

That was okay.

Neil had another question he secretly wanted to ask.

‘Can I kiss you?’

Andrew’s answer was immediate.

‘Yes.’
Neil leaned forward, but pain immediately spiked through his body and he winced, pulling back subconsciously.

Andrew sighed as he moved to sit on the couch next to Neil.

‘Lie down,’ he said.

Neil did.

It did feel better.

It felt the best however, when Andrew’s lips touched his and a surge of warmth filled Neil’s chest.

‘This feels real,’ he murmured.

In response Andrew placed a kiss on his cheek, then his chin.

Neil smiled.

‘That just feels weird.’

‘You’re weird,’ Andrew replied, placing a few impossibly soft kisses on Neil’s lips.

Neil made a small satisfied sound in the back of his throat, and couldn’t help but say, ‘Still you seem to like me.’

Andrew stilled for a second.

‘What gave you that idea?’ he asked, voice emotionless but it didn’t sound at all unfeeling as he’d said it in between kisses. It also wasn’t a denial.

Neil’s heart jumped.

‘I dunno,’ he murmured against Andrew’s lips. ‘Nicky told me you dream of me every night.’

Despite the terror of the night, and the panic after his dreams, Neil felt Andrew’s lips twitch.

‘What am I going to do now?’ Neil asked, watching the clouds slowly drift by.

He’d made their court feel warm, a bright sun shining down on them. Not that Neil felt particularly proud to get more control over dreams, but it’d taken him quite some time to not only control their surroundings but also change how it felt to them.
He wondered for a split second if Riko was able to weave fear into the shadows of his dreams.

Andrew didn’t respond, so Neil turned to look at him.

Andrew was watching the clouds as well, but Neil saw his eyes didn’t move. He was just staring at the sky. Unseeingly.

‘I should go,’ Neil said, thinking about Riko’s demand. Thinking it would be the first time in his life that he was going to keep others safe instead of himself.

‘Is that what you want?’ Andrew asked flatly.

‘What?’ Neil asked in surprise. ‘You’re talking about wanting?’

Andrew blinked, then turned his head towards Neil, who gave the question some thought. The answer didn’t surprise him.

‘I guess I want a reason to stay.’

‘Then stay,’ Andrew said.

‘Why?’

‘Your promise.’

‘I promised to stay in your dreams,’ Neil said. ‘I can do that while being somewhere else.’

What was he saying?
Neil wanted to stay.
For Exy and himself but, and that made it tricky, he also wanted to stay for Andrew shrugged and said, ‘Stay and be real. Leave and be a dream.’

The choice wasn’t difficult, the skin on his stomach burning.

There was a phone call.

They were changing in the locker room, or well, the others were. Neil had already changed, including his bandages, and was waiting for the rest.
When Wymack walked in, he pointed at Andrew. ‘The police are on the phone for you. You’d better come clean with me before I get the unabridged version from them.’

‘It wasn’t me,’ Andrew immediately said, and it sounded like such an automatic response that Neil had to hold in his snort.

Wymack scowled at Andrew then put the phone at his ear again.

‘What seems to be the problem, Officer… Higgins, you said?’

Andrew was on his medication right now.
Neil knew this. Yet surprise, clear as day, was written all over Andrew’s face, his eyes widening as he said, ‘Oh. No, Coach.’

It was curious to Neil how Andrew turned to keep an eye on Aaron after he’d wrestled the phone away from Wymack, and answered it.

‘Pig Higgins, is that you? Oh, it is. Yes, I’m surprised. Did you forget I don’t like surprises?’

Neil glanced around the room but found that none of the other Foxes, not even Nicky, seemed to know what was going on.

Andrew went quiet for a few seconds to listen to the officer, then said, ‘No.’ and hung up.

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'someone from your past?'

wuh-oh.

I'm sorry for not responding to comments a lot these last two days, I've spent it travelling and celebrating! I'll be active again tomorrow though!! You guys mean so much to me, and I adore every comment<3 They are one of my biggest motivators <3

Thanks for reading again!
Hello lovely people!

Hope you're all doing okay! I've been playing the new Fire Emblem game today... NON-stop. Whoops. Not good for writing. Good for relaxing though.

Anyways, enjoy!

Higgins was persistent enough to call a third time.

Andrew didn’t stay for practice.

And when Neil tried to talk to him, knocking on his apartment’s door, Aaron opened with a bored look in his eyes and said, ‘He’s not here.’

‘Where is he?’ Neil asked.

Aaron shrugged.
‘Fuck should I know.’
And closed the door in Neil’s face.

So Neil walked back to his apartment, where Matt was watching him curiously.

‘Didn’t go well?’

‘He wasn’t there,’ Neil replied. ‘And Aaron didn’t know where he was.’

Matt nodded, seemingly lost in thought, so Neil sat down at his desk to start a late-night study session when Matt suddenly spoke up again.

‘Why do you want to hang out with Andrew?’

‘It’s not what you think, Matt,’ Neil replied without looking up.

‘Yeah but, Neil, you know how bad it looked.’

Neil sighed.
He knew.

‘Andrew hasn’t hurt me.’
'He punched you.'

'He also punched Nicky a few times, and you don’t complain about that.'

Matt fell silent,
so Neil turned to look at him.

There was a thoughtful expression on Matt's face,
and even though Neil didn’t see the point in Matt understanding the situation, or the relationship
between him and Andrew, he still said,
'I promise that Andrew isn’t hurting me.'

Matt looked at him.
And Neil waited for the skepticism, the disbelief.
But to his surprise, Matt nodded once.
'Okay. Because if he does, I’ll make sure he’ll regret it.'

'Noted,' Neil said in surprise.

Matt smiled in return.

Neil’s whole being felt heavy,
as he took in the child’s bedroom.

He could guess about the phone call now.

'Someone from your past?' he asked quietly, taking a few steps towards Andrew.

But as always, Andrew had his arms wrapped around his raised knees,
head resting on them.
Completely shut off from his surroundings.

Before Neil crouched down in front of him, he searched the room for the razor.
It wasn’t on the bedside table,
nor on the floor.

Where could it be?

'Andrew?' Neil asked.

Andrew didn’t react,
and Neil suddenly noticed something was different.

It wasn’t on the walls
it wasn’t the bed
it wasn’t the flo-

A chill crept down Neil’s spine,
and he slowly turned around.
Someone was standing in front of the door.

There was a shadow of a man underneath the door, just standing.

Waiting.

It scared the shit out of Neil, and it wasn’t even his own dream. Then again the sight wasn’t strange.

A man standing in front of his bedroom door. Waiting.

‘Do you want to wake up?’ Neil asked quietly.

Andrew didn’t react.

And Neil didn’t know how to snap him out of the dream gently.

Maybe-

Neil closed his eyes and tried to conjure up the bedroom in Columbia, but of course his memory wasn’t as good as Andrew’s and he found it was harder to get the dream to change.

The walls wanted to darken, the bed wanted to shrink, and the overwhelming sense of fear seemed to attack every attempt Neil made to change the dream.

But he wasn’t going to fucking give up.

Panting from the effort, Neil squeezed his eyes shut as he tried with all his might to picture the scene from Columbia, and with it the feelings the ‘I know that now.’

Real.
It was real, the memory was real, and maybe this was would be real too.

Though there was still resistance, it was easier to overcome now. It didn’t fight back as hard anymore, and when Neil dared to open his eyes, he found himself in Andrew’s bedroom in Columbia, lying in his pyjamas in the bed.
Andrew was sitting on top of the blankets in exactly the same position as before, but Neil could see his arms twitching as Andrew probably felt that the dream had changed.

After a few minutes, Andrew tentatively looked up.

Took in his surroundings.

His eyes fell on Neil.

‘I could give you a hangover if that makes it feel more realistic,’ Neil said, trying to go for an easy conversation.

Andrew blinked, and slowly released the cramped hold on his legs, lowering his arms to the bed.

Neil could see flashes of red of hurt on Andrew’s arms, but he immediately focused his gaze on Andrew again, who was staring at the window behind Neil.

‘You left the window open.’

Neil checked.
‘Oh. Force of habit.’
He pointed at the bed. ‘It’s warmer beneath the covers.’

Andrew looked at the bed.

After a few minutes, Andrew slowly lifted the covers, as if the movement cost him a great deal, and tucked his legs underneath.

He was still sitting up though.

The thought suddenly hit Neil, and he could hit himself for his own stupidity.
It wasn’t exactly- Why the fuck did he change the dream into another bedroom?
Andrew sure as hell wouldn’t feel safe in a bed right now.

Neil groaned and covered his face with his hands.

Maybe he could change it into their Exy court?
No, Andrew probably wouldn’t want to stand or deal with Exy.
The shrink’s office then.
That always seemed to be a safe choice.

Neil felt miserable.

He’d just thought back to a situation where both of them had felt relatively at ease and safe. But that had been once.
Whereas Andrew had been visiting the shrink’s- Bee’s office for a long time. It was familiar.

What had Neil been thi-

Andrew lay down.

Surprised, Neil turned to look at him.

‘No clouds,’ Andrew said.

Neil followed Andrew’s gaze up, and was met with an entirely normal and boring white ceiling.

He could change that.

Closing his eyes, Neil took a deep breath.

When he opened his eyes again, the ceiling had vanished, and above them was now a soft blue sky, filled with fluffy clouds in varying sizes that drifted past.

It was enchanting.

And different.

Different than any bedroom had ever looked.

Neil understood.

For the next few minutes, he busied himself with silently watching Andrew watch the slowly moving clouds above their heads.

‘Staring,’ Andrew remarked eventually.

‘Dreaming,’ Neil replied, smiling.

Andrew looked unimpressed, but turned to look at Neil anyway.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘I don’t see the point,’ Neil frowned.

‘Of course you don’t,’ Andrew said, systematically tugging clothes off their hangers and dropping them on the floor.

‘I could just not go.’

‘Shut up. You’re going,’ Kevin said, like he wasn’t dreading this himself.

This being the southeastern district’s fall banquet, not their current shopping for something appropriate for Neil to wear.

To the stupid banquet.
Neil already had clothes. But apparently he needed better clothes.

Both Neil and Kevin dreaded the banquet for the most obvious reason: all the fourteen southern Class I teams would be in attendance, and that included Edgar Allan’s Ravens.

Andrew threw one of the empty hangers at Nicky, who ducked just in time to avoid getting hit in the face. Shrugging at his miss, Andrew looked at Neil as he said, ‘You picked a fight with Riko on Kathy’s show. If you don’t go, he’ll say you’re too afraid to face him.’

Well, that wasn’t not true.

‘Here,’ Aaron said, handing Neil a scrap of paper. It was the first time in two weeks that he’d said anything to Neil. ‘Take this before I forget it.’

Unfolding the paper, Neil saw it was a list of names and phone numbers. All of them were girl’s names.

The confusion must’ve shown on his face because Nicky leaned over to look at the paper as well, then scoffed at Aaron. ‘Seriously? Neil doesn’t need this.’

‘Who are these people?’ Neil asked.

‘All the single Vixens,’ Aaron replied.

‘First off, they’re all women,’ Nicky complained. ‘And second, and probably the most important reason, Neil already has a date.’

‘I do?’ Neil asked, being informed of this fact only now.

Nicky nodded, slinging an arm around Neil’s shoulder. ‘Yup. You got me baby.’

Aaron threw his hands in the air and turned away. ‘Whatever. I’m out of here. You can find me in the food court.’

‘Stop being a bad influence,’ Kevin told Nicky. ‘If all goes well, I’m going to make him Court. It’ll be easier if he remains heterosexual. You know more than any of us how prejudiced people can be. Imagine the impact it would have on his career.’

Neil’s mind was reeling. ‘Wait a minute,’ he said, shrugging Nicky’s arm off his shoulder. ‘My sexuality shouldn’t be any of your concern. Both of you.’ He turned towards Nicky. ‘And I don’t remember agreeing to being your date.’

‘But you have to take someone,’ Nicky argued. ‘Wouldn’t it be better to take someone you know?’

‘He can take Allison,’ Kevin said.
‘I’m not taking anyone,’ Neil said. ‘I don’t even want to go.’

Both Kevin and Nicky seemed to ignore him, picking more clothes from the rack. Neil frowned at the offending pile in Nicky’s hands.

‘I’m not going to try all of that on.’

‘You got a problem with clothes that fit you?’ Andrew asked.

They were all horrible people, Neil thought miserably. ‘Just pick something and I’ll get it,’ he grumbled, following Andrew towards the cashier.

‘I’ll pay,’ Andrew said.

What?

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Neil said. ‘I have money.’

Andrew dumped a pile of clothes on the counter. ‘Didn’t ask.’

Neil crossed his arms in a manner that was very adult-like as he waited for Andrew to pay for clothes that he didn’t need.

‘I’m only going to wear them once,’ Neil said, maybe a little petulantly.

Andrew pushed the bag in his hands. ‘Not if I keep my promise.’

next time; ‘What are you going to do?’ Kevin whispered.

Kevin asking the real questions Day. Anyways, I hope you liked this chapter <3 Let me know what you thought if you want :D

Thank you so much for reading!
Hello lovely people!

It is I, the writer, who just passed the 50k mark on this story. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?? (hoo calm down there naruto) I couldn't when I saw it. Though I am nearing the end, but now you know there's still some ways to go before this story is over :)

Hope you enjoy reading!

They picked up Aaron from the food court, and when they were walking through the mall, Kevin fell back so he could walk next to Neil. Great.

‘What are you going to do?’ Kevin whispered.

Neil feigned ignorance.
‘I’m good with following the rest. I don’t need anything from the shops.’

Kevin glared at him.
‘You know what I mean. About Riko.’

Fine.

‘Riko can’t do anything,’ Neil said. ‘Because we’re all going to be socializing, and we’re all going to be awake.’

Kevin didn’t seem convinced.
‘What if he drugs you again?’ he whispered.

what?
Neil’s head snapped to the side in surprise.

At least Kevin had the audacity to look somewhat guilty.
‘I figured that’s what happened on the bus after the show. You were gone so abruptly.’

Damn.
Kevin was smarter than Neil thought.

‘Well,’ Neil shrugged, trying to appear unafraid. ‘We better watch our food then.’

‘And drinks,’ Kevin said miserably.
They were training.
Or well, Neil was trying to train, but the rest was apparently hellbent on convincing Neil to be excited about the event.
The rest being of course-
‘Look at it this way,’ Nicky said cheerily, stretching his arm behind his shoulder. ‘The princess always goes to a ball.’

‘It’s a banquet,’ Kevin said.

‘Also, that’s wrong,’ Matt said, having finished his third sprint. ‘Sleeping Beauty doesn’t go to a ball.’

‘She does!’ Nicky exclaimed.

‘She does,’ Renee agreed, jogging past them with Andrew beside her.

Neil looked jealously at them as they ran further.
At least they had an out.

‘When?’ Matt asked.

Nicky shook his head in desperation.
‘At the end, oh my god.’

Neil gritted his teeth in frustration as Kevin made him go through a move again and again, his muscles protesting against the abuse.

Though it was a ridiculous and pointless conversation, especially while they should be focusing on training, Neil felt his heart warm.

Having these ridiculous and pointless conversations with others was probably what it meant to have a life.
To have friends?

‘So,’ Nicky continued. ‘My point being. You need to go to the ball, Neil.’

Neil sighed.

He’ll say you’re too afraid to face him.

But he was.
God, Neil was terrified.

As soon as he closed his eyes, he imagined Riko standing in front of him, torturing him for hours in his sleep.
The sun was already rising when Neil finally fell asleep.

Andrew gave him a searching look, which Neil ignored in favour of focusing on getting through their training.

If Kevin noticed that his reflexes were slower than usual, he didn’t comment on it.

Then again, it was a miracle Kevin could see anything past his enormous eye bags.

Neil wasn’t the only one who had trouble sleeping.

‘I feel like I’m dressing for my funeral,’ Neil mumbled to his reflection, as he tried for the fifth time to get his tie to cooperate.

Fucking useless piece of fabric.

Andrew was leaning against the wall across his apartment, dressed all in black as usual, though the suit was unusual.

‘I like that look on you,’ Andrew said.

Neil scoffed. ‘What look?’ he grumbled.

‘That murderous look,’ Andrew smiled, and pushed himself off the wall. ‘Ready?’


Andrew started for the elevator.

‘I thought you stopped lying.’

‘I will swear off lying forever if you stop buying clothes for me,’ Neil promised.

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped inside a small, square space filled with sudden sexual tension.

Neil swallowed.

‘I won’t,’ Andrew said, and Neil felt ashamed that he’d almost forgotten what he’d said.

‘At least don’t buy me ties,’ Neil mumbled.

Andrew looked at his tie.

Neil looked at Andrew.
Then, Andrew reached over and gripped Neil’s tie with one hand.

He gave a harsh tug on it, causing Neil to stumble forward, but also managing to undo the knot of his tie.

Neil’s heart skipped a beat.

‘This isn’t how you tie it,’ Andrew said.

Neil shook his head.

It took a while to find his voice.

‘Show me,’ he whispered.

With a flick of his wrist, Andrew whipped the tie around Neil’s neck, grabbing both ends in his hand, and pulling Neil towards him.

‘Do you want me to show you?’ he asked, voice low.

‘Yes,’ Neil said, and meant both questions.

‘Yes?’

Andrew’s eyes were burning into his.

‘Yes,’ Neil rasped.

With a slightly too rough tug, Andrew pulled Neil forward and clashed their lips together.

A groan had barely escaped Neil’s lips before Andrew slammed Neil against the elevator wall, kissing him by the basest definition of the word.

It felt like being devoured by Andrew’s mouth, tongue and desire.

When Andrew pushed his thigh between Neil’s legs, Neil’s head fell back against the wall with a moan.

Andrew pulled roughly on the tie, forcing Neil’s head down again.

‘I’m not done with you,’ Andrew growled, capturing Neil’s lips again in a rough kiss.

It made Neil impossibly hard.

*ping*

the elevator interrupted them.

Immediately, Andrew released both Neil and the tie,
and walked swiftly out of the elevator towards Nicky, Kevin and Aaron, who were already waiting for them.

‘Wha-’ Nicky began, but Andrew cut him off.

‘Neil couldn’t tie his tie.’

Blinking, Neil gathered enough coherent thoughts to form a sentence. 
*I need to get off the elevator before the doors close.*

He stepped out.

Nicky frowned down at Neil’s tie.

‘What’d you do? Wrestle with it?’

‘Umm,’ Neil said eloquently. ‘Something like that.’

It was only when they were on the bus that Neil thought of it.

He twisted in his seat to look at Andrew, who was sitting one row behind him.

Not that Neil hadn’t wanted to-

The problem was, he wanted too much.

‘Did you do that to distract me?’ Neil asked.

Andrew kept staring outside the window as he replied,

‘Maybe.’

Neil smiled.

It felt like it would be his last smile of the night.

The banquet was supposed to be a two-day event to justify the costs and travel time for the further teams, but the Foxes took a unanimous vote to leave Saturday night. Six hours spent socializing with teams who’d repeatedly and loudly mocked them in the news was more than enough.

They weren’t the first to arrive.

While Kevin was doing an impressive job of downing an entire bottle of vodka before Wymack took it away from him, they were all ushered to go inside.

‘You,’ Wymack said, pointing towards Neil before he could get very far. ‘Attempt to behave this time. Don’t pick fights with him today.’

Neil couldn’t say anything but,

‘Yes, Coach.’
Wymack still looked skeptical.

This could not be happening.

‘Motherfucker,’ Dan said in a low voice.

Meanwhile, Andrew started laughing as they all took in the fact that they would share a table with the Edgar Allen Ravens.

‘Maybe this will be interesting after all,’ Andrew said cheerily.

Neil felt that interesting would be the mildest outcome.

Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘You remember our agreement, Neil?’

thank you so much for reading again!! It means so much to me <3
Chapter 24

Hello lovely people!

I tried to get myself into the writing mood by looking at Andreil stuff on Tumblr and then guess who gave themselves Feelings™. Yup.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Though Neil didn’t end up in front of Riko, he was closer than he preferred.

It allowed for conversation, and even though Dan tried to divert their attention-

‘Dan Wilds.’

Riko offered her his hand in the most condescending handshake Neil had ever seen, and smiled as Dan let go.

‘I know who you are,’ Riko said. ‘Who here doesn’t? You’re the woman who captains a Class I team. You’ve done admittedly well despite your disadvantages.’

‘What disadvantages?’

‘Do you really want me to start listing them?’ Riko asked. ‘This is only a two-day event.’

-it only lasted for so long.

Neil hadn’t even taken a bite of his main course when Riko said,

‘Lovely drinks they serve here. Or are you sticking to water, Neil?’

‘I am,’ Neil said, taking a sip of his water, just to prove he dared. ‘You should too,’ he added. ‘There’s already enough shit coming out of your mouth when you’re sober.’

Riko’s eyes narrowed.

‘I was just being polite,’ he said in an overly friendly voice which gave Neil the creeps.

He smiled in return.

‘I wasn’t.’

Not afraid, he told himself.

‘No,’ Riko conceded, ‘Then again, none of you have any class to begin with.’
‘That’s a bit rude, don’t you think?’ Renee said.

‘It’s called honesty,’ Riko said. ‘I can give you more. Call it an example, if you want.’

He smiled at Renee in a way that made Neil want to punch him.

‘You probably already know that you’ll never beat us. You’re just a mismatched team that is sadly lacking any potential, with a goalkeeper who doesn’t care if he’s scored on.’

Riko turned towards Kevin, sending him a condescending, pitying look.

‘I get that you’re trying to teach them something resembling Exy, but we know you better than they do, Kevin. How much longer are you willing to put up with their incompetence?’

But it was like Riko was speaking to a corpse, Kevin’s face white as a sheet. Somehow he managed to say, ‘They know how I feel.’

Riko’s voice sounded sharp. ‘Then they know you won’t stay.’

Neil had enough.

‘You know, I get it. It must be hard for you Riko, this feeling of losing something. But I hope you’ll get used to it because it’s going to become a regular feeling when we beat you on the Court.’

Riko looked furious.

‘You’ll never-’

‘Never what? Never win? They also said Kevin would never play again. And look where we are. Funny how you use never, but I have a better one for you. Call it an example, if you want.’ Neil smiled. ‘Never assume anything.’

The way Riko’s hands balled into fists told Neil that his words had hit their mark. Well, fuck.

‘Do you think you’re clever?’ Riko hissed. ‘You’ll never be safe.’ He leaned in closer, as if this was meant for Neil’s ears only. ‘I thought I told you to run before the monster would come to get you.’

‘Too bad I’m no longer afraid of monsters,’ Neil said. ‘In fact, I think I’ve fallen in love with them.’

‘Disgusting,’ Riko spit.

Neil shrugged.

‘As much as I would love to insult you back, I’m afraid I won’t do as well as nature did.’

Silence.

‘Matt,’ Dan said, almost choking on his name. ‘Matt, Coach. Get Coach. Oh my god.’

One look at Riko’s expression told Neil that while Wymack was going to intervene this ‘conversation’, it wouldn’t be the last of it.

Neil was almost at the bathroom, the hall empty and abandoned, when Riko suddenly grabbed his wrist and bent it behind his back.
Before Neil could fight back, Riko leaned in close, his mouth inches from Neil’s ear. With every breath against his skin, Neil’s skin prickled.

‘You remember our agreement, Neil?’ Riko asked. ‘Remember what I said would happen if you didn’t leave?’

‘You’d go fuck yourself?’ Neil spit out.

In response, Riko twisted his arm further back.

Neil grunted from the strain.

‘I think it’s time for me to call someone.’

‘Good idea,’ Neil replied through gritted teeth. ‘Talking about your mental issues usually helps.’

Kicking Neil’s legs out from under him so he fell on the ground, Riko put his foot on Neil’s chest.

‘Down, boy.’ Riko sneered.

Neil glared at him.

‘Didn’t know you were into that.’

He instantly regretted his words when Riko leaned down, using his knee to pin Neil to the spot. Painfully.

The pressure made Neil’s lungs burn and his chest feel tight.

‘It’s all you’ll ever be,’ Riko said. ‘A sniffer dog.’

‘Yet you try your best to bark the loudest,’ Andrew said.

Riko whipped around,

and Neil took advantage of his distraction to shove Riko off.

Standing up, Neil noticed the knife in Andrew’s hand.

‘It’s the publicity stunt again,’ Riko smiled.

‘Don’t touch my things, Riko,’ Andrew threatened.

‘Or what? You’ll hurt yourself again?’

Something dark flashed behind Andrew’s eyes, and Neil could see the moment Andrew said fuck it, leaning forward to-

Neil quickly moved to stand in front of him, ignoring the fact that his back was now to Riko.

Andrew’s smile was scary as he said,

‘Move.’

‘Andrew,’ Neil said. ‘Let’s go.’
'Oh no. Not yet. I want to show Riko something. You go ahead.'

‘I don’t think that’s smart.’

‘Then don’t think,’ Andrew said, his voice no longer cheerful, but bordering on dangerous.

And Neil hated himself for saying it, but knew no other way.

‘Don’t let me leave alone.’

Andrew’s grip on his knife tightened, and his eyes turned near murderous as he watched Neil.

A few seconds passed.

‘Fuck you,’ Andrew said, and shoved Neil behind him, keeping his eyes on Riko while they walked out.

‘Neil!’ Matt exclaimed, running towards them as soon as they entered the main room. ‘Where were you? We couldn’t find you, nor Ri-’

His eyes turned wide as he saw Riko leaving the same room they just left. ‘-Ko.’ he finished, then turned a gaze full of worry on Neil.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine,’ Neil said, but

The Foxes left pretty quickly after that.

Shaking, Neil threw off his blanket and walked out of the apartment.

Before he could comprehend what he was doing or where he was, Andrew was suddenly opening the door of his apartment, rubbing in his eyes, and Neil saw that his own hand was raised, as if he’d been knocking on the door.

When Andrew saw Neil’s expression, he opened the door wider.

But Neil didn’t want to be inside, where he would be confined, where he could lie down.
‘I don’t want to fall asleep,’ he whispered, voice shaking.

Andrew looked at him, then nodded silently.

It took a few seconds for Andrew to put on shoes and grab his keys before he was in front of Neil again.

And Neil tried to take a few shaking steps towards the elevator, but it was hard to lead the way, to keep it together.

Without saying a word, Andrew grabbed Neil’s hand and held it all the way to his car.

It didn’t matter where they were driving to. It mattered that they didn’t need to speak, that Neil didn’t need to explain.

He stared at the cold darkness outside, and even though it was just as dark inside the car, it felt like a different kind.

One of comfort.

‘I didn’t mean that,’ Neil said quietly, when Andrew passed yet another car on the highway. It was remarkable how many people were on the road at 3 am. ‘You’re not a monster.’

Andrew didn’t react, keeping his eyes focused on the road.

‘I’m sorry,’ Neil said.

For waking him up, For calling him a monster, For telling him he was in love with him.

Andrew looked in the rearview mirror to check if he could change lanes. ‘I don’t care,’ he said in an emotionless voice.

Neil knew he shouldn’t either.

‘How’re you feeling?’ Neil asked.

Andrew clicked his tongue. ‘Nothing.’

But Neil saw his hands clench on the steering wheel. ‘I meant the withdrawal,’ Neil said quietly.

‘I should be fine for a couple of hours.’
‘Did you bring them with you?’

Andrew’s silence told Neil enough.

Neil sat up.

‘What if it gets worse?’ he asked, trying not to sound like he was worrying.

After months and months of secretly watching over Andrew in his dreams, changing his nightmares into dreams, it was maybe a little too late to feign indifference though.

Andrew didn’t respond, but he looked shortly over at Neil.

Neil leaned back in his seat again. He was satisfied to simply be in the same car as Andrew, driving aimlessly, until

‘Sometimes it’s worth it,’ Andrew broke their silence.

It sounded stupid, and reckless, but as Neil looked at Andrew, who had given up his sleep to keep Neil awake, he felt there wasn’t a lot he wouldn’t do to keep Andrew safe too.

Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘My mom just called to invite me and the twins home,’ Nicky said. ‘For a Thanksgiving dinner.’

Ooh MY GOSH all the respect for Nora Sakavic for writing sassy Neil like she does. I swear I’ve rewritten Riko and Neil's scenes so many times. Eventually I just said ’fuck it DEAL WITH MY INCOMPETENCE’. ahhhh ha... *awkward laughter

Sorry, loads of frustrations there :) BUT thank you so much for reading! <3
The way Nicky was shuffling his feet, opening his mouth, then closing it again, made Neil suspect he wanted to ask him something.

The way Nicky said, ‘Neil?’ made him sure of it.

‘My mom just called to invite me and the twins home. For a Thanksgiving dinner.’

Even Matt, from his lounge position on their couch, looked up at that.

‘And?’ Neil asked.

‘And I hung up on her?’ Nicky flailed at him. ‘What else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t tell her no, could I?’

‘Um, you could’ve said yes?’ Matt said, and Neil silently agreed.

‘It’s not that easy,’ Nicky said, sounding miserable. ‘She wants Andrew and Aaron to go too. Otherwise no Thanksgiving dinner. But you know Andrew. He’s never going to say yes.’

The desperate look Nicky gave him made Neil uncomfortable.

‘What?’ Neil asked.

‘I thought maybe you could convince Andrew.’

Before Neil could say that no, he couldn’t, Nicky pleaded, ‘Please Neil. Believe it or not, I miss my parents. I know they can be assholes, hell, they’ve been assholes, but I still miss them. And maybe, I don’t know, maybe they’ve actually changed. This could be a step in the right direction.’

Nicky sighed as he added miserably, ‘I just want to know.’

The feeling of missing your parents was foreign to Neil. It wasn’t his problem.
But for whatever reason he was going to try.

When Neil got back from his classes, Matt was standing in the kitchen, a hot pink apron tied around his chest that read ‘hot stuff coming through’.

Matt saw Neil looking and explained, ‘Gift from Dan.’

‘Nice of her.’

Matt laughed. ‘I think she meant to tease me. But it’s okay. I gave her a slippers that play a song with every step.’

Neil didn’t get it.

Matt must’ve seen his confused look, because he said, ‘They were valentine’s gifts. The first year we were together Dan was against doing overly romantic things on Valentine’s, so she gave me bacon flavoured deodorant.’

Neil winced.

‘Yeah, it was pretty gross,’ Matt laughed. ‘But the tradition kinda stuck. Honestly, I love almost every crazy gift she gives me.’

‘Even the bacon flavoured deodorant?’

‘Well, no. I threw that away.’

Neil snorted, and moved to the bedroom to put his bag underneath his bed.

When he returned, Matt was just putting whatever he was making into their tiny oven.

‘Hey Neil,’ Matt began. ‘You want to, um, maybe watch a movie tonight?’

Neil looked at his laptop with all his schoolbooks lying beside it.

They hadn’t been opened in a week.

Following his gaze, Matt quickly added, ‘Oh, you don’t have to! If you need to study, then by all means.’

‘No, that’s okay,’ Neil said slowly, still getting used to the idea of Matt wanting to hang with him.

It was a strangely warm feeling.

Neil decided he liked it.

‘Let’s watch a movie.’

Matt smiled brightly.

‘Awesome.’
Neil eyed the Halloween section at the mall, having just bought a bunch of groceries for dinner.

Apparently, people who were romantically involved could give each other gifts that weren’t exactly romantic. Neil frowned as he browsed through the section quickly.

They were planning to go to the Halloween party at Eden’s this weekend. Maybe he could…

And then Neil saw it.

He couldn’t help but laugh.

Friday evening brought Neil in front of Andrew’s apartment, the present stashed inside his bag.

‘Ready to party?’ Nicky asked as he opened the door, wearing a flashy pirate costume.

‘As ready as I need to be for a party,’ Neil said sarcastically, not really getting Nicky’s hype.

Before he could join the others in the living room, Nicky took a step closer.

‘You sure it’s okay to ask him tonight?’

‘I can’t promise anything though,’ Neil stressed.

But Nicky seemed happy that Neil was even trying, and for some reason, that made Neil kind of happy too.

Andrew appeared behind Nicky, wearing normal clothes.

‘You keeping Neil prisoner?’

‘Yar har,’ Nicky said, grabbing Neil’s wrist and pulling him further inside the apartment. ‘Aye, this now be my captive.’

Andrew laughed.

‘Good luck with him.’

And turned towards the living room.

‘Aw man,’ Nicky said. ‘We should’ve made Andrew a prince. Then you could’ve been Sleeping Beauty.’

‘I swear to god, Nicky,’ Aaron said, walking past them, looking fitting as a bloodied doctor.

Using the distraction, Neil quickly slipped past Nicky before he could reference more movies he hadn’t seen, the bag holding Andrew’s present in his hand.

‘Andrew,’ he called out.

But.

Once he stood in front of Andrew, Neil realized his terrible, terrible mistake.
Dan and Matt could give each other funny gifts because they thought things were funny.

Andrew, on the other hand, found very few things funny.

No big deal, Neil thought. He would just keep it for himself.

And Neil was about to sling his bag casually over his shoulder when he noticed that Andrew was watching him expectantly, foot tapping impatiently. Oh yeah, his medication hadn’t yet worn off.

‘Sometime today, Josten.’

Okay. Fuck it.
If Andrew was allowed to buy unwanted things for Neil, then he was too.

Since he hadn’t wrapped it, Neil simply handed Andrew the plastic bag.

Andrew raised an eyebrow.
‘What’s this?’ he asked, though he was already looking inside and pulling out the shirt Neil had bought.

‘A gift,’ Neil said, watching Andrew’s reaction closely.

It betrayed, as per usual, nothing. Even on his medication, Andrew could be very difficult to read.

Andrew’s gaze shifted to Neil for a second, and Neil wondered if he was going to return the present with a disinterested look but then Andrew walked towards his bedroom with the shirt in his hands.

It was still a fifty-fifty chance that he was either going to burn it or wear it.

After a few minutes, Andrew returned, wearing the black shirt Neil bought him, with the words ‘you inspire my inner serial killer’ written on the front.

It took Nicky approximately two seconds to notice. He read the text, then burst out laughing.

‘What the hell?’ he giggled, and his laughter drew Aaron and Kevin close as well.

To Neil’s utter surprise, Aaron snorted. ‘Funny.’

‘Do you think this is a good idea?’ Kevin asked. ‘We don’t want the press to think Andrew is really-’

‘It’s fucking Halloween, Kevin,’ Andrew said. ‘If the press took people seriously during Halloween, the prisons would be too full anyway.’
Kevin didn’t look entirely convinced.

‘Don’t worry,’ Neil said. ‘You’ll get the joke after a few drinks.’

Nicky started giggling again. ‘Oh man. Neil, next year, I want a shirt too.’

Next year.
Yeah.

Neil would like that.

Movie nights with Matt, joking and laughing with Nicky, hanging with the others…
Neil decided he would like to stay for them too.
For them and himself and this life he was currently living.

Living meant letting loose a little, Neil thought, as he confidently took the beer from Andrew’s tray of drinks.
One beer couldn’t hurt.

But he’d barely taken one sip before Andrew took the bottle out of his hands.

Neil frowned.
‘I was drinking that.’

Holding his gaze, Andrew brought the bottle to his lips and took a swig.

It was hard not to watch Andrew’s lips.
But when Andrew licked them, it was impossible.

Neil wondered if he would get drunk if he kissed Andrew many times.

Or maybe he’d just get drunk by proxy, watching Kevin down shots like water.

That wasn’t healthy.

Neil wondered if he should talk about it with Kevin sometime.

The club was packed.

Someone beside Neil tried to pull off an unfortunate dance move and ended up bumping into Neil, conveniently pushing him against Andrew’s back.

Andrew turned around.
When he saw it was Neil, the dangerous edge left his eyes, making room for a heavy, loaded gaze that pinned Neil to the spot.

All of a sudden they were too close and not close enough, and Neil cursed their location.

Maybe he could convince the others to call it an early night.

Would it be too weird to want to sleep so badly?

Probably.

‘I like your shirt,’ Neil said.

‘I didn’t buy it,’ Andrew replied.

‘That’s okay.’ Neil pointed at his fitted black and white shirt. ‘I didn’t buy this either.’

But then Andrew’s gaze travelled slowly over Neil’s chest, and Neil decided he would take his chances being too weird.

If Nicky could just hurry the fuck up, Neil thought, shifting his weight from his left to his right leg, feeling like it took Nicky even longer this time to do something as simple as unlocking a door.

Neil didn’t dare look at Andrew.

Which is why Neil didn’t see Andrew move, and startled when Andrew’s hand was suddenly in his, the touch shooting sparks through his arm.

Andrew pressed something into his hand, and from the feel of cold metal and jagged edges, Neil deduced he was holding a key.

Neil looked at it in wonder.

‘What’s this?’ he whispered.

‘A key.’

Sometimes.

‘I know that. What’s it for?’

‘The house.’

Looking at it more closely, Neil could see the stamp on the key, and-

‘You can keep it,’ Andrew said off-handedly.

Impossible.
Neil looked up in surprise, only to find Andrew looking bored at the door, where Nicky was still fighting a drunken battle.

But.
But had he deserved this?

‘This is the key to your home,’ Neil said quietly, and silently asking.

Whatever Andrew was about to say was cut off by Nicky’s
‘A-ha! Get rekt door. You’ve just been unlocked.’

Immediately, Nicky, Aaron and Kevin stumbled inside, Andrew close behind them.

Before following, Neil watched the casually given key again.

A key
and maybe eventually
a place to call home.

He closed his fist around it,
determined to never let go.

As soon as Neil fell asleep, he found himself in Andrew’s dreams.

Standing in the bright orange room,
Andrew in front of him for once,
Neil was the focus of Andrew’s heavy gaze.

‘I’ve never liked this colour,’ Neil said.

There was no response.
Instead, Andrew closed the distance between their bodies until Neil was afraid he’d touch Andrew by merely breathing.

‘Andrew?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it a yes-’

‘Yes,’ Andrew replied immediately, just barely letting Neil finish his sentence.

Neil was unsure of where to begin, but starting with
‘I want to kiss you.’
seemed like a good idea.

Andrew’s warm breath tickled Neil’s mouth as he replied in a low voice,
‘I want to blow you.’

Neil’s thoughts ground to a halt.
‘Um,’ Neil said, but Andrew had had enough of waiting.

‘Shut up,’ he growled, and pulled Neil forward by his shirt, smashing their lips together with an impatience that made Neil’s heart beat louder.

Shutting up now, Neil thought belatedly.

His hands flailed at his sides while Andrew effectively made every bone in his body unable to hold him upright.

‘Where can I touch you?’ Neil gasped between kisses.

In response Andrew took hold of his wrists and placed the left in his hair and the right on his shoulder.

‘Arms are okay too,’ Andrew added.

Neil nodded, revelling in the feeling of touching Andrew’s soft hair.

He tugged on it lightly.

Andrew’s breath stuttered.

‘Good?’ Neil murmured.

Instead of replying, Andrew sought out Neil’s lips again, this time deepening their kiss immediately, his tongue brushing lightly against Neil’s.

It felt fantastic.

Andrew’s hands slid down over Neil’s neck, stomach, hips and the erection straining in his jeans, and Neil groaned, shifting his hips towards Andrew’s hand.

Andrew moved his head down, leaving hot, openmouthed kisses on Neil’s neck while palming him through his jeans.

Neil’s grip in Andrew’s hair tightened, but Andrew didn’t seem to mind, busy opening the buttons on Neil’s jeans and Neil was so ready for this. He helped Andrew push his jeans and boxers down, and then Andrew’s hand was touching him, gripping him firmly.

A shudder wrecked Neil’s frame as he tried not to moan.

And failed.

‘Andrew.’

It was as if he’d flipped a switch. Andrew suddenly lurched back.
Neil’s eyes flew open in surprise to find Andrew watching him with dark eyes.

‘What?’ Neil asked a little breathlessly, afraid he’d messed up.

‘You-’
Andrew paused and shook his head.
‘I want to wake up.’

Neil’s heart fell.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Um. Yeah sure. No problem.’

Pulling his pants up to cover himself, Neil tried to think of the best way to make them wake up, and decided it would probably be falling.

‘Neil,’ Andrew said.

‘Working on it.’

‘Neil,’ Andrew repeated, his hand suddenly under Neil’s chin, forcing him to look up, to look at Andrew.

‘I don’t want to do this here,’ Andrew said.

His eyes were burning into Neil’s, and Neil heard the unspoken message.

Swallowing against the sudden lump in his throat, Neil nodded.

‘I’ll make us fall, okay?’

Andrew’s eyes didn’t leave his as he replied, ‘It’s a little late for that.’

Neil woke up to knocking on his door, but before he could get out of bed, still slow from having just woken up, Andrew had already opened the door.

And immediately closed it behind him.

Leaning against it, Andrew’s eyes seemed to burn even in the darkness of the room.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ Neil asked, voice raspy, as he pushed himself up on his elbows.

‘Neil,’ Andrew said, voice low. ‘Now’s the time to proof that dreams can be reality.’

Throat suddenly dry, Neil nodded. He threw off his blanket, then pulled down his sweatpants and kicked them off.
The way Andrew’s gaze lowered and lingered made Neil’s erection throb almost painfully, and there was no shyness or shame anymore, only want, as Neil decided to quickly lose his boxers too.

‘Before you ask, it’s a yes tonight,’ Neil said.

‘Until it’s not,’ Andrew replied.

True but,
‘Aren’t you going to make the dream a reality?’

‘Yes.’

And then Neil was no longer alone
in bed
as Andrew crawled on top of him, pinning him to the bed with his body and hands.

Though his gaze would’ve been enough too.

Without wasting another minute, they were kissing and,
Andrew’s hand wrapped around Neil’s cock again, or maybe for the first time,
stroking him until Neil thought it was impossible to be this aroused, but Andrew proved him wrong by kissing his way down Neil’s body.

With every kiss on his skin, Neil felt himself get more lost and more grounded at the same time. It was exactly like standing on the ledge of a hundredth story building, heart racing, everything feeling both unreal and terrifyingly real.

The first touch of Andrew’s tongue against his sensitive erection made Neil groan, his hips shifting up of their own accord.

But Andrew held him down with a strong arm, then continued to tear Neil’s coherence apart with long flat strokes along the side of his cock.

‘Fuck,’ Neil moaned, hand shooting down and gripping Andrew’s hair.

‘Ready?’ Andrew asked, voice low and rough and, in Neil’s totally unbiased opinion, fucking sexy.

‘For what?’ Neil asked breathlessly.

In response Andrew swallowed him whole.

And it felt so good, fuck, that was impossible-
Neil moaned loudly as
Andrew’s mouth slid up and down his erection.

His legs were shaking beneath Andrew’s strong grip, his breath coming in short gasps as Andrew lazily swirled his tongue around the head, taking his time.

But then Andrew took him in his mouth once more and-
‘Fuck,’ Neil swore, head falling back and mouth falling open.

Andrew set a slick and steady pace 
that had Neil’s hands tighten in Andrew’s hair.

It made Andrew groan quietly,
and the confirmation that Andrew was enjoying this just as much
had Neil’s stomach clenching and his breath stuttering as he came with a groan.

Trying to catch his breath, Neil opened his eyes hazily, and watched the ceiling for a few seconds, 
wondering about the absence of clouds before the truth settled on him like a warm blanket.

Real.

Neil propped himself on his elbows and looked down at Andrew, who was lying on his stomach,
already watching him quietly.

Seeing the faint redness on Andrew cheeks and the mussed state of his hair made Neil’s stomach
swirl pleasantly.

‘What about you?’

‘There’s nothing.’

Neil sat up more, reaching out to lightly touch Andrew’s cheek. 
‘The cause of this,’ he said.

But Andrew moved away from his hand and rolled onto his back. 
‘It’s not your concern.’

‘I want it to be my concern.’

‘You know how I feel about wanting.’

Not particularly caring about clothes right now, Neil moved closer to Andrew. He didn’t touch him, 
only wanting to see Andrew’s face better.

‘I remember you telling me what you wanted, just now,’ Neil grinned.

Andrew had no response to that, so he simply closed his eyes, 
shutting Neil out.
Little did Andrew know that Neil had no intention of being shut out.

Andrew wasn’t running away. 
That meant something.

‘Can I kiss you?’ Neil asked.

‘Yes.’

Leaning over, Neil’s lips touched Andrew’s softly. 
The upside-down aspect of the kiss made it feel a little funny, a little new and different, but still
exciting.
Still the same.

Andrew’s hand reached up, grabbing the back of Neil’s neck and pulling him closer.

It was kind of thrilling when Neil slid his tongue softly against Andrew’s and tasted himself. Not that he liked the taste, but it was proof.

Real.

‘Tell me what you want,’ Neil said against Andrew’s lips.

Expecting nothing Neil was surprised to hear Andrew say, ‘I don’t want to say anything I’ll regret.’

It wasn’t exactly a wanting, but it was a sort of admission. A hesitant reluctance.

So Neil deepened their kiss, his heart leaping inside his chest as he was glad for the simple fact that he’d expected nothing and had gotten something.

Andrew’s fingers threaded through his hair, keeping him close as they kissed, arousal present in every slide of their tongues against each other, in every press of lips.

So focused on their kissing, Neil hadn’t realized what Andrew was doing until Andrew groaned quietly.

Though he held Neil close with one hand, his other was somewhere else.

Andrew tugged harshly on his hair, and Neil noticed he’d been leaning back, opening his eyes to check if what he suspected was true.

Neil immediately leaned back into their kiss, his heart pounding in his chest as he heard the quiet slick sounds of Andrew getting off.

It was extremely arousing.

After a few wonderful minutes of getting to kiss Andrew, of hearing Andrew’s quiet moans, Andrew suddenly froze and the hand gripping Neil’s hair tightened.

Neil placed a soft, small kiss on Andrew’s lips and leaned back a little.

Andrew’s eyes were still closed and his hand was still gripping Neil.

If Neil could’ve stared at Andrew’s flushed and calm face forever, he would have.

But they were both a little gross, and Neil was unsure if Andrew still wanted him close or not, so
with a quick kiss to Andrew’s nose, he stood up, quickly pulling on his sweatpants, and then grabbed a few towels from the closet.

When he turned around, Andrew was watching him.

Neil threw the towel on the bed and hovered awkwardly by the door. Though Andrew didn’t look at him while he cleaned himself up and put on his sweatpants, it didn’t exactly feel like a dismissal yet.

Then Andrew walked towards the door, hands in his pockets, and Neil was sure he was going to get thrown out.

When he stood next to Neil, Andrew paused.

‘I sleep on the left side of the bed.’

Before those words could sink in, Andrew walked away, closing the door behind him.

Neil watched the bed.
Watched the space on the left,
and the space on the right.

Tears burned behind his eyes.

He had a key to a home,
and a place in a bed.

☁

Chapter End Notes

next time; 'So Nicky's mother called,' Neil started bluntly.

AAh you thought shit was going down
well it was
just different...
shit.
Hahahah anyways.

Let me know what you thought of this chapter, though I can understand that you're maybe a bit hesitant now that you've read my horrible attempt at sexy smut ;u;

Thank you SO much for reading <3
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people!

I was originally splitting this chapter up in two but then figured, nah, it'll be more fun to read another chapter over 3000 words right?

Enjoy!

(or 'enjoy')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil’s dream was his own.
And when he woke up the next morning, Andrew was sleeping beside him, one arm curled underneath Neil’s pillow.

It terrified Neil
this feeling of being hap-

Someone pounded on the bedroom door.

‘Andrew!’ Nicky shouted. ‘Neil’s gone!’

Andrew’s eyes flew open, shock evident on his face, until he locked eyes with Neil lying next to him.

Slowly, Andrew’s eyebrows lowered, and he calmed down again.

Nicky’s knocking turned frantic.
‘Andrew!’

Then Nicky actually did the unthinkable of opening Andrew’s bedroom door and barging in.

He halted as soon as his eyes landed on the bed.

Nicky’s eyes turned comically wide for a few seconds.
Then he grinned.
‘Oooh, so sorry guys. Didn’t want to be a cockblock.’

Andrew shot Nicky a murderous look.
‘Leave,’ he said.

‘Is he like this in bed too?’ Nicky asked Neil, then laughed again. ‘Oh wait, he’s already in bed.’

Neil felt Andrew tense beside him, and in one smooth movement, Andrew was out of bed and walking threateningly towards Nicky,
who held up his hands and started walking backwards immediately.

‘Leave,’ Andrew repeated. ‘Be back in the afternoon.’

‘Um, yes, wonderful idea Andrew,’ Nicky smiled nervously. ‘I’ll take the rest out for breakfast.’

And then he was out the door.

‘Sure you shouldn’t go looking for this Neil person?’ Neil asked, smiling a little.

Andrew gave him a bored look, and went to lie down again.

The strange, warm feeling inside Neil’s chest returned when Andrew’s breathing slowed within a few minutes. Neil lied down too, listening to the sounds of the others walking around the house and eventually the sound of the front door closing.

Being really careful not to wake Andrew up, Neil tiptoed out the bedroom and went downstairs to make some breakfast.

There wasn’t a lot in the house.

He’d just flipped the eggs and put the bread in the toaster when Andrew walked into the living room.

‘There wasn’t a lot in the fridge,’ Neil explained, even though Andrew hadn’t asked. ‘Unless you want to eat pasta for breakfast.’

Andrew sat down at the breakfast table, staring at the little pill lying in front of him.

‘I don’t think you would’ve managed that.’

‘Hey I can cook pasta,’ Neil protested. ‘I’ll make it some time.’

‘The eggs are burning.’

Neil turned around in shock to find the eggs sizzling frantically, little wisps of smoking coming off the edges. Grabbing two plates in a hurry, Neil nearly threw the eggs onto them, then picked up the toast that literally burned his fingers, throwing that onto the plates as well.

Fingers burning, Neil put breakfast on the table.

Meanwhile Andrew was still staring at the pill.

‘Do you want some water?’ Neil asked carefully, sitting down.

Andrew shook his head.

‘Is it going to be bad when you don’t take it?’

Andrew took a bite of his toast.
'Yes.'

Neil didn’t know what to say to that, so he didn’t say anything.

For a while, they both ate their breakfast in silence.

Eventually, Andrew stood up to fill a glass with water.

‘I can’t believe this,’ Neil said.

‘Shut up,’ Andrew said. ‘See it as your education. You’ll no longer be ignorant.’

Sighing, Neil sat back on the couch, and was surprised when Andrew immediately took advantage of the situation to whack a pillow on Neil’s lap and lie down on it.

‘But you haven’t seen it either,’ Neil argued.

‘Ssh,’ Andrew said. ‘The movie’s starting.’

Neil shut up, absent-mindedly threading his fingers through Andrew’s hair when he realized what he was doing.

Neil froze.

‘It’s okay,’ Andrew said.

Oh.

Neil smiled and continued the simple touches, while they watched Sleeping Beauty together.

‘It’s still unrealistic,’ Neil said.

‘That’s a little hypocritical, don’t you think?’

No, Neil didn’t think so.

But he didn’t want to argue about this.

He had a promise to fulfill.

He had to ask, before Nicky and the others returned.

‘So Nicky’s mother called,’ he started bluntly. ‘She would like him to visit for Thanksgiving.’

‘Great,’ Andrew said sarcastically.

Neil took a sip of his coffee.

‘The deal was that you and Aaron join.’

‘No.’
Neil winced internally, knowing this would happen.

‘Why won’t you go?’

‘Why would I? I’m not friends with them.’

‘And you visit all your other friends on thanksgiving?’ Neil asked skeptically. ‘If you can put up with the foxes on a daily basis, why can’t you tolerate Nicky’s parents? I mean, his father got you out of juvie.’

Andrew smiled.

‘Well, you haven’t got the full story, do you, Neil? No. My dreams revealed a lot. A lot, but not everything.’

‘Will you tell me?’

Andrew stood up suddenly, walking towards the window.

‘No. No, I don’t think so.’

‘Will you show me?’

‘I can’t always choose what to dream about. You know.’

‘No,’ Neil said. ‘I meant, show me why they’re horrible. Take me with you.’

‘Oh? What?’ Andrew turned around in surprise. ‘Neil, you wouldn’t know what to do with a god-fearing minister. You can barely stand to be around Renee. There’s no way you could last a sit-down with Luther. He’d end up exorcising you when you snapped.’

Neil shrugged.

‘Well, at least it’ll be interesting.’

‘Could be,’ Andrew agreed.

‘We could all go,’ Neil said. ‘Hell, we’ll even take Kevin. It’s been too long since he had to use his fake smile.’

‘You’re right,’ Andrew said, a painful smile stretching across his face. ‘Let’s have two fake smiles. No, there’ll probably be more. But is it worth it? Probably not.’

‘You thought the same thing about me.’

Andrew hummed.

‘I still do.’

‘I know you can’t understand this because you’ve never had a real family, but Nicky has to give his parents another try. If you’re lucky this dinner will be the breaking point. Nicky’s got his hopes up thinking his mother’s come around. If she lets him down again he might be ready to walk away for good.’

Andrew watched Neil.

‘And you have?’

A family?
'Not really,' Neil said, and added, ‘I don’t understand Nicky either.’

‘So unfeeling,’ Andrew laughed. ‘Okay. Change the date. I’m going to give Nicky one more chance.’

‘Okay,’ Neil said, but he didn’t feel relieved at all.

Nicky’s disbelief was an interesting thing to observe, Neil thought, as he observed it.

‘No way,’ Nicky said for the third time. ‘How did you manage to convince Andrew?’

Neil shrugged.

‘I asked.’

Nicky turned towards Matt.

‘He asked,’ he repeated, perplexed.

Sitting at his desk, bent over his school books, Matt also shrugged.

‘Would you be able to say no to Neil?’

Nicky looked like that sentence made sense to him.

‘Valid point.’

He turned towards Neil again.

‘Seriously, thank you so much, Neil. You have no idea how happy this makes me.’

Nicky’s blinding smile made Neil feel uncomfortable, so he looked away.

‘Don’t thank me yet. Let’s wait to see how it goes.’

Without warning, Nicky leaned forward and wrapped Neil in a tight hug.

Neil froze in surprise, but luckily, he was quickly released again.

‘It will be fine,’ Nicky said. ‘At least now I’ve got a chance. Of course it’s going to be a little awkward, but what’s the worst that could happen, right?’

Murder, Neil thought.

The child’s bedroom walls were bright orange, and when Neil looked out of the usually dark windows, he saw the airport with its unmoving airplanes instead.

This was new.

As was Andrew, who wasn’t folded in on himself, but standing rigidly with his back against the wall, facing the door.

Neil then noticed how some of the furniture in the bedroom seemed to be coming from the house in
Columbia and the apartment in the Tower.

Weird.
This mismatched mix of objects and dreams was very unusual.
For Andrew’s dreams at least.

‘Everything okay?’ he asked carefully.

From the way Andrew clenched his fists, Neil could tell he had to force himself to turn his head and look at Neil.

‘I need one truth,’ Andrew said.

Unsure what he meant, Neil asked, ‘What kind of truth?’

‘The true one,’ Andrew replied, sounding irritated.
No, Neil thought.
He sounded on edge.

‘I know what truth means,’ Neil said.

‘Do you? Then why haven’t you told it?’

Neil looked away.

‘I’m going to show you why I don’t trust Luther,’ Andrew said. ‘What have you got to show me?’

It was fair, Neil knew that.
Still, it was hard to choose between all those horrible truths.

‘When I visit someone’s dreams,’ Neil started, ‘I can get hurt in real life. But that’s not all. Because dreamwalking creates a bond between the dreamer and the dreamwalker, the dreamer can get hurt too.’

Andrew’s eyes narrowed.
‘Did I ask for a text book recital?’

‘What? You want a fucking demonstration?’ Neil snapped, feeling prickly and uncomfortable talking about what made him different.

‘No,’ Andrew said. ‘I want a truth.’

‘That’s the truth,’ Neil said. ‘I visited people’s dreams to hurt them. To torture them. For information, for money, you name it.’

Andrew tilted his head to the side.
‘When?’

‘Since I could dream walk.’

Neil didn’t want to relive those early memories, when it’d been unclear to him what exactly his father wanted from him.
Didn’t want to remember picking up those knives, because he had to if he wanted to wake up again.

‘I was six,’ Neil said eventually.

There was a silence in the room, and Neil was glad Andrew didn’t immediately ask anything else. He needed time to push those memories out again.

Andrew crossed his arms.

‘Who?’

‘My father.’

Andrew hummed.

‘How fitting.’

‘They should give a warning,’ Neil said, watching the airport outside, with its airplanes that had been destined to go places but were now standing still.

‘Family ruins lives.’

‘Only the ones you’re forced into,’ Andrew said. ‘Not the ones you choose.’

It was weirdly optimistic for the setting, for Andrew, and Neil looked at him in surprise.

Andrew was watching the door again, tensely.

Neil noticed a few spots on the walls had started to darken, the orange changing into the ‘normal’ wallpaper again.

‘Shall I change the dream?’ Neil asked.

‘No Exy,’ Andrew requested.

Neil woke up early, which wasn’t new to him.

It was new to find Andrew already awake and waiting for him, leaning against the wall opposite Neil’s apartment.

‘Hey,’ Neil said, noticing how Andrew was fidgeting with his hands.

‘Let’s go outside,’ Andrew replied, but he didn’t wait for Neil to follow, already walking towards the staircase.

‘No elevator?’ Neil asked.

‘See it as a morning exercise.’

‘Are you finally taking Exy seriously?’ Neil asked hopefully, jogging down the stairs with Andrew.
still in front of him.

Andrew laughed.
‘Do you want me to answer that?’

As per usual, his laugh sounded all wrong.

‘I can’t wait for you to get off your medicine,’ Neil muttered.

Andrew stopped in the middle of the staircase.
He spun around, surprise clearly written on his face.

‘What?’

Neil stopped walking too.
‘I can’t wait for you to get off your medicine,’ he repeated.

Andrew watched him for a few seconds.

‘Why?’

Neil had to suppress his surprise.
It seemed pretty obvious to him.

‘Because this is not the real you.’

‘What do you know about being real?’ Andrew smiled. ‘Everyone likes this version better.’

Neil doubted it.
‘I don’t think they do. I know I don’t.’

Andrew’s smile twitched.
He turned around again.

‘Come on. Let’s have a peaceful family gathering.’

☁

It wasn’t far to Nicky’s old house.
The Hemmicks lived in a two-storey home in the suburbs of southern Columbia. Neil peered past
Andrew out the window as Nicky parked at the curb.

From the outside, the house looked perfect.

Which meant it probably wasn’t.

☁

There wasn’t anything that could’ve warned Neil for what happened.

Or maybe there was.
Maybe he could’ve recognized the signs Andrew had given him, as clear as he could.
As it was, they were all sitting together at the table outside, eating a nice piece of pie while Nicky’s mother asked, ‘Have you thought about what you want to do after you’ve graduated?’

While Nicky answered, Neil shifted nervously in his seat.

Luther and Andrew were still inside, still talking about something.

Neil was afraid that Andrew’s version of talking would involve knives.

‘I’ll clean up,’ Neil volunteered as soon as Nicky’s mother ate the last piece of pie on her plate. Neil stood up and hastily gathered all the empty plates.

Inside, he strained to hear voices, or just any sign that the conversation wasn’t going well, but then almost bumped into Luther.

‘Oh,’ Neil said in surprise. ‘I was just bringing these dishes inside.’

‘That’s nice,’ Luther smiled.

‘Where’s Andrew?’

‘Upstairs,’ Luther said. ‘He’s talking to an old friend.’

Bullshit.
Neil’s heart immediately leapt inside his throat.
There were no old friends.

Aaron and Kevin were now inside too, carrying a few plates as well. They stopped behind Neil, who was blocking their path.

‘What’s wrong?’ Aaron asked.

There was no time to explain. Neil spun around and dumped his plates on the stack Kevin was already carrying, and sprinted towards the hallway.

‘Hey!’ Aaron called out from behind him.

From the corner of his eye, Neil saw Aaron following him, so Neil grabbed his newly purchased racquet lying in the hallway and pushed it into Aaron’s hands, who had to drop the plates he was still holding.

They smashed into pieces on the ground but Neil was already sprinting up the stairs opening the bedroom door and seeing-

It was like the child’s bedroom but real.

Neil wished with all his might that he could change this scene.
Aaron however, already did it for him.

Nobody moved.
Least of all Drake, his body dead and bleeding on the floor.

Neil sat down on the bed.
‘Andrew,’ he choked.
‘Oh, Neil,’ Andrew said, and he slowly started peeling his hands loose from the headboard. ‘I must be dreaming then.’

When Andrew tried to sit up, he winced and had to try once more.
‘This hurts more than my usual nightmares,’ Andrew giggled.

Neil hated the laughter and
Neil hated the words as he said,
‘It’s not a dream.’

‘I know,’ Andrew replied, his eyes staring unfocused at the bed. ‘I said it was a nightmare, didn’t I?’

Everything passed by both too quickly and too slow.
Neil couldn’t-
couldn’t make it stop.

He was in the hospital,
his nerves on high alert, wondering when they would start bringing the needles to him.

He was standing up quickly, Andrew walking past him,
the familiar and surreal smile etched into Andrew’s face.

‘Andrew!’ Neil said, going after him.
‘Neil,’ Andrew replied, not looking his way, instead walking straight to Wymack.

He was in the car, watching Andrew flinch with every speed bump,
his hands balling into fists as rage burned through him and he wished he could murder Drake all over again.

He was standing in front of Andrew’s closed and locked bedroom door, head resting against the wood,
the words not coming, and doubting they would be enough anyway.

He was knocking on the door to the living room, not giving a fuck if he woke the others up,
telling Wymack that Andrew needed to come off his medication.

Wymack opened the door a little further, and Neil saw Abby and Betsy sitting at the kitchen table behind him.
‘That’s what we were just discussing,’ Wymack told him.

Neil nodded.
‘Good.’

He was dragging himself outside, finally allowing himself to sit down
on the front steps
leaning his head in his hands as he sighed, his breath swirling in front of him like smoke.

And.
He was seen,
as Andrew sat down beside him.

‘Stealing my smoking spot?’ Andrew said, lighting a cigarette between his lips.

Neil didn’t know what to say.

‘Hey now,’ Andrew called out, blowing the smoke against Neil’s face. ‘Don’t steal my silence too.’

Neil dragged his eyes over to Andrew, who looked at him cheerily.
Neil hated that look.
As if what had happened hadn’t affected Andrew at all.

‘I don’t know what you want to hear,’ he replied.

‘I want nothing.’

Andrew took a drag of his cigarette,
watching the end burn.

Neil saw it too.

‘Why aren’t you screaming?’ he asked quietly.

Andrew raised his eyebrows.
‘Screaming? Oh, Neil.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m saving myself all the trouble by not giving a fuck.’

Not wanting to give into his anger, Neil reached out and stole Andrew’s cigarette.
It gave him a small thrill when Andrew didn’t stop him, so Neil took a deep drag, the smoke filling
his lungs momentarily before he released it again.

‘I wish I could change the scenery.’

‘You can,’ Andrew replied. ‘It’s called walking. Travelling.’

Neil looked at him in surprise,
because that wasn’t what he’d meant at all.

Andrew smiled mockingly at him.
‘Yeah. You see, Neil. It’s time to stop living in dreams. Do yourself a favour. Live in the real world.’

Like a slap.
Across the face.
'You should do the same,' Neil replied. ‘And get off your medication.’

Instead of replying, Andrew stole back the cigarette, and threw it on the ground, crushing it beneath his shoe as he stood up and walked back inside.

‘We’ve all agreed,’ Betsy told Neil when he went back inside the house, ‘Andrew will go off his medication.’

It felt like all the tension in Neil’s body left him.

‘When?’

‘Well,’ Betsy paused, looking at Wymack and Abby for a brief second. ‘Tonight.’

‘Do it,’ Neil said.

Andrew and Betsy came downstairs together.

‘Oh hello,’ Andrew waved to everyone in the living room. ‘How nice of you to see me off.’

Nobody replied.

Before Neil could take a step towards Andrew, Andrew was already walking towards him until he stood close enough for Neil to hear his quiet words.

‘You’re not going to run.’

Neil shook his head. ‘No,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll stay here. I’ll protect Kevin.’

Andrew nodded calmly, but Neil saw his hands twitching.

‘I don’t fully trust you,’ Andrew said. ‘But so far you’ve kept your promise.’

Neil nodded, keeping his eyes trained on Andrew, searching for any darkness in those brown eyes.

He found nothing, of course.

The drugs were doing their job.

The realization that Andrew would be leaving was scary.

And Neil was afraid.

Not afraid of protecting Kevin from Riko.

Afraid of losing the memory of Andrew being real.

‘Promise me one more thing,’ Andrew suddenly said, hand shooting out and grabbing Neil’s wrist tightly.
Anything, Neil thought.

Andrew must’ve seen the answer in his eyes, because anger flared behind his, and he tugged harshly on Neil’s arm.

‘Keep it.’

But that was obvious?
Neil wouldn’t break his promise.

With that, Andrew turned around.
‘Ready, Bee?’

‘Whenever you are,’ Betsy smiled.

It wouldn’t be so bad.
It wouldn’t be so bad, Neil thought, as he watched them walk through the door.

They would still have their dreams.

right?

Chapter End Notes

next time; ‘Don’t talk,’ Kevin whispered. ’He'll hear you.’

I'm sorry for the hurt.

If you want, leave me a lil' comment and talk to me about this chapter or the story! <3
But please don't feel obliged to do so. Thanks for reading again!
Hello lovely people!

Are you all watching the new Stranger Things season? I've just watched the first episode and oh boy. I'm so scared for these precious boys.

Talking about being scared for precious boys...

Enjoy!

When Neil opened his eyes, he felt like he was being watched by the whole world, like he was being judged, looked at, scrutinized, observed.

With a shock, he found himself standing in the middle of the claustrophobic cage that was Kevin’s dream Exy court.

‘Kevin?’ he called out, seeing no point in pretending he was anything other than dreamwalking.

‘Neil?’

Kevin’s voice sounded shrill, shaking and definitely close to a full-blown panic attack.

Neil tried to look for him, but it was exceptionally dark.

‘Kevin, where are you?’ he asked.

A choked off sound came from the left corner of the court and Neil ran towards it. He found Kevin sitting on the ground, arms wrapped around himself.

‘Don’t talk,’ Kevin whispered.

‘Why not?’ Neil asked, crouching down so he would be eye-level with Kevin. So he could maybe calm him down.

After Andrew’s dreams, Neil now somewhat knew how to deal with these situations.

Kevin’s eyes darted frantically across the court before staring wide-eyed at Neil.

‘He’ll hear you.’
‘Who?’ Neil asked, at the same time that all the stadium lights came on, blinding them both momentarily.

Neil still had the foresight to turn around, trying to shield Kevin from whatever was going to haunt his dream.

When the spots dancing before his eyes disappeared, Neil saw.

Though all the lights were on, shadows seemed to trickle down from Riko’s pitch black suit, and darkness pooled beneath his feet.

All the blood left Neil’s face as he stared at Riko.

But he had no time—no time for this, no time to start panicking, to freeze up. He had to protect Kevin, like he promised.

Neil blinked, forcing away his fear.

‘Kevin,’ he hissed. ‘You need to wake up.’

‘H-how?’

Neil didn’t need to see Kevin to know that he was shaking.

‘Your heart rate needs to spike,’ Neil replied automatically, keeping his eyes on Riko who, so far, was only observing them with a smile on his face.

Until—Until a thought suddenly made Neil’s blood run cold.

‘Kevin,’ he asked slowly, quietly. ‘Did you drink anything before you went to bed. Anything that you left for a second?’

While Kevin was thinking, Riko took a slow step closer.

‘It’s impolite to whisper, Nathaniel,’ he said calmly, but somehow his voice carried over the entire court, echoing eerily. ‘You should really learn some manners.’

‘I did,’ Neil replied. ‘I learned to be patient with pathetic, second-rate nobodies.’

Within a blink, a blink where the world turned dark for a millisecond, Riko was in front of him.

Kevin’s time to think was up, but it didn’t matter not when Neil had expected Riko to reach for him but instead
Riko grabbed Kevin’s shirt, and pulled him away from Neil.

Kevin was looking at Neil with wide-eyes while Riko kept him in a near chokehold against his chest.

Fuck.

‘Riko,’ Neil said slowly. ‘I don’t think this is smart.’

‘You’re going to talk to me about being smart?’ Riko laughed. ‘Being smart would’ve been leaving when I gave you the chance.’

With his free hand, Riko grabbed Kevin’s left hand and held it up, studying it for a second.

Neil could see that Kevin’s hand was shaking.

‘Oh no,’ Riko said. ‘It’s all healed.’

His dark eyes slid to Neil as his grip tightened, uncomfortably by the look of pain on Kevin’s face.

‘Shall I fix that?’ Riko asked silkily.

Neil felt his legs tremble, 
the wounds running over his skin burning as if they were fresh.

‘No,’ Neil said, but it sounded weak.

‘Oh? What shall I do then?’

‘Leave.’

‘And you’re going to come with me?’ Riko asked.

No.
Everything inside Neil screamed

\[
\text{no} \\
\text{he’ll take me apart} \\
\text{cut by cut}
\]

‘Or shall I make another phone call?’ Riko asked casually, but a smile curved his lips upward slowly. Dangerously.

‘You may have killed one, but I know more people. And they can get everywhere. Even into closed facilities.’

To keep them safe, 
Neil would burn.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Neil said, 
 doing his best not to let his resolve break 
 like his promise.
Awake.

Kevin was at his side in under a minute.

‘It’s suicide,’ he said.

‘Maybe,’ Neil replied, staring at the ceiling.
No clouds.

Kevin shifted nervously on the spot.

‘Are you really going?’ he asked quietly.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I promised.’

‘That promise must be worth a hell of a lot,’ Kevin said. ‘Because you’re throwing away your future. You know that, right?’

Neil knew.
But if doing this meant he was giving Andrew one, a future, then it would be worth it.

There were three more days, and three more nights for Neil to pack his things into one bag before he would run away again.

He hoped he would see Andrew in his dreams.

He didn’t.

‘This is a bad choice,’ Kevin said.

Neil was a little sick of hearing it, even though Kevin was right. Maybe especially because Kevin was right.

‘Shut up,’ he said, and pointed at Kevin’s face. ‘Have you looked in the mirror recently? Not sleeping hasn’t done wonders for your face. And besides, it’s unhealthy to skip sl-’

Neil stopped himself and got on the plane.
For some reason, or maybe it was because he’d slept like shit the last three days, Neil fell asleep on the airplane.

It took everything he got, which wasn’t a lot anymore, to not fall to his knees as he saw the bright orange r-
Andrew.

‘Andrew,’ he breathed.

Andrew turned around, large dark circles under his dead and detached eyes.

Neil took a stumbling step forward, but before he could reach Andrew, he tripped over one of the floorboards sticking up.

It hurt to fall.

And Neil didn’t think he’d have the energy to pull himself together, because he was so scared so scared of facing Riko alone.

‘How’s everyone?’ Andrew asked, and he sounded a lot closer than he was before.

Neil looked up, and saw Andrew crouching down in front of him, holding out a hand.

‘Safe,’ Neil whispered, reaching out to grab Andrew’s ha-

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are now approaching our destination. Please make sure your seatbelt is-’

Neil woke up.

Everything was dark as he entered Castle Evermore.

‘Let me guess your favourite colour,’ Neil said, when Riko entered the equally dark and claustrophobic bedroom.

Instead of replying, Riko closed the door behind him.

When he turned towards Neil again, his smile made Neil freeze.

‘Black,’ Riko replied, waving his left hand around to indicate the walls, the floor and the sheets on the two beds in the room.

It was a magician’s trick. And Neil fell for it,
his eyes automatically following Riko’s left hand, unbeknownst to what Riko’s right hand revealed.

Riko was in front of him with two steps, grabbing the back of his neck and pulling his head back, pouring in pills from the bottle his right hand was holding.

Three, five, seven-

Neil nearly choked on the pills gliding down his throat.

With a jerk of his hand, deeming the amount of pills enough, or the bottle was simply empty, Riko threw Neil down on the floor.

‘You know what I love about the colour black?’ Riko asked, looking down at Neil, who tried to push himself up but-
His vision was blurring abnormally fast, and his limbs were slowing down, getting heavier with the second.

Neil tried to push himself up again.

It only resulted in falling down.

And nobody was here to pull him up.

‘Let’s pretend I give a shit,’ Neil slurred, fighting a losing battle against the drugs.

‘It’s the last colour you see when you close your eyes,’ Riko said.

losing.

Neil knew he was asleep.

Because there was always something wrong in the environment, something oddly shaped or oddly coloured or just plain odd.

Sometimes he tried to run from them.

His dreams.

He ran for hours on end, but his mind wasn’t creative enough to think of new locations, so he ended up in front of his father’s house time and again.

It was lonely in his dreams.
There were no people.

‘Isn’t this what you’re used to?’ Riko sneered, leaning against the car wreckage.

How did he know?
Neil glared at him and tried to run away again.
But.
‘It’s your dream, Neil.’
Riko was suddenly in front of him, his arms spread out as he continued.
‘The loneliness is dripping off the walls.’

‘There are no walls in my dreams,’ Neil said. ‘There never are.’

Riko looked around, probably finding the deserted midnight beach definitely lacking of any walls.

His gaze slid to Neil again, a sadistic smile spreading across his face.

‘Why didn’t you say so? You only needed to ask.’

And suddenly the beach seemed to drain away, as if it was being sucked into a void, and the sand beneath Neil’s feet was shifting.
Neil stumbled and nearly fell down, but he regained his balance just in time.
When he looked up, Riko was gone.

So was every colour.

He had always disliked Andrew’s bare bright orange room.
But it was better than this black, seamless room, from where there was no escape.

In a way
it was the perfect torture.

There were no knives.
There was no Riko.
There was nothing.
and
Neil was nothing.

Crouched down in front of him, Riko slowly slid a knife towards Neil.

Neil’s eyes flickered towards it briefly, before continuing to stare numbly at the ceiling.
No clouds.

‘I figured you might want some entertainment,’ Riko smiled.

It took a few tries for Neil’s voice to work again.
How nice of you to volunteer.’

Riko shrugged. ‘Don’t say I never gave you anything.’

Now that he was talking anyway, Neil had another question. ‘How long?’

Riko stood up, stretching his legs. ‘I have no idea what you’re asking.’

‘How long do I have to be here?’

‘Depends. If you prove your worth, I might allow you to join the Ravens. I’ll even let you wake up then.’

Neil’s response was immediate. ‘I’ll never join.’

While Riko looked at him, there was a sort of detachedness in his gaze. Like his mind was also busy thinking about the best way to hurt Neil.

‘Then sweet dreams,’ Riko replied, and left.

Time seemed to indeed be a construct.

Because Neil had lost all sense of when.

Something was different.

Neil noticed how the darkness seemed to shimmer, becoming translucent, and how it didn’t feel like solid stone against his back anymore.

Neil lightly pushed against it, and found that he could mold it.

Did this mean?

And then the room started to disappear altogether.

Neil opened his eyes, blinking against-light, something he hadn’t seen in so long. He tried to sit up but his muscles wouldn’t cooperate in the slightest, protesting against lying still for god knows how long.

A door closed.

Neil’s vision was blurry, but he could make out Riko hurrying towards him, a bottle of pills in his hand.
"N-n-"
Neil tried to protest but his voice was horribly unused.
And opening his mouth was the biggest mistake.

But again, something was different.

It might be because Riko wasn’t asleep yet, because Neil found himself on a wonky version of his childhood’s Exy court.
Wonky because there were four entrances to the court.
Wonky because there were three goals.
Wonky because there were two overlapping circles in the centre.
Wonky because there was one Andrew standing with his back to Neil.

Without wasting any time,
Neil ran towards Andrew,
hand stretched out to reach him just a second faster than his legs could run.

Andrew turned before Neil could touch him, but that was fine because Andrew didn’t cross his arms or turn back,
no, he stayed where he was, and Neil wanted to fall against him, wanted Andrew to hold him up.

Neil didn’t however.

‘Andrew,’ he croaked, looking at Andrew’s face, frantically trying to memorize it as best as he could before he disappeared again.

Because.

Because this Andrew was not real.

A sob escaped Neil,
the realization hurting,
and he fell to his knees,
dropping his gaze to the floor.

‘I want you to be real,’ Neil said quietly, his voice trembling as tears fell down his cheeks. ‘Please be real.’

Andrew didn’t say anything,
and Neil pressed his hands against his eyes to hold back the tears.
He couldn’t fall apart.
He couldn’t.

‘Please be real,’ he whispered.

‘Didn’t you know, Neil?’ Riko said. ‘Dreams aren’t real. And they’ll never be real.’

Neil knew.
Just like he knew that when he would look through his fingers, the Exy court would be gone.

And with it,
next time; ‘No. You’re not real. Stop pretending you are.’

aaah
we’re getting closer to the end wuh-oh

Let me know what you thought of this chapter! <3 And thank you so much for reading :D
Chapter 28

Hello lovely people!

Ohhhh it's nearing Halloween! Since I LOVE studio Laika movies, I'm planning to watch Paranorman. It's SUCH a hilarious and adorable and appropriately spooky movie. In my opinion at least. Totally unrelated of course, but oh well. Hope you all have had a lovely weekend <3

Enjoy this long ass chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

What Neil perhaps hated the most about the black room, was the fact that the smooth stone was shiny enough for him to see his own reflection.

To see his father looking back at him.

Eventually, even hate became too strong a word for whatever Neil did.

There was a door.

Neil blinked against the sudden disruption of the smooth black stone.

What had Riko thought of now?

Neil almost didn’t want to find out, content in simply being in this room, content in knowing that there was some purpose to him being here. He was keeping Andrew, Kevin, and everyone else, safe.

But. But there was still something inside Neil that was curious.

Especially because the appearance of the door wasn’t the most unusual thing. It was the fact that the door was bright orange.

With legs that were stiff, Neil pushed himself up and walked towards it, holding out a hand. Afraid he’d bump into a glass wall, or find something that would prevent him from ever reaching the door.

But his hand touched wood.
Neil slowly pushed the door open.

And walked into the bright orange room again, where Andrew was standing with his back to Neil.

Oh.

This wasn’t.
No.
No, Neil’d had enough of this.

This hurt the worst of all.

He laughed dryly.
Because he rarely ever spoke, it sounded terrible.
‘You really know how to make it hurt,’ he said to Riko, waiting for him to appear.

Instead, Andrew’s head whipped around and his eyes widened as he looked at Neil.

See?
Not real.
Andrew wouldn’t be surprised to see Neil.

With a few steps, Andrew stood in front of him.

It was torture to see Andrew up close, to finally be able to look into his brown eyes, brown eyes that looked at him too, brown eyes that saw him.

Neil’s bottom lip trembled. He swallowed away the pain.

Andrew reached out and tugged on a strand of Neil’s hair.

‘New colour,’ he said, while staring into Neil’s eyes. ‘And no contacts.’

What?
‘Don’t be surprised,’ Neil rasped. ‘You never believed I was real.’

Andrew’s eyes darkened.
‘What happened?’

The question sounded so much like the real Andrew that Neil’s heart ached inside his chest, and it felt like someone Riko maybe was squeezing his throat.

Neil looked away.
‘Nothing.’
But not looking at Andrew wasn’t enough. He had to get away.

So Neil took a step back. And another.

Andrew took one forward. And another.

Neil sighed. ‘You can stop now,’ he said to Riko, hoping he would show himself and Neil could focus on him instead of Andrew.

Andrew tilted his head to the side. ‘Neil. Look at me.’

Neil shook his head. ‘No. You’re not real. Stop pretending you are.’

Andrew’s voice lowered dangerously. ‘What?’

But Neil couldn’t do this any longer, the pain of seeing Andrew, and knowing it wasn’t Andrew was terrible.

‘I don’t-’ he choked out, but then Andrew was standing in front of him, grabbing Neil’s shirt with one hand and his chin with the other, forcing Neil to look at him.

‘Neil. What’s wrong?’

Tears burned behind Neil’s eyes as he whispered, ‘Everything.’

Andrew’s grip tightened, and something dark flickered behind his eyes.

‘Tell me.’

‘How?’ Neil asked incredulously. ‘How can you keep asking me to tell you, after everything you’ve seen? After everything you know?’

Neil shook his head frantically. ‘Nevermind. You’re not real. This is not real. None of this is real.’

From the corner of his eye, he saw the black door, leading back to the black room. His way out of this torture.

But Andrew’s grip on him was strong, holding him close.

‘Just leave,’ Neil pleaded. ‘I just need to stay gone. I need to stay asleep and everyone will be safe. That was the deal,’ he said to Riko.
'Deal? What deal?'
Andrew’s voice sounded urgent,
and not bored at all.
See?
Fake.

‘Let me go,’ Neil said, struggling against Andrew’s hands
who immediately let him go.

‘Neil.’

But Neil was already halfway to the door.

‘Neil,’ Andrew repeated,
and
hand already on the door, Neil hated himself for still looking over his shoulder at Andrew.

‘If this is not real,’ Andrew said. ‘Tell me something that is.’

‘I wanted to stay for you,’ Neil said quietly, and stepped back into the black room,
the door immediately slamming shut behind him.

☁

Riko was already waiting for him,
a frantic look on his face.
It was gone in an instant, but Neil still thought it was weird.

Then Riko was smiling again.
‘There you are again. I knew you would come back.’

Come back?

Back?

Neil’s eyes widened
as the realization froze his every limbs
and threatened to rip him apart from the sheer pain
and longing.

‘Wait- was- did I just dreamwalk?’

A sudden sharpness entered Riko’s eyes as he tried to maintain his carefree smile.
‘And yet you came back like the good dog you are.’

He had dreamwalked?
Andrew had been
real?

Though it shouldn’t,
it changed everything.
With a sudden determination, Neil ran towards the knife still lying on the floor of the black room and picked it up.

He turned around as quick as he could but Riko was already at his back, hand shooting out and grabbing Neil’s wrist tightly before he could, well, stab Riko.

Riko tutted.
‘Do you need another lesson, Nathaniel?’

Yes.
He’d dreamwalked into Andrew’s dreams.
how?

Riko slammed Neil’s hand against the solid wall beside them, the knife clattering on the ground as Neil had to release it.

Using his free hand, the hand not gripping Neil’s wrist, Riko punched Neil in the gut, causing him to double over.

‘Don’t go walking into other people’s dreams again, Neil,’ Riko said. ‘That’s just bad manners.’

But Riko’s words barely registered with Neil.
He’d dreamwalked once.
And if he’d done it once, he could do it again.

A door.

For some reason, Neil had created a door that had led to Andrew’s dream.

The tricky part would obviously be figuring out when he would be asleep.

Because Neil had no sense of time.

Nor did he really know how he was supposed to create a door into another dream.

But he was going to try.

The first few doors were way too small and, when Neil pried them open, led to nothing.

The next few tries featured enormous doors, without handles.

But light shone underneath the last one,
and so Neil did not give up.

The door was a little on the smaller side, but there was a handle, and shadows seemed to be moving from the other side.

Neil’s hand hovered above the handle, doubting.

But he knew what he had to do.

Opening the door, Neil crawled through the space into the closed off Exy court.

‘Neil?’
Kevin sounded surprised, but immediately ran towards him.

Neil breathed a sigh of relief.
It had worked.

‘Kevin,’ he said. ‘I don’t have a lot of time. Riko might come back. But I need to know how everyone is.’

‘I’m okay. Everyone’s okay.’

‘And Andrew?’

‘I don’t know,’ Kevin confessed. ‘He hasn’t tried to contact us. I’m not even sure he’s allowed to.’

Neil accepted that reluctantly.

‘But,’ Kevin began, then paused.

Neil lifted his eyebrow in question.

Kevin looked awkwardly to the ground.

‘How’s Evermore?’

‘Don’t exert yourself,’ Neil snorted, but still. Kevin’s concern was a little comforting.

‘I have no idea how Evermore is,’ Neil replied truthfully. ‘I’ve been asleep.’

Kevin looked at him in shock.

‘This whole time?’

‘I don’t know how long that is, but yes.’

‘Neil, that’s- It’s been four weeks already.’

Neil swallowed.

Only four weeks.
It had felt like months.
‘Okay,’ he replied.

‘You have to get away there somehow,’ Kevin said quietly. ‘Or at least figure out how to wake up.’

‘No,’ Neil said. ‘If I run away, Riko will hurt you.’

Kevin sighed.
‘I know.’

It sounded like a defeat.
It wasn’t yet.
Neil still had something he wanted to say.

‘Kevin, when Andrew gets back… Tell him-No, ask him something for me, will you?’

Kevin nodded.
‘I will.’

When Neil got back to the black room, Riko wasn’t there.

It was a relief.
He’d succeeded, and done what he’d wanted to do.

That had to be enough.

Neil had too much time to think.

He decided to take up poetry.

Black
the colour of the room.
Room
black in colour.
Colour
black.

It was the safer one.

Because his mind wanted to

Again, and again think about-
Not seeming to forget
Dark brown eyes seeing him like he was
Real and touching him with
Everything because for some reason Neil was
Worth the trouble.

Neil gave up on poetry.
‘Tell me something, Nathaniel,’ Riko said. ‘Was it a lie?’

‘You have to be more specific,’ Neil replied. ‘Everything about me is a lie.’

‘Your power,’ Riko said, sneering at the word power. ‘So far, you’ve done nothing impressive.’

‘I didn’t know you wanted a show.’

Riko laughed and spread his arms slowly.
‘If I wanted a show, I’d do this.’

Where first there had been nothing, 
now dozens of knives were hovering motionless in the air.

Neil didn’t react.

If anything, he thought, the pain would be a welcome change to the monotony of his every day-
his life.

‘Oh no.’ Riko narrowed his eyes. ‘Did I break my toy?’

Neil merely lifted his eyes to watch the ceiling, 
partly because he wanted to check, 
no clouds 
and partly because he knew it would look like he was rolling his eyes.

To his surprise, Riko didn’t hurl a knife at him.

He simply said in a calm voice, 
‘You should see the state of your body. It’s rotting away on the bed, very unsanitary. Luckily, it’s only a few more weeks until I don’t have to deal with it anymore.’

Neil’s blood ran cold. 
He knew what Riko meant.

His body wasn’t getting enough food, 
water, 
or movement that would cause his blood to flow.

In a few more weeks, 
he’d be dead.

In a way, it was a relief to know there was an end to all this. 
To know it wouldn’t be day after day in that horrible room.

But that was just 
one way of looking at it.

Neil sometimes pretended that a day had passed
and that the next day would be slightly more interesting.

Neil sometimes pretended that every passing day wasn’t a countdown and that the next day he would still be alive.

It was ironic in a way. Neil had always pretended, passing for someone else and someone else and someone else.

So it wasn’t that new, this pretending. Pretending that his life was more than what it currently was. Pretending that what he was doing right now could pass for living. Pretending that he didn’t want anything else.

But it had been new when their dreams started. And it was new now when his dreams stopped.

A large bang resounded through the black room. That was what Neil thought at first. But when he could hear the vague droning of voices talking, Neil knew it wasn’t in the room. It was in his head.

Something was happening.

Then the black room started to vibrate, and with a sudden poof a part of the wall opposite Neil dissolved in smoke.

Neil slowly stood up, while a part of the ceiling disappeared in equally wispy black smoke.

What was happening to Riko?

Neil reached out hesitantly, touching the wall, and found he could mold it. Just like before.

So he gave it a push, and it fell down easily, smoke flying up slowly and circling around him. As if it wanted to trap him again. But the smoke only stroked his skin lightly before dissolving into thin air. Into nothing.

There was a sudden fear,
a sudden thought that this was what the end looked like.
That Neil would find himself turning into smoke and drifting away.
Into nothing.

But then the room started to lighten, and it was as if someone pulled him forward.
Away from the room,
away from the dream.

☁️

When Neil opened his eyes, he had to blink a few times, because

Andrew
was standing above him,
leaning on the arm beside Neil’s head as if he had been bent over.

Andrew’s hair was falling forward a little,
and the blonde strands were the brightest colour Neil had ever seen.
But it was nothing in comparison to Andrew’s eyes, the warm brown colour reminding Neil of home.

The feeling that flooded his veins was painful in its intensity.

‘I know you,’ Neil croaked, and tried to clear his throat.
In vain.

Andrew leaned forward to hear him better.

‘I walked with you once upon a dream.’

Something flickered across Andrew’s face but it was gone in an instant,
and Andrew blinked in surprise.

Surprise?

Dread settled in Neil’s stomach as he wondered if-

‘Are- are you real?’ he asked, voice strangled.

The surprise on Andrew’s face was immediately replaced by a careful blankness.

‘Yes,’ Andrew replied.

Oh.
But.
Needing to see for himself, Neil tried to sit up and move his head, but his body was too stiff and uncooperative.

Neil grunted in frustration when he only managed to shift a little.
At least he could look around now.

The room looked like Andrew’s bedroom in Columbia, but that wasn’t what drew Neil’s attention.
It was the way the white walls around them seemed to darken, shimmering as if someone was flicking a lightswitch on and off.

‘Don’t move,’ Andrew said, and slid his arm underneath Neil’s upper body. ‘I’ll move you.’

But-
‘Andrew,’ Neil rasped. ‘The room.’

Andrew’s hands tightened their hold on his body.

‘I know.’

But if the room was changing, if the walls were turning black again.

‘You’re-’

Neil couldn’t believe it.

‘This is a dream,’ he stammered.

‘Such observation skills,’ Riko drawled. ‘You’d almost say you’re a dreamwalker, Nathaniel.’

The blankness on Andrew’s face didn’t quite hide his anger.

Jaw clenching, Andrew gently laid Neil back on the bed before turning around to face Riko, who was standing in front of the door. Their only exit.

‘Half-truth, Neil,’ Andrew said, his back to Neil. ‘It’s my dream.’

What?

‘Unfortunately,’ Riko admitted.

‘H-how?’ Neil asked.

Riko’s eyes flitted to him.
‘It’s really awkward talking to you while you’re lying there. I know you’re dying, Nathaniel, but could you at least try to find some strength?’

But it was true.
Neil was dying,
and moving his hand seemed to be getting harder and harder.

Strange.

No, Neil thought.
Not strange.
If he was indeed in Andrew’s dream, then his dream body would feel the same as his real body. Hence the weakness.
And.
And if it was Andrew’s dream.
Then Neil could force them to wake up.

‘Well,’ Riko continued, faking disappointment. ‘What did I expect?’

He turned his attention towards Andrew again.

‘Let’s start with you. You’re a nuisance.’

And he’d no sooner said the words than more shadows started slipping down the walls, creeping towards the bed and Andrew.

Again, a distraction from the knife that suddenly appeared in Riko’s hand, who immediately took a step forward and took a swing at Andrew’s stomach.

Andrew stepped aside in time, intending to grab Riko’s arm and jank him forward, but Riko quickly leaned out of Andrew’s space again.

‘Neil,’ Andrew said. ‘Give me a knife.’

Riko laughed, and changed the grip on his knife.

‘I don’t think Neil will manage that. Did you know he’s afraid of kni-’

But Andrew didn’t wait for Riko to finish his sentence, swinging his left fist at Riko’s head, who instinctively held up his right arm to block. Like Andrew had counted on. Because his right hand immediately shot out and gripped Riko’s wrist tightly. Tight enough to force Riko to drop the knife.

As it fell to the ground, Andrew used his foot to kick it behind him, out of their reach.

A mistake.

Because his balance was off slightly, just slightly, in the process and Riko used that small mistake to kick, hard, at Andrew’s leg.

It was a wonder that Andrew didn’t fall down, but his leg buckled and he fell to one knee.

His grip on Riko’s wrist was still strong however, and Neil hoped that the awkward position would force Riko to take a step back, but-

Another knife appeared in Riko’s left hand and Riko swung before Neil could shout, before Andrew could react, and Neil watched wide-eyed as, with a sickening ease, the knife embedded itself in Andrew’s shoulder.
It was lucky.

Because it wasn’t what Riko had been aiming at.

Andrew’s goal keeper reflexes had saved him from the knife sticking out of his throat instead.

Neil gasped, his entire body shaking from anger, from the fear of almost losing Andrew, of almost seeing Andrew die in front of him.

Because he was so focused on Riko and Andrew, Neil didn’t notice that Riko’s shadows had been slowly creeping up on him, until one of them started wrapping itself around his throat.

He tried to lift his arm to grab the smoke, which was futile in its own way, but his arm was protesting against the movement and it cost so much so much energy to even lift it into the air.

Before Neil’s eyes the dream was turning into a nightmare, the normally white walls of Andrew’s bedroom overrun by shadows, while Riko was still standing above Andrew, another knife materializing from the shadows into his waiting palm.

This was not going to happen, Neil thought, his hand twitching helplessly, his mind racing.

Neil knew that he needed to wake them up before the shadows around his throat finished what was happening in real life anyway before Riko could-

Neil didn’t allow himself to finish the thought, his heart pounding wildly in his chest.

He needed Andrew’s heart rate to spike.

Meanwhile Riko gripped the knife in his hand tightly, a smile creeping onto his face.

_Now._

Closing his eyes, Neil focused with all his might focused on what he _wanted_ and when he opened them again, couldn’t help the satisfied smile.

‘You’re right,’ Neil croaked, having already taken aim. ‘I don’t like knives.’

_bang_
Neil shot Riko.

Chapter End Notes

next time; "Neil felt his heart racing, sweat dripping down his temple as he forced himself to calm down and willed himself to move."

Well that chapter ended with a bang, right?? hiihihi
(I will let myself out yeah)

Thank you all SO much for reading <3
Hello lovely people!

I had one of those productive but uneventful days today and it's honestly, super relaxing. But now it's time for candles and hot chocolate/tea/coffee and some sweets and snuggling on the couch, watching a spoOoooOpy movie.

Enjoy your Halloween guys,
and the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil woke up with a gasp, breathing in air for what felt like the first time in months.

His hand shook, and it felt like he was still holding the gun.

He wasn’t.

Though his body was uncooperative, Neil forced himself to sit up.

Which fucking hurt.

Thank god that the light in the room was almost as dark as the black room, so Neil could see fairly quickly Riko lying on the bed opposite him, his breathing calm and quiet, a growing red spot on his shoulder.

Neil guessed he’d passed out from the shock.

The room was quiet.

Where was Andrew?

Neil knew he didn’t have enough time to look for him.
He needed to use this time to get away from Riko and away from Evermore.

Using his stiff arms, Neil pushed his equally stiff legs off the bed.

They hit the floor with a thump.

Neil felt his heart racing, sweat dripping down his temple as he forced himself to calm down and willed himself to move.

But it was taking too long.
Every step took minutes
or close to it anyway,
and the door didn’t feel any closer than when he’d been lying on the bed.

Meanwhile Riko’s steady breaths provided a nerve wracking background sound.

Neil gritted his teeth as he walked the slowest he’d ever walked.

Almost there.

Suddenly, there was a hitch in Riko’s breathing,
and Neil froze.

But Riko stayed unconscious.

It was probably caused by the wound or the pain or something like it.

Still Neil didn’t want to waste another second here,
and immediately forced his limbs to continue moving.

Stretching his arm way too slow for his liking,
Neil finally touched the door handle.

And decided to just throw his body against it,
not trusting the finer muscles in his hand.

For some reason, his fumbling worked and Neil took a few steps outside the room.

The corridor was just as dark as the room, but
hope
and mostly determination
made it seem a little lighter.

There was a ridiculously expensive looking car parked near the gates of Evermore, and Neil had never felt more relieved to see the thing.

Relief was dangerous however,
as it made his knees weak, and before Neil had reached the gate, his knees buckled and his legs gave out.

He hit the ground hard,
and dark spots danced in front of his eyes, covering parts of his vision,
but he could still hear the car door close, the sound of footsteps running towards the gate and then landing on the other side of it.

A hand on his shoulder,
then under his arm,
helping him stand.

Neil turned his head tiredly.
Andrew, up close.
Andrew, face blank as he was no longer on his medication.
Andrew,

‘Are you real?’ Neil asked quietly, his voice rough.

And even though they didn’t have the time to stop, because any second Riko could wake up,
Andrew stopped walking,
and turned his head to look at Neil.

A shiver ran down Neil’s body.
He was seen again.

Andrew didn’t even need to answer him anymore.

Neil knew.

‘Yes,’ Andrew said.

‘Yes?’ Neil asked again.

Andrew’s expression didn’t change
as he repeated
‘Yes.’

Luckily, Andrew spared him the struggle of moving by leaning in
and gently pressing his lips to Neil’s,
the touch so soft that it almost seemed like he was afraid to hurt him.

The kiss was short,
it needed to be,
but it confirmed exactly what Neil had wanted to know.

Andrew, real.

☁

‘What the fuck?’
Wymack.

Silence.
Andrew.

Someone talking from far away.
Abby’s voice through the telephone.

☁

‘I don’t want to sleep,’ Neil whispered in a strangled voice to Andrew as he was being lifted onto a stretcher.

Andrew’s eyes not leaving his as he said,
‘I’m not leaving.’

‘There isn’t any room—’

‘Then make room,’ Wymack argued.

‘But—’

‘Listen,’ Wymack’s voice lowered. ‘I’m doing my best to keep this kid out of any facilities, and I’m telling you, it’s in your best interest to let him be close to Neil. Otherwise you’re going to have one hell of a situation on your hands.’

There was a silence, in which Neil struggled to stay awake.

‘We’ll see what we can do.’

Another voice Neil didn’t recognize.

‘We’re going to need to use some anesthetics.’

No, no nonono it was too dangerous to fall asleep, too soon, Riko would c-

‘Neil,’ Andrew’s voice cut through the panic, forcing Neil to look at him.

‘I’m going to sleep. Remember your promise.’

His promise. He could do that. Neil would protect Andrew.

He nodded, so Andrew sat down on the bed next to Neil’s, eyes still focused on him.

Neil couldn’t do anything but keep watching Andrew too.

So he didn’t feel the pinprick when the needle broke his skin. Only when a cold fluid started flowing through his veins did Neil notice that people were setting him up and hooking him into different machines and fluids.

Beside him, Andrew fell asleep before Neil did.

He was back in a room, but this room was mostly bright orange.
Mostly,
because parts of the wallpaper were coming down.

‘What’s this?’ Neil asked, running his hands over the torn and peeling orange wallpaper. ‘I always
thought it was paint.’

He looked over his shoulder at Andrew, the movement stiff.

‘It’s a dream, Neil,’ Andrew replied, walking towards him.

Of course.

And then Andrew was standing behind him, his chest against Neil’s back.

It was a steady and reassuring presence.

Neil turned to watch the wallpaper again and noticed the wooden planks underneath,
the foundation of the wall.

Something was engraved in the wood.

With a less than fluid movement that luckily didn’t hurt, Neil slowly moved his hands over the words
carved into the planks.

No, he corrected himself.
Word.

Neil’s breath left him
as he read the word,
over and over again.
Repeated on every plank.

His fingers followed the dips and curves of the letters.

‘Neil,’ he read out loud.

Andrew sighed behind him and said,
‘I use metaphors too much.’

Neil knew this feeling.
Disbelief and
hope
and
his heart feeling like it wanted to burst out of his chest.
But in a good way.

‘I want this,’ Neil confessed quietly.

‘Walls with your name on them?’

Glad to see that hadn’t changed.
'No,’ Neil said. ‘I want this name. I want to be this person.’

‘You already are.’

Neil’s heart pounded in his chest as he continued.
‘And I want to have a home. A place where my name belongs, where I belong.’

For a long while, Andrew didn’t respond.

So Neil leaned back against Andrew’s chest, finding the unyielding and unquestioning weight that could hold him more comforting than he wanted to admit.

His eyes however, kept glancing at the wall.

He couldn’t get enough of seeing his name everywhere.

It was like someone was shoving it in his face, repeating relentlessly,
Real.
You’re real.

He realized he’d been stupid again.
It was an answer.

‘I thought you could read,’ Andrew said eventually.

Neil hummed.

‘I thought you didn’t trust me.’

‘After that dumb shit you pulled?’

So Andrew knew why.

‘Not so dumb after all,’ Neil said, a small smile on his lips. ‘Since it made you trust me.’

Andrew didn’t reply. Which meant it wasn’t a denial.

Neil was in the hospital for well over a week. He was being fed and kept hydrated while under supervision almost the entire time. It made Neil’s skin crawl.

But Andrew was with him, and every night Andrew made sure he was asleep before Neil was.
‘God Neil, what happened?’ Matt asked as soon as he rushed into the room. ‘You look terrible.’

‘Thanks,’ Neil said. ‘But I’d rather not get into detail.’

Moving to Neil’s side, Matt suddenly noticed Andrew lying on the bed next to Neil, reading a book with a bored expression on his face.

Neil tensed, afraid of Matt’s reaction, but to his surprise Matt merely turned to Neil with his eyebrows raised.

‘I didn’t know he read books for fun,’ Matt whispered.

‘I don’t think fun’s the right word,’ Neil replied.

Matt observed Andrew from the corner of his eye.
‘You’re probably right.’
Then turned his attention to Neil again.

‘But seriously, how are you right now?’

‘Right now I’m okay. They’re giving me food and water and plenty of awkward exercises.’

Matt nodded.
‘Good. No, that’s great actually.’
His happy smile made Neil a little uncomfortable.

‘Oh,’ Matt said, ‘Before I forget to ask, do you think you’re up to seeing Kevin? He’s been annoying me and Andrew ever since you’re in the hospital.’

Neil raised an eyebrow and looked at Andrew, but Andrew didn’t show any signs of listening to their conversation.

‘Really?’ Neil asked, turning towards Matt again. ‘I guess. What does he want?’

‘Beats me. Probably wants to inspect how long it’ll take for you to start training again.’

Neil grimaced, and Matt patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.
‘Sorry. But I have to admit I can’t wait for you to start training too, because it’ll mean you’re healthy again.’
Matt seemed to reconsider that statement.
‘Or well, healthy enough to stubbornly get yourself on that court no matter your condition.’

Andrew snorted behind his book.

Neil glared at Andrew while Matt stood up.

‘You take good care of him,’ Matt said to Andrew. ‘And don’t let Kevin bully him too much.’

Andrew looked Matt in the eye for a few moments before nodding once.

Satisfied, Matt waved them goodbye, and Neil had to shove away the warm feeling inside his chest. Matt was trying to be nice to Andrew.
Because.
Because Matt trusted Neil’s judgement.
Trusted Neil.

He felt it was more than he deserved.

The next day at 8 o’clock,
Neil and Andrew were still eating breakfast
when Kevin walked into the room and immediately inspected Neil’s food.

‘That’s white bread,’ he said disapprovingly.

‘Good morning, Kevin,’ Neil said. ‘I’m doing fine, despite being in the hospital. And yes, I would
love to play the state the obvious game.’

He pointed at the chair on the other side of his bed.

‘That’s a chair.’

Kevin begrudgingly sat down on the chair.

‘How long will it take for you to heal?’ was his second question.

Incredible.

‘I don’t know,’ Neil said. ‘I think I’ll be out of the hospital in a few days, and then it’s back to
training.’

‘You can try,’ Andrew said.

It sounded like an optimistic statement and a threat at the same time.

Neil decided to ignore him.

‘Any news from Riko?’ he asked Kevin, who immediately tensed at the name.

‘No,’ Kevin said quietly.

‘Obviously,’ Andrew said. ‘He can’t complain that you left Evermore against his will now that
you’re in the hospital. It’ll be bad press.’

Neil hadn’t thought of that.

‘Glad to know my almost dying served some purpose,’ he said dryly.

‘Don’t be dramatic,’ Andrew said.

Neil turned an incredulous look at him.

‘You threatened a nurse when she wanted you to leave the room for a minute.’

Andrew shrugged.

Meanwhile, Kevin was shifting nervously on the chair.

‘What?’ Neil asked, turning his attention to Kevin again.
‘How do we know Riko will leave us alone?’

‘We don’t,’ Neil answered. ‘But I don’t think he’ll be in our dreams any time soon.’

Kevin didn’t look convinced.
‘How can you know for certain?’

Neil didn’t.
But he couldn’t let Kevin know that.

‘I fired a warning shot at him,’ Neil said casually. ‘And it accidentally hit.’

Kevin’s eyes widened comically.
‘Y-you shot him?’ he stammered.

‘Not really,’ Andrew said. ‘It was only a dream.’

Neil couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him.

—if it was somewhat of a comfort to Kevin,
Neil immediately went back to training after being released from the hospital.

For a second, Neil thought Andrew would refuse to drive him to the stadium, but eventually Andrew broke off their staring contest and turned around to start the car.

‘Finally,’ Kevin muttered under his breath.

—if

Before Neil could follow Kevin onto the court, he was grabbed by his wrist and pulled back, the door closing in front of his face.

‘Wha-’ Neil asked,
but paused when he saw the burning intensity in Andrew’s eyes.

‘Don’t overdo it,’ Andrew warned.

‘I won’t.’

Andrew kept looking at him,
and the low light in the locker room felt unnecessarily intimate.
Especially with Andrew’s fingers on his skin.

‘Are you going to kiss me?’ Neil asked.

Andrew cocked his head to the side.
‘Is it a yes?’
‘No,’ Kevin said, opening the door again. ‘No, this is not happening right now. Save this,’ and his hand waved towards them, ‘for later.’

Neil raised an eyebrow.
‘This?’

‘Please,’ Kevin scoffed. ‘I’m not having sexual vibes on the court.’

‘Now that’s unfair,’ Andrew responded. ‘We have to deal with your Exy boner every single day.’

Crossing his arms, Kevin glared down at Andrew.
It didn’t have a lot of effect, as Andrew looked boredly back at him.

Neil sighed.
‘Look, I don’t mind if you stay here. I’ll be on the court in a minute.’

‘What?’ Kevin asked, eyes shooting to Neil, who tugged lightly on Andrew’s arm, hoping the teasing grin on his face would show what he meant.

Andrew turned back to him and raised an eyebrow, but when he saw Neil’s expression, shrugged and leaned in.

The horrified gasp Kevin produced would always be remembered by Neil.

‘One. Minute,’ Kevin threatened, and was out the room before Andrew’s lips could touch Neil’s.

Neil tried to hold his laughter in, but in the end it was just too funny, so Andrew ended up kissing his smile.

Andrew pulled back.
‘Sorry,’ Neil laughed.

Instead of replying, Andrew looked at him, and though there was a blank look on his face, his attention was all on Neil.

‘Done?’ Andrew asked.

‘Yes,’ Neil said, and was immediately kissed again in the dimly lit locker room.

He didn’t think he’d ever grow tired of kissing Andrew.

Neil moaned softly, which caused Andrew to tighten his grip on Neil’s wrist briefly before roughly intertwining their fingers instead.

It wasn’t the softest way of holding hands, but in Neil’s opinion, it was the best.

‘I said one minute,’ Kevin complained.
‘Sorry,’ Neil grinned.

Kevin narrowed his eyes.
‘You don’t look sorry.’

‘Oh,’ Neil said. ‘Are we going to play the state the obvious game again?’

Obviously, he paid for the remark with a double dose of demanding and dangerous exercises that left his muscles sore and his body tired.

Worth it though.

Kevin slammed the back door shut, apparently too tired after training to deal with them. It was fine by Neil, who also moved to open the door, but he was stopped by Andrew.

‘No.’

Neil looked at Andrew expectantly but instead of answering, Andrew simply started the car again, driving away from the Tower.

‘What about Kevin?’ Neil asked.

‘I think he’s safe for a while,’ Andrew replied.

‘So you believe Riko will leave us alone?’

‘For now.’

‘Until we have to play against the Ravens,’ Neil murmured. Though he was all fired up to win and give the Ravens a national fuck you, he wasn’t looking forward to standing eye to eye with Riko again.

‘I hope his shoulder’s fucked up,’ Neil said.

‘It wouldn’t be the only thing,’ Andrew replied. Neil snorted.

Leaning his head against the headrest and closing his eyes, Neil contented himself with simply sitting in a car with Andrew late at night, driving to wherever.

He wasn’t even afraid of falling asleep.

Eventually, Andrew pulled over.

Lazily stretching his body, Neil slowly sat up, feeling Andrew’s heavy gaze on him while he looked around to see where they were.
It was too dark outside to see however, the only light coming from the red lights on the car’s dashboard.

The prickling sensation of being watched became too much, so Neil met Andrew’s eyes and shivered from anticipation at what he saw.

The look in Andrew’s eyes told him exactly what Andrew wanted to do.

It took all of Neil’s restraint not to immediately pull Andrew towards him and kiss him like he’d wanted to ever since the hospital.

Luckily, he didn’t have to wait long.

‘Yes or no, Neil.’

‘Yes,’ Neil breathed, so Andrew leaned over.

There was no build up, no being careful or gentle. There was Andrew’s frustration and passion, and Neil’s impatience and want.

Their kissing was hot and messy.

Neil slid his tongue in Andrew’s mouth and gripped Andrew’s hair tightly, pulling his head back to deepen their kiss. His heart beat wildly when he heard Andrew groan in response.

Neil was anxious about being too rough, but Andrew’s ridiculously hot groan was all the motivation and confirmation Neil needed.

Or-

‘This okay?’ Neil asked, tugging on Andrew’s hair.

‘Yes,’ Andrew answered hoarsely.

Neil’s cock twitched.

Fuck that shouldn’t be so hot.

Then again, he already knew how his body felt about Andrew.

When Andrew’s hand gripped Neil’s thigh almost possessively, Neil decided to say fuck it, and pushed Andrew back in his seat to swiftly, or as swiftly as he could manage, climb over and onto Andrew’s lap.

Neil was afraid Andrew wasn’t on board with the new position, but Andrew’s hand immediately
disappeared under the seat to shift the seat back and create more space.

Oh.

And then Andrew’s hands were travelling over Neil’s thighs and back, sitting up in the process to press their chests together.

Neil wondered if Andrew could feel how fast his heart was beating.

‘Are we going to kiss again?’

‘Are we?’ Andrew repeated, voice low, and moved close enough for their lips to almost touch.

Neil groaned in frustration.

‘I want to.’

Immediately Andrew leaned forward and kissed Neil, his impatience clear in every kiss.

‘Anything else?’ Andrew asked roughly, moving to kiss Neil’s neck, his hot breath both tickling and arousing.

‘Touching,’ Neil moaned, leaning his head back to make more room. ‘Definitely, touching. Maybe fucking.’

Andrew leaned back.

‘Fucking?’

Neil sat up a little straighter.

‘If you want.’

Andrew seemed to observe Neil for a moment.

‘Mm. Think you’re special?’

Neil grinned.

‘Riko said I was.’

Within a blink, a second, Andrew turned serious.

‘Why?’

Ugh.

Wrong thing to say, Neil.

‘Nevermind. Forget I said anything. Can we get back to what we were doing?’ Neil asked, but Andrew made no move to do so.
He just kept looking at him, and not in the sexy way that made Neil want to take all his clothes off. Talking about an idea.

But first.

Neil reached out slowly, giving Andrew enough time to move away, and carefully brushed a few strands of hair out of Andrew’s face.

‘Forget Riko,’ he said quietly.

But there was no reaction, Andrew’s face betraying nothing about what he was thinking.

Gently, Neil let his finger follow the line of Andrew’s face, from his temple to his cheek and eventually his chin.

Then, dragging his nail down over Andrew’s neck, Neil said lowly, ‘Maybe I can make it easier.’

Andrew shivered, and irritation flickered on his face at his body’s reaction.

Keeping his eyes on Andrew, Neil pulled his shirt off, having to lean back to make it work in the small space.

Andrew’s eyes dropped to his chest, and it was Neil’s turn to shiver at the burning, at the want he saw there.

But then Andrew’s gaze returned stubbornly to Neil’s eyes.

‘Why?’ Andrew asked again.

For someone who didn’t want to repeat themselves, it had to mean something.

‘Riko called me special,’ Neil explained reluctantly, ‘Because I’m the only one who can visit the dreams of others, no matter the distance.’

Andrew traced a finger along Neil’s collarbone.

‘Your father?’

Neil shuddered at the coldness of Andrew’s finger. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling though.

‘Can only visit my dreams.’

Finger sliding over Neil’s nipple and down, Andrew’s eyes darkened when Neil gasped in surprise.

‘How?’ Andrew asked in a low voice.

‘I d-don’t know,’ Neil stuttered when the finger slid over the sensitive skin of his stomach. ‘Family
bonds and all that bullshit maybe?’

‘That’s why he wants you back,’ Andrew said, slowly following the slight curve of Neil’s hip bone. ‘To do what he and Riko can’t.’

Biting his lip, Neil nodded.

The silence in the dimly lit car was broken only by Neil’s heavy breathing.

His legs were trembling
from anticipation of where Andrew’s tantalizing touch would go,
but Andrew kept tracing patterns on his hip as he processed the information.

Suddenly, Andrew gripped Neil’s thigh and said,
‘You didn’t lie.’

Neil could’ve protested that he hadn’t lied to Andrew for a while now, but instead he asked breathlessly,
‘Do I get a reward now?’

‘If you stop talking.’

‘Or else?’

Andrew’s hand travelled up his thigh, and his voice sounded dangerous as he threatened,
‘Or I’ll make you shut up.’

Goosebumps appeared on Neil’s skin.

He hummed.
‘You promise?’

Andrew’s eyes darkened.
And suddenly there was the frustration, the impatience and the need again, as Andrew grabbed Neil’s neck and pulled him forward.

‘I want you naked. Now.’

Neil had never undressed so quickly, so eagerly and in such a small space as he did now, wanting, no needing, to feel Andrew’s hands on him.

After having undressed, Neil placed a kiss just under Andrew’s ear, which made Andrew shiver in response, and said a little smugly,
‘Look. You got what you wanted.’

‘I hate you,’ Andrew growled, but his hands were all over Neil’s skin, touching, feeling and turning Neil into an impatient and horny mess.

Finally,
Andrew gripped Neil’s cock and started jerking him off quickly, not waiting for Neil to catch his breath and fuck-
who needed air anyway

‘Andrew,’ Neil began, but it turned into a moan when Andrew twisted his wrist and
tightened his grip, making Neil forget momentarily what he wanted to ask.

Andrew’s hand moved slickly over his cock and Neil shifted his hips forward, rubbing against Andrew’s jeans and—oh he remembered what he wanted to ask.

‘I don’t want you to do all the work,’ he breathed, forcing himself to open one eye to look down at Andrew.

Who stopped moving his hand.

‘Go ahead,’ Andrew said. ‘Do it yourself.’

Neil blinked in confusion.

Do What?

But Andrew quickly provided the answer as he gripped Neil’s hip and moved it upwards, causing Neil’s dick to slide into Andrew’s hand.

‘Work for it,’ Andrew said, voice low.

Neil definitely got the message this time.

If he wasn’t so fucking aroused right now, he’d accuse Andrew of sounding like Kevin.

Neil started moving his hips up and down, and it wasn’t awkward, as it brought back the delicious friction.

Neil moaned, trying his best to keep his eyes on Andrew.

Andrew was looking at him with dark, blown-out eyes, watching Neil like he was the drugs Andrew was fighting so hard not to get addicted to.

Neil continued shifting his hips slowly, steadily, sliding his cock against Andrew’s hand, the pressure building hotly.

Neil wished it would last longer, but he was already close.

‘Andrew,’ he moaned, leaning forward to whisper in Andrew’s ear, ‘I want to come.’

‘What’s stopping you?’ Andrew asked in a rough, breathy voice that told Neil how wrecked and unstable his performance was making Andrew.

He placed hot, desperate kisses on Andrew’s neck and breathed against his skin, ‘You.’

Andrew tightened his grip momentarily on Neil’s cock, and Neil bit his lip as he groaned and stopped moving for a second, or else he would come.
Neil leaned his head on Andrew’s shoulder while he pulled himself together.

‘I want to touch you too,’ Neil said.

‘You talk about wanting all the time,’ Andrew said, and started moving his hand on Neil’s dick again, which was entirely unfair.

Neil gasped.

‘Ever since I met you,’ he said breathlessly, his hips moving in sync with Andrew’s hand, ‘I started wanting so much more.’

Andrew captured his lips before Neil could say any more embarrassing things, and kissed him roughly, almost aggressively, as if Andrew wanted to stop himself from saying that he felt the same way too.

They broke apart long enough for Andrew to say, ‘Yes.’ and then Andrew was quickly undoing his jeans, and Neil could feel his heart hammering inside his chest as Andrew took them both in his hand.

His eyes were burning into Neil’s with a new kind of intensity as he asked, ‘Why’d you stop?’

Neil bit his lip and nodded vaguely, mind reeling at the feeling of Andrew against him, but when he moved-

It felt so amazing, to move together, to be so close.

Andrew removed his hand and held it up to Neil’s face. ‘Lick,’ he said.

Neil did.

Andrew’s hand was salty, and not so cold anymore, and when he wrapped it around their dicks again, the slickness made moving better, fuck so much better.

And though Neil wanted this moment to last, he was already close, had been on the edge for so long, his legs trembling.

But it seemed so was Andrew, because the hand not wrapped around them held Neil tighter, closer, and so Neil wrapped his arms around Andrew’s neck and leaned their foreheads together.
Their hot, panting breaths were mingling in the small space, and this close, Neil could hear Andrew’s shuddering breaths and barely contained groans.

He was so close
so close

‘Neil,’ Andrew said with difficulty, his teeth clenched tightly to keep himself from groaning. ‘Open your eyes.’

Neil hadn’t realized he’d closed them.

When he opened them, he found Andrew’s eyes immediately, already watching him, no, seeing him.

A shiver wracked Neil’s body as he came between their bodies with a quiet moan, trying his best to keep his eyes open, the eye contact so much more intimate than anything Neil had ever done before.

To his surprise, Andrew followed after him, biting his lip stubbornly to keep himself from moaning as he came too.

Arms shaking, Neil managed to keep himself from slumping forward while he tried to catch his breath.

His legs were also trembling from the exertion of moving so much in one night. Though this was definitely preferable to Kevin’s version.

A warmth that wasn’t from the exertion or the small space filled Neil, and he wondered why it always seemed to make his heart clench tightly, or his breath come with difficulty.

He wondered why it was always there when he was with Andrew.

Andrew started tracing patterns on his back, and the feeling was kind of nice.

Neil sighed contently, ignoring the way his chest seemed to expand.

Until Andrew’s fingers drifted too close to his side and—Neil shrieked.

Andrew’s hand froze immediately.

‘What was that?’ Andrew asked.

Neil tried to hide his face in Andrew’s neck, but Andrew leaned back to look at him.

‘Nothing,’ Neil bluffe.
When Andrew experimentally moved his hand again, Neil tried to wiggle away quickly, but Andrew was still holding him tightly to make sure he wouldn’t fall off his lap.

There was no escape.

A giggle escaped Neil’s mouth, and another, and another, and then Neil was full out laughing, trying in vain to escape Andrew’s vicious attack.

‘Stopstopstop,’ he gasped.

Andrew stopped, but there was a lightness in his eyes that made Neil want to smile again.

‘That’s unfair,’ Neil complained.

It didn’t come out as indignant as he’d wanted however, because Andrew started tracing other mindless patterns on the safe parts of his back again, and the feeling was pleasant and relaxing.

‘You’re probably not ticklish at all,’ Neil sighed.

‘I won’t give away that information for free,’ Andrew said, sounding dead-serious.

Neil snorted, and though he could have lied there for a long time, decided it was time to move and deal with the situation.

His legs protested against moving after being in the same position for so long.

He’d just put on his clothes when it suddenly dawned on Neil.

‘I got what I wanted. Again.’

Andrew gave him a look. ‘Shut up.’

‘Sometimes it’s okay to want things. Because sometimes, you’ll get them.’

Andrew started the car again.

‘I already have what I want,’ he replied.

Neil stumbled into his bed when he got back, which was god knows how late.

He was asleep before he could even move into a more comfortable position.
It had been a long time since Neil was glad to wake up, but the next morning, after having slept dreamlessly, Neil was glad to wake up.

Because waking up was finally better than dreaming.

‘What time is it?’ Neil asked, as he saw Matt stretching and yawning in bed.

‘Do I look like I know what time it is?’ Matt said sleepily, but fumbled for his phone nevertheless. ‘It’s eleven.’

‘Is today a training day?’ Neil asked, the end of his sentence turning into a yawn as well.

Matt was staring at his blankets, looking like he was still half asleep, and replied after half a minute, ‘I think so.’

‘Kevin’s going to kill me.’

‘He doesn’t seem to be the only one.’

Throwing his legs over the side of the bed, Neil avoided Matt’s gaze by looking at the ground. He tried telling the truth.

‘He isn’t.’

‘Can I help?’ Matt asked carefully.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘That’s another way of saying Andrew’s already taking care of it, isn’t it?’

When Neil didn’t reply, Matt continued, ‘That’s why we always find him with you when something’s happened.’

Neil shrugged a little helplessly. He couldn’t explain, but he could say, ‘Andrew’s trying to protect me.’

‘It would help if we all talked a little more with each other,’ Matt sighed. ‘Then there wouldn’t be all these misunderstandings.’

Matt was right. If only Neil could actually talk about his problems.

Neil stood up and grabbed a few clothes from his closet.

‘Hey,’ Matt said, like he just had an idea. ‘Maybe you can finally be the link. The connecting factor
between our groups.’

Neil nearly dropped the shirt he was holding.
‘What?’

‘To get all of us communicating and hanging out, you know? Andrew listens to you.’

Neil frowned.
‘I’m not sure Andrew will listen.’

Matt laughed.
‘Well, I am.’

How Matt could be so sure, Neil didn’t know.

Turning his back to Matt, he quickly put on his shirt.

Behind him, he heard Matt changing too.

‘I’m gonna make breakfast. What d’you want?’ Matt asked, noticing Neil’s awkwardness.

It was thoughtful,
and Neil’s throat felt tight.

‘I’ll ask,’ he said. ‘But I can’t promise anything.’

‘That’s okay,’ Matt smiled. ‘Thanks for trying. But seriously, do you want toast with eggs or bacon?’

‘How about both?’

‘I like the way you’re thinking, Neil.’

‘You’re late,’ Kevin said, crossing his arms. ‘Too late.’

‘Sorry,’ Matt said, ‘We slept in a little.’

But Kevin’s glare was meant only for Neil.
‘If you’re serious about this, you’ll be on time.’

‘Okay mom,’ Neil said, shifting impatiently from his left to his right leg, wanting to start warming up.

‘Don’t mom me,’ Kevin said. ‘I don’t care if you want to stay up all night with Andrew, but if there’s training the next morning, you’ll be there. On time.’

Neil waved his words away.
‘Yeah, yeah. Can I start training now, or are we going to waste more time talking?’

‘Wait,’ Nicky interrupted. ‘Neil was with Andrew all night? What were you guys doing?’

‘Driving,’ Neil shrugged.
‘Uhuh,’ Nicky grinned. ‘I’m sure you were riding something aaaaalll nigh-’

With a shriek, Nicky ducked to the ground to avoid Andrew’s racquet.

‘Woah! The fuck, Andrew, that could’ve been my skull.’

‘I was betting on it,’ Andrew said.

Before Neil could witness another murder, and before Kevin could start his early parenting career, Neil took off, jogging across the perimeter of the court.

Running felt nice.

Before Neil could go back to his own apartment after training, Andrew tapped his arm.

Neil stopped and turned around, and when Andrew started walking away, followed him.

They walked at least five flights of stairs, and finally stopped in front of a closed metal door with a broken padlock.

When Andrew opened the door and walked onto the roof, Neil had to blink against the view.

So it hadn’t been a hundredth-story building then.

‘This is from your dream,’ he said, moving to sit beside Andrew on the ledge.

Andrew took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one and took a deep drag.

He offered Neil one too, who accepted.

As he watched the cigarette smoke swirl upwards, a sharp stab of fear pierced through him, but.

When Neil looked up at the sky, there were clouds everywhere.

‘What are you doing near the ledge?’ Neil asked again.

Andrew humoured him by replying, ‘I’m not going to jump.’

Their first dream together.

But then Andrew turned towards Neil and grabbed his hand, moving it towards his chest and stopping before Neil could touch him.
The moment where his hand hovered in the air was short and painful, before Andrew pushed it against his chest with a force Neil could only interpret as frustration.

Beneath his palm, Neil felt Andrew’s heart beat fast.

‘Feeling,’ Andrew answered.

Neil understood.

When Andrew released his wrist, Neil dropped his hand as well. No point in forcing it past its breaking point.

‘And?’ Neil asked. ‘Have you figured out what I represent?’

Andrew took a final drag of his cigarette before throwing it over the ledge. He watched it fall, while Neil watched Andrew.

‘Nothing,’ Andrew said, and turned his head towards Neil.

‘Oh.’

‘You represent nothing of me.’

It could be because they were sitting on the ledge, legs dangling over the edge, so close to falling.

It could be because Andrew was afraid of heights.

But it was probably because Andrew was afraid what would happen now that he had let himself fall this blindly.

Andrew’s eyes were burning into Neil’s, seeing him like he had since their very first dream.

‘But you are a part of me.’

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Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for like, including important plot in the sex scene hahah... I can't ever seem to simply write smut.
Anyways.
Woah.
That was some ride, wasn't it?

I had never thought this fic would turn out to be over 50k words long, but I'm very, very proud of what I produced. Of course, Marichatshipper, thank you so much for giving me the prompt of 'magic!Neil'. It inspired me to try and write something different, and I loved the experience <3

Thank YOU all so much for reading and supporting this story, it has made my time writing that much more enjoyable <3 You're all too sweet and I couldn't have gotten this far this fast without you guys :D

I'm going to be posting a few shorter stories in the next month (seeing as it's my nanowrimo 'theme'/challenge), but I'll definitely be back with a longer story in the future.
In the mean time, if you ever have any prompts, don't hesitate to tell me at @idnis9 (twitter) or idnis.tumblr.com !

(and be on the lookout for the last chapter from Andrew's POV, I really REALLY enjoyed writing that one).

That's it.
I've rambled for too long.

Thanks for everything guys! <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!